That Crucial First Impression

By Rob Jenkins | OCTOBER 11, 2010

A cover letter is one of the most important—and most often botched—elements of a community-college job application. Assuming your materials arrive on time and you're actually qualified for the job, an effective cover letter can do more than any other part of the application to help you secure a coveted interview.

Now is a good time to discuss the features of an effective cover letter, since many applications for positions at two-year colleges are due around the end of November. But first let me offer some general advice for people who are either new to the job market or have never given their letters much thought.

First, understand that the cover letter—and not your appearance in person—actually constitutes the first impression you'll make with members of the search committee. Long before laying eyes on you, they will learn a great deal about you from what you say in the letter, and how you say it. Just as you would dress well for an interview (probably better than you normally dress), so you should take pains to dress your cover letter appropriately.

Second, tailor your letter to fit the position you're applying for, especially if you're applying to both two-year and four-year institutions. A letter to a research university might focus heavily on your dissertation, while a letter to a community college should mention it only briefly. And not all two-year colleges have the same requirements, expectations, or needs, which means that a simple form letter won't suffice. You may have a basic template that you follow—in fact, I'm going to show you one—but be prepared to adapt it, as necessary, to make the best case for each job.

The way to achieve that tailored effect is to do your homework. Read the job announcement carefully, more than once, to make sure that your cover letter responds to specific job requirements or preferences, such as experience teaching online. Spend some time surfing the institution's Web site to gain a feel for its culture and values. If you know someone who teaches there, or someone who knows someone, don't hesitate to work the phone.

Finally, don't neglect the visual impact of your letter. I've always liked the clean lines and businesslike appearance of simple block format. Print the letter in black ink on good-quality white or ivory paper, using a decent laser-jet printer. I recommend 12-point Times New Roman font for its size (remember the middle-aged eyes of the search-committee members) and professionalism. The letter should be at least a page long, and no longer than two. And for heaven's sake, make sure it's as free of typos and grammatical errors as you can make it. If necessary, hire a copy editor. And now, as promised, I offer a basic template that you can adapt for any academic cover letter. I didn't invent this template, but I've employed it quite effectively over the years in my own job searches. (One dean told me that I got an interview because my letter was one of the strongest he'd ever read.) And yet, among the hundreds of cover letters I read every year as a search-committee member, I rarely see the kind of specificity and organization I look for. Most letters are too long, too short, too dry, too scattered, or too irrelevant. In short, they're bad. When I do see a good letter, it stands out.

The salutation. One of the first mistakes applicants make is not addressing their cover letter to anyone in particular. A letter should be written to a person, not to a committee, a department, or an institution. "Dear Department of Human Resources” or “Dear Search Committee” is simply too impersonal. "Dear Human Resources Officer” or “Dear Search Committee Chair” is not much of an
improvement. With a little time and effort, you should be able to identify a specific person whom you can address by name and title in the letter, such as the director of human resources, the chair of the relevant department, or even the chair of the hiring committee. If a Web-based search does not yield that information, try making a phone call or two.

It doesn’t matter, by the way, if the person you address the letter to is not actually the person who receives it. In reality, the recipient might be a clerk. But there’s something about addressing your letter to an actual human being that turns it from another mindless exercise in bureaucracy into a form of genuine human communication.

**The opening paragraph.** Your goals here are to let the reader know what job you’re applying for and to assert your suitability for it. You will, of course, expand on that second point later in the letter.

Open by stating, in a straightforward manner, that you’re writing to apply for such-and-such a job, using the specific title given in the job announcement along with the position number, if applicable, in parentheses. Also, mention the institution by name and say where you saw the job advertised. Then assert what I refer to as your two primary claims on the job: your education and your experience, not necessarily in that order.

**The body.** It will probably consist of three paragraphs: two that expand upon your claims to the position, and one that adds any other pertinent information.

Whichever of your claims is stronger—your work experience or your education—is the point you should make first. If you have significant teaching experience, especially at a community college, you should always lead with that, because nothing else you say will make a more positive impression on the committee. Here is also the place to talk about any special pedagogical training you might have received, or any other relevant teaching skills, such as experience with educational technology or online teaching.

If you don’t have a lot of experience, you’ll need to make that your secondary claim and try to beef it up as much as possible. One way to do that is by talking about specific courses you have taught—especially to the extent that those courses mirror ones you will be asked to teach in the new job. Mention any experiences you had while teaching those courses that made you a better teacher.

If most (or all) of your experience has been an adjunct, and in particular if you have a great deal of adjunct experience, you should make the connection for the committee by pointing out that teaching three courses a semester for five years, for example, is the equivalent of three years of full-time experience.

