

Sending Canaries to the Job Market:  
Ethical Issues in Training Community College Faculty  
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Panel: Can This Canary be Saved?  
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Abstract

This presentation explores ethical dilemmas for graduate school educators in programs that prepare M.A. students to teach English in community colleges. Such graduate programs attract students and produce strong, enthusiastic teachers, and university administrators value the programs because they draw tuition; however, the job prospects for graduates of the programs are less than rosy. This paper uses personal narratives, statistics, and anecdotal observations over a twelve-year period to assess the value of one such long-running program. What are our ethical obligations when training M.A. instructors to enter an exploitive job market? What is the relationship between a university department and area two-year colleges? How do graduates of our programs view their training and subsequent careers? The paper includes narratives of graduates of one such program, of whom a few have acquired full-time positions; some are working at multiple adjunct positions, hoping to gain a foothold in the profession; and others have simply abandoned a career in teaching.

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Thank you all very much for being here today and for attending this session, and thank you especially to Linda Weinhouse for organizing this panel on this important topic, and to Diana Taylor for including our panel in this year's presidential theme, #States of Insecurity.

“Insecurity” is at the heart of my presentation today, in which I’ll talk about my university’s program to train graduate students to teach English in two-year colleges, and also address the career prospects of these new instructors, most of whom enter the work force as adjunct faculty. These recent graduates of my Certificate program are the “canaries” to which our panel title refers, those who enter the mines as we watch anxiously from above to see if they survive.

My certificate program and especially the teaching internship part of the program is almost universally heralded by its graduates and by the instructors who serve as mentors, as practical, stimulating and sometimes life-changing, even if it is not a golden ticket to employment. Thus, as the person who recruits and admits students to this program, I am very concerned both with the best methods of preparing them to teach, but also with the ethics of preparing them for a frankly abusive job market, and of selling a “certificate” that may or may actually benefit them.

Thus, one “Insecurity” of my program is what happens to my program’s graduates when they enter the workplace. They DO enter the workplace, but almost always as adjunct faculty, and fewer than a quarter have gone on to full-time jobs.

Another insecurity also emerges from the other side, in the administration of this program and its history at my university, DePaul, and for similar programs at other schools. My program and others like it highlight what is still an ambivalent relationship between those who teach at four-year colleges and universities, and those who teach at two-year colleges.

An article by H. Mark Reynolds, posted in the Humanities Commons last year, 2017, offers a fascinating historical look at a past collaboration between a

university and two-year college faculty, and provides some important lessons for the present.

In "Checking the Rear View Mirror: The Preparation of Two-Year College Faculty," Reynolds describes a program that originated at Carnegie Mellon University and ran from 1975-1983. It was a summer program designed for faculty currently employed at two-year colleges; that is, it was separate from the MA or PhD program and from another graduate degree that was still offered at that time, the DA, or Doctor of Arts, degree.

Reynolds notes that in the 1970s and into the 80s, universities were taking a fairly active interest in preparing two-year college faculty. In 1978, 43 programs appropriate to training two-year college faculty in English were listed in the "National Directory of Graduate Programs for Junior/Community College English Faculty."

For his 2017 article, Reynolds conducted interviews with faculty who had participated in the Carnegie Mellon program over three decades ago, and he writes that now

From decades ago, these two-year faculty members voiced the same sentiment that has reverberated across the decades: the traditional PhD was and remains inappropriate as preparation for two-year college teaching; likewise are programs over-saturated with pedagogy, curriculum, or the usual schools of education courses. Rather, as [one respondent] indicated, "It was the blend, the fusion, of academic and professional concerns that made the summer successful for the participants ("An Experiment" 152)."

But Reynolds also argues that

Now, as then, no entity is better able to deliver the solid preparation, suitable training, or scholarly rigor needed by two-year faculty than a discipline-based academic department.

The summer program, as Reynolds describes it, was very successful in allowing its students, the two-year college faculty, to bring their expertise to the table while at the same time studying theories of language and pedagogy, under the guidance of Carnegie Mellon faculty. The participants that Reynolds interviewed three and a half decades later also said that holding the course in the summer made it work for them – there was no way they could take time out from their academic year to do this. He does not say who paid for this course; perhaps the participants received help from their own colleges or from Carnegie Mellon.

Also notable is that the participants in this program were not graduate students – they already had master’s degrees and had been teaching for a while. Thus, the program could perhaps be better called enrichment or professional advancement than simply training.

Either way, it was unusual, bringing together research-oriented faculty with teaching professionals. But it was not as unusual as we might think.

Reynolds quotes Christina Toth and Darin Jensen, in a forthcoming article, who write that

there is. . . unknown to many in the field . . . a significant history of specialized graduate programs for teaching English in two-year colleges. The fates of many of these programs--dissolution, transformation, absorption into a more generic curriculum, or relative obscurity--offer instructive considerations for renewed efforts to transform graduate education . . . .

