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ADVICE

## 7 Tips on Applying for Faculty Openings at Community Colleges

What job candidates need to know about seeking a teaching position at a two-year college.

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If you're on the faculty job market — such as it is this year, amid Covid-19 — chances are you may be applying to a community college. More specifically, you might be applying to one of the 115 California Community Colleges, where I teach, given that they make up the largest single education system in the world.

Hiring freezes across academe will make it more important than ever for you to submit a competitive application to the places that *are* hiring. It's critical — especially for newcomers to the community-college job market — to understand how our hiring system works.

What follows are tips that I've collected from years of serving on search committees at my college. My focus is on full-time positions at California community colleges, but my advice may apply to two-year systems in other states.

**1: Understand the meaning of “equivalency.”** Our two-year system uses “minimum qualifications — or MQs — to determine your eligibility for a teaching position. They are posted online and updated through a rigorous process led by the [Academic Senate](#). Colleges are forbidden to employ any faculty member who does not meet the MQs for a position. What that means is your degree has to match the MQ description exactly; if it does not, you need to apply for what's called “equivalency.”

Applying for equivalency is not seen as a failing on your part — it's actually a way to diversify the pool of qualified applicants. For example, if the job ad requires a master's in engineering, and your degree is a double master's in physics and math with an engineering emphasis, your degrees do not match the language of the MQ (despite appearing to exceed it). However, your degrees, work experience, or a

combination of the two might be deemed equivalent to the MQ, which would allow you to submit the appropriate evidence and be considered for the opening.

The most important thing to keep in mind: The MQs and equivalency standards are set by the college district in the California system — not by the applicant. You do not get to determine your own equivalency. Many applications are rejected when applicants (a) erroneously claim that they meet MQs when they do not, (b) do not apply for equivalency, or (c) apply for it but do not provide sufficient evidence.

*Advice:* Read the MQs listed in the job description carefully. If your degree does not match them exactly, seek out the college's equivalency process and follow it to the letter. Gather your evidence. Applying for equivalency is the applicant's responsibility, but determining it is squarely in the purview of the hiring body.

**2: Your cover letter is an interview before the actual interview.** Many applicants assume that the purpose of a cover letter is to politely introduce yourself, give an overview of your experience, and demonstrate your desire for the position. To limit the cover letter to those basic elements would be a severe miscalculation. For faculty openings at two-year colleges, the cover letter is the true test of the application package, for it requires the skill of knowing how to talk about your abilities and yourself.

Search committees are not ad hoc, hastily convened groups, mechanically checking boxes for HR. They spend hours crafting job descriptions to advertise exactly what they are looking for in a hire. Thus, cover letters that do not mention specific criteria listed in the job ad rarely make it past the initial paper screening. You also need to think of your cover letter as the committee's initial window into your personality, work ethic, values system, and potential as a colleague. A good cover letter is like a warm handshake, a confident smile.

There is no specified page length for a successful cover letter. Less than a full page will seem woefully insufficient to introduce yourself, while more than two or three pages risks overstating things. Many job applicants suffer from impostor syndrome, and fear they will bore the committee with tales of achievements. It may help you to know that we are just as wary and nervous as the applicant; we are seeking to welcome a new member of our departmental family. The details in the cover letter are the only insight into what a long-term working relationship with you might be like.

*Advice:* Go through the job description's desired qualifications and requirements, and turn each one into a question. To shape your answers, ask a trusted friend to play interviewer, ask you those questions, and take notes on your responses. Review your friend's notes. What is missing? Craft your cover letter in a way that responds directly to every part of the job description and with as much care as you put into drafting your CV or résumé.

**3: Fill out the entire online application.** Many candidates feel they are repeating themselves throughout the community-college application process, and they're not wrong. Candidates must list their education and experience in an online form, state their record in further detail (and with attractive formatting) in their résumé or CV, and expand upon it in the cover letter. That's by design. Each step in the laborious application process has a purpose:

- The online application allows committees to screen candidates who are all presenting the requested information in the same consistent order.
- The CV/résumé is an opportunity to present your strengths in the sequence and format that you deem best reflect you. It's your chance to control how that information is conveyed.
- Finally, the cover letter is the true introduction to the person behind the qualifications.

Taking care to fill out the online application completely — however perfunctory it might seem — shows a respect for the process as well as an attention to detail. I've seen candidates write “see résumé” in some application fields, or leave them blank. Doing that is a quick trip to the reject pile.

*Advice:* Use the online form to list the requested skills. Use the résumé to flesh out details that the application does not allow for (specific courses taught, research conducted, papers published). And use your cover letter to show your skills, values, and personality, and why you want to teach at our college.

**4: We love researchers, but we're looking to hire teachers.** As interested as we are in your scholarship, we are not research universities. Very few community colleges hire faculty members predominantly for the purpose of research. Remember: Our department got permission to recruit by demonstrating that we had unmet teaching needs. If you are hired, your primary assignment will be teaching; therefore, you need to demonstrate your skills, abilities, values, and goals as a teacher, first and foremost.