Under education, if that’s your primary claim, you will want to list your graduate degrees and the institutions where you earned them, along with any additional course work you may have completed. But don’t use the education section to talk about your thesis or dissertation topic, unless it relates specifically to the job at hand. (For instance, if you’re applying for an English position at a community college with a large international population, and you wrote your master’s thesis on teaching composition to non-native speakers, then mention that in the letter.) Otherwise, focus on the specific courses you took as a graduate student and how those courses will enable you to perform this particular job effectively.

If you have a great deal of teaching experience, education should, of course, become your secondary claim, and you need not go into such great detail. Just make sure the committee members know you have the appropriate credentials.

The last paragraph in the body of the letter should be a kind of catchall in which you include any relevant information that you haven’t had a chance to mention. The key word is "relevant." This might be the place for you to mention your dissertation topic, although you still shouldn’t do much more than that. There’s no place, in a cover letter to a community college, for a detailed summary of your research.

Other items you might list in a catchall paragraph include any additional training that may relate to the job, teaching or research awards, publications and presentations, and any significant institutional or community service. In short, add anything that you think might help you get an interview, without seeming to brag or cross over into the realm of the trivial or inconsequential.
The "ask piece" and the closing. Another common mistake of applicants is failing to come right out and ask for an interview. In fund raising, a document that is produced specifically for the purpose of eliciting a donation is referred to as an "ask piece." I recommend that your cover letter include an "ask piece" as well.

Near the end, after you have thoroughly expanded on your claims and listed any other relevant information, you should reiterate your fitness for the job—"For these reasons, I believe I would be an excellent fit at XYZ College." Then write something like, "May I travel to [name the city] to discuss this position with you in person?" After that, state that you are available at the interviewer's convenience and reference the contact information in your résumé or CV. End your letter with a note of thanks and an expression of hopeful confidence: "Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

In your closing, you can say "Best wishes" or "Warmest regards," but I've always preferred a simple "Sincerely." Be sure to leave room to sign your name, although if it's an electronic application, you might not have that opportunity. And below your printed name, type the word "Enclosures," to indicate that you have included other documents, such as your résumé, CV, transcripts, teaching statement, and the rest.

With hundreds of qualified people out there applying for each job, nothing and no one can guarantee you an interview. But a cover letter that is professional-looking, well written, and relevant to the position will certainly give you a leg up on the competition.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English and director of the Writers Institute at Georgia Perimeter College. He blogs at www.academicleaders.org and writes monthly for our community-college column. If you would like to write for our regular column on faculty and administrative careers at two-year colleges, or have a topic to propose, we would like to hear from you. Send your ideas to careers@chronicle.com.

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What to Expect at a Community-College Interview

By Rob Jenkins | FEBRUARY 20, 2018

A complaint I hear frequently from graduate students at research universities is that no one on their campus can advise them on the faculty-hiring process at community colleges.

That’s not necessarily a knock against their advisers. No doubt some of them are actively opposed to their students’ pursuing a teaching job at a two-year college, viewing it as “settling” or “beneath them.” (That strikes me as a bit shortsighted, but I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they mean well.)

Other professors, however, would genuinely like to help — they just don’t know anything about the hiring process at a two-year college because they’ve never been through it themselves. They naturally assume that it’s similar to the process they went through at four-year institutions.

Unfortunately, for their students, it isn’t.

This is a knowledge gap I have tried to fill over the years when I’ve been invited to speak at universities. I’ve also written twice on this topic — first a general essay on hiring at community colleges and, most recently, on the application. This time, with interview season upon us, I’d like to talk about some of the ways in which the community-college version differs from its research-university counterpart.

A couple of caveats:

- First, just as most professors at research universities have never been involved in a job interview at a two-year college, I have never been interviewed for a position at a research university. So I’m basing this comparison on what I’ve been told by graduate students and job candidates, as well as on my own conversations with university acquaintances.
- Second, the interview process is hardly standardized, either at two-year colleges or at four-year universities. Indeed, it can vary widely from campus to campus. Interviews at some small, teaching-focused four-year campuses might resemble community-college interviews in some respects. Meanwhile, two-year colleges in certain parts of the country (like the Northeast) might incorporate elements of the research university interview. I encourage readers to post comments below sharing your experiences and/or detailing the interviewing idiosyncrasies you’ve witnessed.

Now let’s turn to the key ways in which the two-year-college interview typically differs from one at a research university:

It won’t be at a conference. If you’re reading this in late February or early March, and you’ve just received an invitation to interview at a community college, you already know this.

(If you haven’t yet gotten an invitation, that doesn’t mean you won’t. The timing of this column reflects the fact that most interviews for full-time faculty positions at community colleges are held between mid-March and late April. But again, that varies. Some readers may have had a two-year interview already, while others might not hear from the search committee for a couple of weeks.)