One key phrase here is “unknown to many in the field,” and an important question for us is how to make such programs more visible and more viable and of more interest to university departments of English that have graduate programs.

As the participant quoted by Reynolds said, the “blend and fusion” of research and practice in the program was its highlight. That appreciation of expertise combined with scholarly knowledge is what I and others try to replicate in our programs.

But here is where we come back to insecurities. I am a non-tenure-line faculty member at DePaul. In the past, I have enjoyed the relative security of a multi-year contract; lately, however, those of us who are contingent faculty at my university have seen both full-and part-time positions and their accompanying benefits slip away. So far, my position as director of this Certificate program and as instructor for a number of required English and Honors classes seem to have protected me. But actually, I don't know what next year will bring.

Also, in a situation that may sound familiar to you, it is not my colleagues and chair in English who would decide to eliminate my job: it's people who have never met me and who seem to be checking off boxes on a list of expendable programs and individuals.

My point here is not simply about my job security. Rather the point here is the lack of deep commitment on the part of universities to preparing our graduate students to be part of our national two-year college systems.

I inherited the Two-Year College Certificate program from the tenure-line faculty member who created it and who created my job, which became a full-time position that included running this program.

I'm belaboring this explanation because I want to be clear that my university is committed to the Certificate in Two-Year College teaching, but only so far, not to the extent of assigning this program to a tenure-line person. The Certificate has been in operation for about 14 years; it has always attracted students to our MA in English graduate programs, but lately not so many: our enrollment is down all across the board in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Other than recommending that students seek me out, my tenure-line colleagues are mostly uninvolved with this two-year college program. Speaking un-ethically, that's a relief to me because it protects my job. Speaking ethically, however, as I want to

do today and as I honestly want to do in general, it's not a good thing: it shows the lack of connection and commitment to the two-year colleges at my university, in the Chicago area, and indeed in the United States.

So how can we improve the connection between a university's graduate faculty and the two-year college system? Recent research on the professional culture of two-year colleges is particularly applicable here.

In a 2013 article in *College Composition and Communication*, "Distinct and Significant": Professional Identities of Two-Year College English Faculty," the authors, Christina M. Toth, Brett M. Griffiths and Kathryn Thirolf, note that the teaching knowledge of two-year college faculty goes unrecognized and unincorporated in scholarly conversations in the field of Composition.

They write that teaching writing at two-year colleges is a "rigorous intellectual activity motivated by responsiveness to student needs." But, as the authors also argue, the actual work of two-year college English instructors is often "invisible" and "poorly understood" – due, they suggest, and I agree, to the disconnect within the scholarly profession of teaching English.

Furthermore, as the authors point out, two-year college instructors are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate the utilitarian value of their work, and this pressure from non-academic bodies takes away from their professionalism and decreases their ability to engage in scholarly pedagogical conversations.

This is not to say that things have not improved. The fact that we are here at the MLA convention, talking about two-year college teaching, is in itself notable, since for a long time, two-year college issues were not considered relevant to the work of the MLA.

So, what are we to do with our canaries who hope to enter the teaching field?

I believe we can do at least two things in graduate departments at universities. First. Prepare them to teach. Give them appropriate class work accompanied by an experiential component, such as a teaching internship. To do this, universities must work in partnership with the two-year colleges in their area.

The DePaul Certificate in Teaching English in the Two-Year College requires four classes: 3 graduate classes in the pedagogies of teaching Writing and Literature, and a fourth class which is the teaching internship accompanied by an on-line course on the history, practices, and culture of Teaching English in the Two-Year College.

The on-line class that I've developed attempts to achieve that "blend and fusion" of practical experience and academic theory that Reynolds noted as the high point of the Carnegie Mellon summer class.

My class has three main goals:

First, to engage the teaching interns in a community of instructors that includes each other, their teaching mentors, colleagues, and other voices in the profession. As anyone who has been an adjunct faculty, especially at more than one college at a time, knows, this job can be very isolating. You go to your shared office or desk, meet your class, go home or to your next job. There isn't much time or physical space to hang around sharing notes with colleagues, and you rarely see the chair of your department. You often get hired and "let go" by an adjunct coordinator, usually by email.

So, I make sure that my interns talk to each other and to their mentors and if possible to other faculty members. If they can't get the ball rolling on their own, I give them questions to ask; and as part of the on-line course, they report on their

conversations and respond to each other's reports on our Discussion Board. The on-line Discussion Board, where they talk to each other, allows them to see the internship from several points of view, to get ideas about how to better assert themselves, and most importantly to start creating a sense of collegiality and support.