What if you are a graduate student or a recent Ph.D. who lacks teaching experience? You're not entirely out of luck, but you do need to help the committee see how the skills you have will contribute to the department. Instead of merely listing your research, talk (in your cover letter) about how it informs your teaching and how it will make a difference in the hiring department or in moving the student-success needle. What does your research make you excited about doing when you finally get into the classroom? What things do you hope to learn about your students that will help our college meet the challenges it faces today?

If your only teaching experience has been as a TA, or if you have none at all, you need to get some. Look at places to volunteer, apply to tutor in a campus learning center, or seek out a mentor at a local college who may take you on as an assistant

for a semester. Check if any colleges have a [Faculty Diversity Internship Program](#), designed to provide new teachers with supervised mentorship and experience.

*Advice:* Educate yourself on the issues facing community colleges. Any teaching experience is valuable, but know that our students have unique needs and challenges; you need to demonstrate your ability to apply your skills to teaching our particular students. Don't hide a lack of teaching experience under a long list of research. However, you can use your research to demonstrate the added value it would bring to the college.

**5: Do your homework about the hiring institution.** In the digital era, there is no excuse for being uninformed about the college you're applying to, or the region it serves. Demonstrate that awareness, and you get the immediate interest of a search committee. Who are the college's students? Which four-year institutions do they transfer to? What challenges did the college face in the latest accreditation round? How has it responded to recent state mandates and standards?

Fortunately, it's easy to find that information online. As you do your research, trends and themes will appear that are deeply embedded in the fabric of the institution. You will come across buzzwords that we use and hear every day. Each college is a unique community with strengths and weaknesses, challenges and successes. So when the hiring committee asks, "Why are you interested in working here?," we know that the real answer is "I need a job," but you can use your research about the college to respond in a more nuanced fashion.

*Advice:* Scour the college's website for the following: recommendations from its last accreditation report, minutes from recent meetings of its Academic Senate and curriculum committees, and anything to do with student success. Take note of the buzzwords you read, and make them keywords throughout your application. Good resources include the two-year system's [Academic Senate](#) and [chancellor's office](#).

**6: Take the equity and diversity statement seriously.** With colleges focusing more and more sharply on equity, diversity, and inclusion, a successful faculty application will include a robust and relevant statement on those issues — especially when you’re applying to a highly diverse system like California’s. Equity work embodies specific mind-sets, language, methodology, and concepts, and it will be evident to selection committees when that knowledge is lacking.

Colleges need to know that you recognize your obligation to be a part of a cultural shift toward socially just education, and that you have already embarked on that path. Don’t assume this is training you can wait to receive on the job.

*Advice:* Avoid some of the severe missteps that can be made in an equity and diversity statement:

- If you don’t know what the buzz is about equity and diversity, before you give an insufficient response, look it up. You’re joining an educational institution that expects you to educate yourself. You needn’t be an expert, but you do need to be courageous with a willingness to fumble forward and learn what you need to learn. Most colleges have accessible online resources on diversity, equity, inclusion, antiracism, and educational advocacy, so seek them out.
- Avoid citing diverse environments in your life as the chief (or sole) evidence of your skills in diversity and inclusion. It may give the committee context for your life, but it doesn’t reveal what you know and believe about equity. Instead, share what equity and diversity mean to you, and why an inclusive mind-set is important to serving our college’s students.
- Saying “I treat everyone equally” and “I don’t see color” are not demonstrations of an equity and diversity mind-set (actually, quite the opposite). Equity is about what individuals need to succeed, not about what institutions can legally defend as “fair treatment for all.” Stating that you “don’t see color” suggests that you don’t see or acknowledge the very real

circumstances that people of color face. Focus less on yourself and more on the students who deserve attention to equity.

**7: Service is part of the job.** Teaching accounts for about 60 percent of a full-time faculty job at a community college. The remainder is made up of institutional work — serving on committees, tracking outcomes for your department, writing curricula, working on accreditation, doing outreach for your program, and a myriad of unseen collaborative projects. Hiring committees need to see that you are collegial and collaborative; they need to know that you can lead when asked, work well with others, and ask for help as needed.

As with any job, leadership skills are highly sought after at two-year colleges, but teamwork and collegiality are perhaps more important. In California, for example, community colleges operate, by law, under a practice called participatory governance. Members of the search committee will want to know that you are willing to play an active role in college governance.

*Advice:* Research the committee structure of the college you are applying to, and get a feel for recent issues on its agenda. Be ready to ask questions about particular committees, reports, initiatives, services, or institutional commitments, and answer questions about how you might contribute.

Good luck will play a role in the hiring market this difficult year, but good preparation can't hurt.

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