Perhaps there are some two-year colleges that interview candidates at the big scholarly conferences — for example, at the Modern Language Association or the American Historical Association meetings — but I’ve never heard of one. That probably has to do with the cost of sending a delegation and with the hiring timeline at two-year colleges. We typically don’t approve the creation of new
positions until November or later, and don’t form search committees until after the winter break.

Instead, we hold most initial interviews on campus. That said, more and more two-year colleges, like our four-year counterparts, have started to do preliminary interviews via telephone or Skype as a way of reducing the number of candidates who must be brought to campus.

**We might not pay your way.** If you are invited for an on-campus interview, be sure to ask if the college plans to reimburse you for your travel expenses. Don’t just assume it will, because many two-year colleges don’t.

Of those that do, some will pay only a portion while others might offer you a set amount ($500, for instance), which may or may not cover your actual expenses. You might also want to ask if the college plans to make your travel arrangements, or any portion thereof (like a hotel reservation, for instance), or if you need to make those yourself.

**The interview won’t be a marathon.** A tenure-track interview at a research university can span a day or two, involving multiple meetings with search-committee members, other professors, students, and various administrators — not to mention a job talk and/or a teaching demo.

That sort of extended schedule is rare for a faculty interview at a community college. There, your interview most likely will last about an hour, perhaps 90 minutes, and might well be one of several the committee is conducting that day with multiple candidates for the same position. (On the hiring side of the table, we sometimes refer to these as “cattle call” interviews.)

You probably will talk only with people on the search committee, although you may get to meet the department chair or dean.

**There is no “job talk.”** I have been through the hiring process at five different community colleges and never had to deliver a job talk at any of them. I’ve never heard a job talk, either. At four-year institutions, the “job talk” is a presentation on the candidate’s research. It’s usually delivered to a larger group of people than just the search committee, and followed by a Q&A.

Not only are you unlikely to give a job talk during a community-college interview, you may not be asked any questions about your research at all. The fact that you do research may be impressive, but it’s not part of the faculty job description at most two-year colleges. In fact, the subject matter of your scholarship might not be particularly relevant to the entry-level courses you would be assigned to teach.

What the search committee will ask about is your teaching — both your philosophy of teaching and your practical experiences as a teacher. You will be asked about hot-button issues like diversity, technology, and classroom management. If your research deals directly with any of those issues, feel free to work it into the discussion. Just be sure that your answers are practical and not just theoretical. (I’ve written more about the specific questions you can expect, and how to answer them, here.)

**The teaching demo is a critical part of the interview.** I wrote about the misuse of PowerPoint in demos just last fall (“The Teaching Demo: Less Power, More Point”). At research institutions, the teaching demo is usually separate from the interview and conducted in front of students (an actual class or a group invited just for that purpose). Some community colleges do it that way, too.

At most two-year colleges, however, the teaching demo is part of the 60- to 90-minute interview I mentioned above, and the audience is usually composed solely of members of the search committee. That can feel a little awkward and may require some specific strategies (I’ll summarize them below but you can find more detail here):

- It’s not a presentation. Don’t just tell how you would teach. Show.
- You may not get to pick your topic, but if you do, choose a manageable one. One of the biggest mistakes I see candidates make in a demo is trying to cover too much.
- In your demo, treat committee members as if they were students. That will require you to do a bit of role-playing: Ask them questions, try to engage them in discussion, and call on them to answer.
- Don’t just lecture. Include discussion, Q&A, or activities.
- Use bells and whistles — in moderation. Don’t go overboard on the tech, and have a backup plan for what you will do if the technology crashes.

**There may be an "inside candidate."** Because two-year colleges often hire their own adjuncts for full-time positions (something I’m sure many adjuncts wish was the case at four-year institutions), the entire process may be a foregone conclusion. Committee members might already have a front-runner in line for the job, and are conducting interviews only to fulfill institutional, state, or federal requirements.

There’s probably a continuum at work here. Some searches may indeed have a predetermined outcome (Adjunct A is going to get the job) while in other cases, committee members might lean toward certain candidates yet still be open to "new blood." Plenty of searches — maybe even most of them — are truly wide open.

So how can you know if a community college’s hiring decision is foreordained?

You can’t — unless you have a friend on the campus who is willing to give you the scoop. Barring that, if you’re invited to an interview, assume the search is legitimate and proceed accordingly. You should certainly accept an offer for a phone or Skype interview — that won’t cost you anything except an hour or so of your time — and if they’re willing to pay your way to campus for an on-site interview, you should probably accept that, too. (If you have to pay for travel out of pocket, you’ll have to weigh the costs, and decide.)