My second goal in my on-line course is to help the teaching interns understand the special history and culture of two-year college teaching. I assign readings that describe and contextualize the history of the two-year college in the United States as well as current essays and commentaries on specific teaching and institutional issues. These readings help students understand where they fit into the mission of the two-year college. Along with the readings, I ask them to talk to their mentors and others about why they chose this profession. And, I assign a module on navigating the job search, including how to prepare a CV and a job letter.

Finally, the on-line class addresses specific topics that relate to teaching writing and English literature, topics that will arise in the intern's teaching experience.

For example: teaching grammar is a topic that invariably comes up. Graduate student interns who have been taught in their graduate courses to keep classes student-centered and to respond "globally" to undergraduate writing, and who have taken classes in theories of teaching Composition and Rhetoric, are often surprised to see a very subject-centered approach to teaching grammar. Interns report with alarm that instructors lecture on grammar with PowerPoints to a class of passive students who do not take notes. They also note that the lessons likewise do not seem to impact the level of error in the student papers. But the practice persists and indeed, the graduate student intern is often asked to prepare a lesson and activities on grammar, even if that goes against the grain of classroom-acquired pedagogical theory.

My point here is not about methods of teaching grammar; rather, I mention this because such instances create the kind of practice vs. theory moment that is incredibly important and can only happen on the ground in the classroom, but can only have meaning if the intern also has some scholarly background in the field.

Other classroom events and issues often surprise the interns, such as the persistent use of the 5-paragraph essay assignment, the rate of attrition and lack of participation in some classes, and the extreme diversity of student preparedness in the two-year college.

Each of these is an important part of the two-year college culture that can best be learned from experiencing it.

In their reflections on the two-year college internship, my students frequently describe the need to adapt rapidly when theory meets practice. One student noted that the internship allowed her to observe and “reflect on which styles of teaching [she] favored and wanted to utilize in a classroom. As the internship class developed, [she wrote] I began to understand how [I could choose among] each of the different theories [and how they] could be applied.”

Another student wrote, “Once the internship began, I remembered a handful of lessons [from my graduate courses in pedagogy] but the benefit of the training in the internship significantly outweighed anything that happened in those classes.”

Finally, another intern wrote, “Taking graduate classes such as “Teaching writing” is useful preparation, but until you’re actually leading discussions, grading papers, and, most importantly, dealing with students personally, it is difficult to get a grasp on how demanding, stressful, and rewarding teaching can be.”

So, out of my approximately 10-15 student interns per year, since 2007, the year I took over the program, what has happened to these interns after they graduated with an M.A. in English and with the Certificate in Teaching English in the Two-Year College?

One student reported that when she applied for an adjunct position, the department chair said, "I get a ton of applications for these slots. I want to let you know that yours really stood out" due to the internship and the Certificate courses.

Another student wrote, "Your certificate program filled my quiver with arrows. I would dread walking into a teaching interview with [just a ] plain ol' MA in English."

To conclude, I want to get back to the ethics implicit in training two-year college instructors. My Certificate program is attractive to both students and I believe to employers; nonetheless, I spend a lot of time warning and advising about the realities of the job market for my "canaries."

Over the past decade, I've observed two effects. First, this program really does help inexperienced teachers learn to teach. The accompanying coursework gives them pedagogical strategies and theoretical understanding of teaching writing and literature. Students who complete this program almost always go on to teach immediately as adjunct faculty. But then they run into difficulties, and so my second observation is about these difficulties: moving from adjunct to full-time instructor is difficult, to say the least. An instructor can get stuck in the adjunct circuit, and we all know that this is not a living wage or a good long-term career arc.

In other words, in recruiting students for my Certificate program and training them to be two-year college instructors, I'm doing a job for which I have to constantly qualify and explain. I believe in the mission of the two-year college. I'm dedicated to the concept of higher education for everyone, and to the idea that everyone should have the chance to reach, try, fail, and try again. I teach MY students to expect attrition in their classes and not to judge. I try to open their minds to the unfathomable depths of experience and accompanying challenges that the two-year college students bring to the room. That's what makes this profession so exciting and worthy.

One of the most important things a course like mine can do for a rising two-year college instructor is, I believe, to provide a sense of professional context so that the intern sees herself as part of a long, continuing pedagogical dialogue, that constantly challenges itself, that adapts to changing student needs and populations, and that draws from rhetoricians past, from the classics to the belletristics to the hard-nosed composition theorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the progressive, student-centered practices of recent years.

Universities should join with two-year colleges to train faculty in concert and in dialogue with the practices on the ground, but it may take more of a push from the two-year college side to make this really happen. My recommendation, speaking from my position in a university English department, is that two-year college faculty can reach out to area universities with graduate programs and offer teaching internship opportunities for their graduate students. From there, the discussion could begin as to which courses are most useful for rising two-year college instructors.

## Sources

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