Worst-case scenario: You’ll acquire some valuable experience in interviewing.

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Cattle Call

By Rob Jenkins  |  FEBRUARY 14, 2005

You know it’s coming. Any day now you’ll get that telephone call or e-mail message asking you to serve on yet another search committee. As a tenure-track faculty member at a two-year college, you’ll most likely say yes. Here you go again.

I’m not going to recite platitudes about the joys of service or bore you with legalities. I'm sure your college, like mine, employs professionals to do that. Instead, I’d like to share some complaints from real job seekers who have e-mailed me over the past year to voice their frustrations with the hiring process at community colleges.

Too often those of us who serve on search committees come to see applicants as mere file folders — or worse, as nuisances — rather than as actual people. I’ve been guilty of that myself. So let’s remind ourselves that we’re dealing with human beings, over whose lives we have temporarily, and more or less randomly, been assigned some measure of control. We must accept that responsibility with soberness and humility, not arrogance or barely disguised annoyance.

We should also remember that the process of searching for new faculty members is supposed to be mutually beneficial to both the hirer and the person hired. The candidates bring important qualities to the table, qualities we are, or should be, looking for. They come to us hoping to establish careers at our institutions and build lives in our communities.

Committee members, for their part, seek to enhance the academic, intellectual, and social environments of their campuses by hiring the best teachers and colleagues.

In the end, even those candidates who don’t get hired should come out of the process feeling that, at a minimum, they were treated with respect and that, ideally, they learned and grew from the experience.

Sadly, that’s not usually the case. Sometimes our searches are more like "cattle calls," as one frustrated job seeker put it. "I appreciate your attempts to help prepare people interviewing for positions at community colleges," she says, "but perhaps what’s really needed is better informed search-committee members and chairs."

The complaints I received focused primarily on two issues. The first is salary, and specifically, the fact that many search committees won’t talk about it. "I wonder," wrote one reader, "if a committee remaining so 'tight-lipped' about something as basic as salary is not hiding other things."

The second concern of job candidates involves their perception that many community colleges are unwilling to give "inexperienced," first-time teachers a chance. "What I found most frustrating about seeking community-college employment," wrote another reader, "is that, unlike almost all other careers, community-college teaching does not seem to have an entry level. Community colleges simply do not hire beginning teachers."

At first glance, it seems there’s nothing an individual faculty member serving on a search committee can do about either of those complaints. Or is there?

Let’s take the salary issue first. Several readers wrote to say that they felt it was unreasonable for candidates not to be told the starting salary for a position during the interview (if not before), or at least given a range.

So why are search committees often reluctant to talk about money?

The answer is probably because they’ve been told not to, but that seems like a lame excuse. Can a community college really expect people to make potentially life-changing decisions, to contemplate moving their families across the country, based solely on the notion that teaching is its own reward?
Maybe individual committee members can’t do anything about the fact that the college didn’t mention salary in the position announcement, as it should have. But you can resolve among yourselves to be forthright with candidates on the subject.

So disclose the salary. You can always cover yourself with the caveat, “Of course, human resources will determine your exact salary,” but at least give a range.

The second brings up higher education’s version of an age-old conundrum: How do you get a job without experience, and how do you get experience without a job? As another astute and frustrated reader observed, “From the point of view of the search committee, I know the reason why community colleges don’t hire beginning teachers: The pool always contains plenty of experienced applicants, and, all else being equal, experience wins. From an applicant’s point of view, though, this is maddening.”

My college has been struggling recently with this very problem. For the past few years, we’ve made “three years full-time teaching experience” a required qualification in our job advertisements for new tenure-track faculty members. That has led some of us who frequently serve on search committees to wonder if we’re missing out on some of the best talent right out of graduate school — promising young scholars whom many four-year colleges would not hesitate to hire.

I know of one case involving a candidate we really wanted, a young woman with otherwise impeccable credentials who had only two years of teaching experience. Fortunately, we were able to hire her in a temporary position, which both sides hope is eventually converted to tenure track. But we nearly lost her.

To avoid losing promising young faculty members, the long-term solution, from an institutional point of view, is to rewrite your job descriptions and either eliminate the experience requirement altogether or at least de-emphasize it.

Maybe you could move teaching experience from the “required” list to the “desired” list, or perhaps you could simply lighten up — require one year of previous experience in the classroom instead of two or three, with two years of part-time teaching counting as one year of full-time.

Of course, once again, individual search committee members can’t do much about the way the job ad was written. But perhaps the members of the committee can agree to consider more carefully those applicants who are borderline in the experience department — or maybe even below borderline — rather than simply rejecting them out of hand as an easy way to narrow the field. (“Yahoo! Here’s one who doesn’t meet the experience requirement. One less folder to read through.” Not that that would ever happen.)

And if the committee members find that the best candidate is someone who doesn’t have the required experience, perhaps they can go together to the department head or the dean and plead that applicant’s case. Few administrators, I think, could withstand the joint plea of several determined tenured faculty members.

Once the search is over, committee members can also take up the experience requirement with their administrations. Ultimately faculty members hire new faculty members — at least, we do all the grunt work. And we’re the ones who have to work with new colleagues and advise them.

It’s in the long-term best interests of our colleges to reintroduce the entry-level position into the community-college job market. Right now there may be far more applicants than jobs, so we can pick and choose.

But that might not always be the case. As our older colleagues retire, and as the number of students attending two-year colleges continues to grow, we will need constant infusions of new blood, in the form of new young faculty members. It doesn’t make sense for us to ignore those who might become some of our best teachers (and friends), just because they are neophyte teachers fresh out of graduate school.

In the end, serving on a search committee may turn out to be the most important thing you did this year, professionally speaking. I hope you will approach the task with sensitivity and an open mind. I hope your applicant pool is deep, filled both with experienced professors seeking a change of venue and with eager young hopefuls plunging enthusiastically into the profession.

Above all, I hope your top applicants refuse to schedule an interview unless you tell them the salary up front.
With this article, we begin a new monthly column on faculty and administrative careers at two-year colleges. If you would like to write for the column, or have a topic to propose — on any aspect of finding jobs at two-year colleges, getting promoted, or doing the jobs — we would like to hear from you. Send your ideas to careers@chronicle.com.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English and interim dean of academic services at the Lawrenceville campus of Georgia Perimeter College. He will write occasionally for our new community-college column.

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The Community-College Interview

By Rob Jenkins  |  February 17, 2006

As you prepare for an interview at a two-year college, keep in mind that your chances of getting the job depend more on your ability to speak the language of community colleges than on any other single factor.

In my experience -- 19 years as a faculty member, department head, and dean at two-year colleges -- one of the main reasons that otherwise-viable candidates do poorly in an interview is that they don't understand community colleges. They're unfamiliar with our values and don't speak our jargon.

Do you know what "the community college mission" is? Do you understand what faculty members at two-year colleges mean when we talk about "teaching and learning" or "the learning campus"? Are you familiar with various learning styles, and can you identify them and explain to the committee how you would accommodate each in your teaching? And what will you answer when a committee member asks about your "use of technology in the classroom"?

Those are among the phrases that, I've found, either leave candidates looking confused or elicit responses that have nothing to do with the question.

Take the matter of the community-college mission. You may be required to discuss that topic in writing, as part of the application process, or be asked to talk about it during the interview. Not to be glib, but you can't go wrong with some variation on the following response: "Community colleges meet students where they are and take them where they need to go."

Because that's the simple truth. Bear in mind that nearly all two-year colleges have "open-door" policies, meaning they accept anyone with a high-school or General Educational Development diploma, regardless of grade-point average or SAT scores. Many enroll non-high-school graduates in adult-education programs.

At the same time, community colleges in many states are expected to show graduation and persistence rates similar to those of their more selective, better-financed, four-year sister institutions.

So when you apply to a two-year college, you had better be able to teach. You'd better be able to meet students where they are and take them where they need to go, both for the students' sake and for the sake of the college. By and large, community colleges do a remarkable and largely unheralded job of fulfilling that mission.

It's important for you as a candidate to understand, then, that even though some of your students may be above average in terms of intellectual ability and academic preparation, you will also have some who are going to require all of your teaching skills to reach. It's even more important for the search committee to recognize that you understand and embrace that fact -- that you're not just another research-oriented, frustrated job-seeker "settling" for a position at a two-year college.

The mission of the community college is not just teaching, it's also learning. That may sound suspiciously like academic doublespeak. It's not. When we talk about teaching and learning or about the learning campus, we're really emphasizing, once again, the primary mission of the college: not merely to teach, but to ensure that students learn.

Community colleges have a vested interest in that process that goes beyond the professionalism and compassion of individual instructors. Whereas certain professors or programs at more selective institutions may take pride in "weeding out" those students who "can't cut it," community colleges and their faculties are committed both by charter and by disposition to helping every student "cut it."
The focus is not on the professor, but on the student, the learner. Faculty members at two-year colleges are both trained and predisposed to consider the student first when developing course materials, activities, even the overall approach to the course. We've learned that traditional methods of delivery, like lecture and class discussion, may work fine for some students in some situations but might not be sufficient to help every student master the material. That kind of extra attention to the learning process is both expected by the institution and, in most cases, personally important to the faculty member.

Which brings me to "learning styles." Research has shown that not all people learn in the same way. Some learn best by listening, others by reading. Some are highly visual, others more hands on. Good teachers understand that their students come to them with different learning styles and incorporate into their teaching approach activities that appeal to each style -- as opposed to merely lecturing, which reaches only auditory learners.

Search committees at two-year colleges will expect you to have at least some familiarity with learning-styles research and to have given some thought as to how you might deal with different styles in your classroom. I would recommend that you not rely on my one-paragraph synopsis. Do your own research.

Finally we come to the issue of technology, as in "Tell us how you use technology in your classroom." I've heard too many candidates respond to that question by mumbling something about e-mail or talking about how their students have to write their term papers on a computer. Those answers are not going to impress us.

That's because, despite our annual budget contortions, many community colleges are remarkably advanced technologically. That may be, in part, because we teach so many courses in information technology and related fields. Or perhaps, given our student-focused approach, we simply spend what money we have on tools for improving teaching.

Whatever the reason, a large percentage of community-college classrooms contain at least one computer and a data projector, while many are fully outfitted for 25 or 30 students. A surprising number even have interactive whiteboard technology.

I say surprising because surprise is often the reaction when friends and colleagues from research universities visit our campus. They're shocked to find that our classrooms are, by and large, better equipped than theirs. It's no wonder, then, that many first-time candidates for two-year college teaching jobs, who, as graduate assistants, were probably relegated to the worst rooms on the campus, have no idea what we mean by "using technology in the classroom."

Understand that, for us, technology is a tool -- possibly the primary tool -- for transforming the classroom from the traditional "sage on the stage" to a true learning-centered environment. Through selective use of Internet resources, streaming video, and presentation software, to name a few applications, instructors create engaging, interactive lessons that appeal to a variety of learners. Of course, not all instructors use those tools, and some use them far more than others. But community colleges are definitely looking for new faculty members who both can, and will, use them.

That said, it isn't absolutely necessary for you to know how to manipulate a SmartBoard or have experience with streaming video going into the interview. If your community-college campus is as wired as most, you will have ample training opportunities once you're hired. The important thing is that you understand what those tools are for and demonstrate a willingness to use them.

Armed with a new vocabulary -- and bolstered by your own research -- you should come across in your interview as someone who knows what two-year colleges are all about and who shares our vision. My hope, of course, is that you will actually become that person, not merely present yourself as such. More than anything else -- even more than new computers -- we need excellent teachers who are committed to the community-college mission.

If that describes you, I wish you the best of luck.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English and director of the Writers Institute at the Lawrenceville campus of Georgia Perimeter College. He writes occasionally for our community-college column.
The Teaching Demo: Less Power, More Point

By Rob Jenkins | NOVEMBER 28, 2017

I’ve noticed a definite trend whenever I serve on faculty search committees lately: More and more job candidates seem to be relying heavily on PowerPoint during their teaching demonstrations.

Such demos have become a routine part of the faculty-hiring process at many institutions but especially at teaching-focused institutions like my own. Perhaps candidates are turning to PowerPoint because, having been warned beforehand that they will need to show some familiarity and facility with "technology" during their interview, they believe that a PowerPoint presentation is a good way to fulfill that requirement.

I see several problems with that strategy. For one thing, using PowerPoint doesn’t tell us much about your technological savvy. As a nondigital native and alleged neo-Luddite, I assume any application I can use myself — and use reasonably well — can’t be too complicated, much less cutting edge. In addition, too many candidates use PowerPoint in their demos much as they would for a conference presentation — to the point of reading their slides out loud. As all conference-goers know, few things are more boring than that.
The Chronicle's Best Ideas for Teaching

The 10 articles in this collection describe innovative teaching strategies — not just high-tech ones, like webcast introductory courses, but low-tech ones, like peer instruction, learning communities, and reconsiderations of the canon.

Even if it’s not boring, treating the teaching demo like a conference talk violates the cardinal rule of teaching demos: You’re giving a demonstration, not a presentation. Especially at two-year colleges or other teaching-focused institutions, your objective is not to tell us how you teach, but to show us.

As committee members, we (and anyone else in the audience) are looking for a glimpse into what your future classroom might be like if we hired you. If standing at the podium and reading your PowerPoint slides aloud is indicative of how you teach, then as a search-committee member, I’m just not interested in your candidacy. I will vote against you — and, based on our most recent committee’s post-interview discussions, I am not alone in that.

It’s not that I have anything against PowerPoint. When presenting at a conference, conducting a workshop, or giving a visiting lecture, I often use it as a kind of visual outline — to remind myself what I intend to talk about and which points I need to cover. I’ve even been known to throw in a little clip art, or a pithy quote or cartoon.

I don’t use PowerPoint in my classroom, for reasons I explained in a blog post in 2013. In short, I like the spontaneity of writing notes in class on a whiteboard. But I have no quarrel with those who prefer to prepare their notes ahead of time on PowerPoint. I can see how it might offer significant advantages in, say, a large lecture hall with 200 students.
Even if, in your actual classroom, you do use PowerPoint extensively, I recommend that you not rely on it too heavily during a teaching demo — and certainly not exclusively. After all, there are far more impressive ways than that to show your potential future colleagues that you know how to use technology to enhance your teaching.

For that matter, reading PowerPoint slides aloud is not really teaching, in the modern sense. It takes us back to the proverbial "sage on the stage," monotonously reading dog-eared, yellowed notes to the class from behind a wooden lectern. The only difference is that, with PowerPoint, modern audiences can read those "notes" for themselves.

I'm not going out on a limb here when I say that most search-committee members would much rather see you interact with your "students." By all means, put something up on the screen, but then use that visual aid as an aid, not a crutch — as a way to spark interest, not stifle it. Show us a photo, drawing, or cartoon that illustrates a point you're trying to make. Pull up a current newspaper headline, an opinion essay, or a video. And then come around in front of the lectern and engage us in a discussion about what we are seeing.

Don't hesitate, by the way, to use the whiteboard in conjunction with the PowerPoint screen. In one of the best teaching demos I've seen, the candidate spoke briefly about the nature of descriptive language before showing us two paragraphs from Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. She then invited us to identify descriptive words and phrases from the excerpt while she wrote down our responses on the whiteboard — and periodically stopped to talk about them.

As she moved from board to lectern to the front of the room, and back, that candidate seemed to have a great deal of energy, which became infectious. Her teaching demo did not feel canned, as PowerPoint presentations often do, with predetermined "key ideas." Instead, we as "students" felt like we were contributing to an evolving discussion.

At the same time, be sure not to rely on the whiteboard exclusively, either. In our last hiring cycle, the committee was in complete agreement that the worst teaching demo we saw came from a candidate who informed us, up front, that he was "an old-fashioned guy" who wasn't "really into technology." He then spent his entire 20 minutes painstakingly writing on the board information that could easily have been captured in a single PowerPoint slide.

What faculty members serving on hiring committees want most from a candidate giving a teaching demo is a little variety — not just because it speaks to teaching ability but because we're bored. (I'm only half kidding.) Yes, by all means, show us you know how to use technology. PowerPoint is fine, if that's what you've got. But show us, too, that you know how to give a (brief) lecture, engage us in discussion, and lead a short activity.

If all you're going to do is read from a canned presentation — well, please spare us the tedium and just email us your slides. We can read them ourselves.

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**Making the Most of Your Teaching Demo**

*By Nicole Matos*

It can be scary and artificial, but it also presents a unique opportunity to communicate who you are as a teacher.
Demonstration or Demolition?

The teaching demo is arguably the most important part of the community-college interview — and the most terrifying

By Rob Jenkins | JANUARY 25, 2009

If you’re fortunate enough to have scored a job interview at a two-year college, congratulations. Now it’s time to start preparing for what is arguably the most important, probably the most arduous, and certainly the most daunting (judging from the e-mail messages I receive) part of the interview: the teaching demonstration.

Over the course of my 30 years’ teaching at community colleges, I’ve observed dozens of teaching demos. Only a few were actually good. Most were just OK, and many were downright awful. I’ve seen a number of otherwise-solid candidates derailed by their demonstrations, and many other people whom we hired despite a lackluster performance, hoping against hope that it was an aberration.

Those candidates were not bad teachers. OK, some of them were, but in most cases, the problem was not that they didn’t know how to teach but rather that they didn’t know how to conduct a teaching demonstration during a job interview. The two things, while obviously related, aren’t exactly the same.

Here, then, are some tips to remember as you prepare your teaching demo.

It’s a demonstration, not a presentation. One of the biggest mistakes job candidates make is treating the teaching demo like a conference talk, sometimes even complete with PowerPoint slides and handouts of those same slides.

It’s not that using technology is a bad idea (more on that later); it’s just that candidates who are using it in that particular way are demonstrating the wrong thing. They’re showing the committee how well they can present information to peers in a conference setting, not how well they can teach students in a college classroom.

The problem with the presentation approach is that candidates spend all their time talking about what they would do in such-and-such a class rather than actually doing it. That deprives committee members of the opportunity to observe the way candidates present real material in a real-time, quasi-classroom setting. And that’s what we need to see in order to hire the best teachers.

Choose a manageable topic. While some search committees allow candidates to choose a subject for their demonstration, most panels provide the topic. In fact, committees often give all of the candidates the same topic in an attempt to place everyone on an equal footing.

If you don’t get to pick your topic, you still have some important choices to make: Exactly what information, and how much, do you hope to convey in the time allotted (usually 15 to 20 minutes)? How will you present it? Will you mostly lecture? Invite some discussion? Involve everyone in a group activity? Dazzle committee members with your technological brilliance?

The first step is to narrow your topic to something you can manage in your few minutes on stage. Here again, one of the biggest mistakes that candidates make is covering too much information — basically, trying to squeeze a 50-minute lecture into a 15-minute presentation. Once again, they end up talking about what they do instead of doing it.
My advice is to identify a 15 to 20-minute segment of a familiar lesson, an excerpt that can stand on its own without a lot of background or lead-in material. Preferably, it should be something you’ve taught often enough that you already know how you’re going to present it.

**Treat committee members like students.** Sometimes a search committee will give you this directive explicitly, either in written preinterview instructions or verbally as you’re about to begin. But whether they mention it or not, remember that you can’t teach without students — and committee members are the only other people in the room. (It’s true that a few colleges have job candidates teach actual students in a classroom setting, while committee members observe. But in most hiring situations at two-year colleges, it’s the committee members themselves you’ll be “teaching.”)

Treating committee members as if they were students means forgetting, for a few minutes, that they hold your professional future in their hands and relating to them as you would to students in a classroom. Address them just as you would address students. Ask them questions, try to engage them in discussion, and call on them to answer. Involve them in activities, whether they, much like real students, appear willing or not.

Although that approach may seem to involve a great deal of role-playing on your part — and perhaps on the part of committee members as well — it actually provides them with invaluable insight into your teaching style, your classroom manner, and your ability to establish a rapport with an audience.

Just be careful not to appear condescending. If you do, committee members will wonder if you will treat a bunch of 18 to 20-year-olds the same way, or worse. And don’t take the "student/teacher" relationship too far, like the candidate who confiscated a committee member’s cellphone during "class."

**Do more than lecture.** Tempting as it might be to stand up and talk for 15 minutes, don’t. And for heaven’s sake, don’t simply read from lecture notes; that’s a surefire way to eliminate yourself from contention.

At the very least, mix in a little discussion and some question and answer. (One nice thing about having faculty members as your "students": They’re going to know the answers.) And be sure to distribute at least one handout that clearly enhances the lesson.

You might also use a group activity, although I would add three caveats: First, make sure the activity is, shall we say, age-appropriate. Don’t be like the candidate who gave each of us on the search committee a cracker, asked us to stare at it for three minutes, and then instructed us to write a paragraph about what we saw. I confess: I just saw a cracker.

Second, don’t use an activity that will take up too much of your time. We want you to do more than just lecture, but we do want to hear you lecture. So choose an activity that can be completed in no more than five to seven minutes.

Finally, don’t expect committee members to be any more enthusiastic about participating in your activity than your actual students would be.

**Use bells and whistles — in moderation.** After you are invited to an interview that includes a teaching demonstration, one of the first things you should find out is what kind of technology will be available to you. If it’s something you’re comfortable using — that is, something you already use regularly — plan to use it in your teaching demo. So, for example, if you normally use PowerPoint in your classroom, or like to pull up YouTube videos on the Internet, the committee would probably love to see you do it.

On the other hand, you shouldn’t go to great lengths to concoct some "totally wired" lesson plan that doesn’t reflect the way you actually teach, just to show how savvy you are. Your lack of comfort (and perhaps familiarity) with the technology will almost certainly be evident.

Also, even if you’re a bona fide geek, avoid giving a teaching demo that is so technologically based that it’s almost a lesson on technology rather than on the topic at hand. Remember, search committees at community colleges are looking for the best teachers, not necessarily the best techies. By all means, dazzle them with technology, but do more than just dazzle. Teach.
And bear in mind that if you do intend to use technology, it's vital to have a backup plan. In my experience, nothing is more common during teaching demonstrations than for the classroom technology to malfunction. So if you're using a CD, have the data on a flash drive as well. Prepare handouts that you can substitute for the images that won't appear on the screen if the projector refuses to boot up. (Here's where those copies of your PowerPoint slides might come in handy.) If all else fails, be prepared to teach in the old-fashioned way.

By following those few simple steps, you can set yourself apart from other candidates. And if you're interviewing at my institution, where I'm once again serving on a search committee, I'm not just suggesting you follow my advice — I'm begging.

After all, how many awful teaching demos can one person sit through?

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