

## **Employing Graduate Students at Two-year Colleges: A Missed Opportunity?**

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### Abstract

A good opportunity that is rarely exploited exists for both graduate students and two-year colleges. Supplemental faculty play an important role at many two-year colleges, yet for a variety of reasons, schools often have trouble finding enough people to meet their needs. This author feels that engineering graduate students can play a fundamental role in filling the void.

Many graduate students have a strong desire to teach and therefore, are working towards their Ph.D. in pursuit of a career in academia. While many universities give graduate students the opportunities to be teaching assistants, many graduate students never have their own class. By teaching at a two-year school, they are gaining valuable classroom experience while still being “students” themselves. It also shows them another side of academia they are probably unfamiliar with since many graduate students have only experienced large universities. Also, teaching at a two-year school is a good way for graduate students to supplement their income. Some graduate students find that they need to have a part-time job while in graduate school. Working at a two-year college allows them to teach both at night and during the summer thereby providing additional income while doing something that is relevant to their future career choice. Teaching at a two-year college is a great opportunity for graduate students, yet most are unaware this opportunity exists.

Many two-year colleges hire a significant number of supplemental faculty members. By actively searching for graduate student employees, two-year colleges would be filling an increasing void. Graduate students interested in academia have a strong desire to teach and despite their limited time in front of the classroom, most learn quickly. In addition, due to their flexible schedules, graduate students are willing to work a variety of hours. This allows the college to schedule classes that might otherwise be hard to find instructors for, such as at night and during the summer. Finally, graduate students are qualified to teach a variety of subjects since their background is frequently diverse. Overall, graduate students can be a positive addition to many two-year college departments.

### Graduate Student Perspective

While in graduate school, many students are given the opportunity to be teaching assistants, but as a teaching assistant, they are frequently relegated to holding office hours and grading homework. Only if they are fortunate will they get to participate in course development or be in

front of the class. Some graduate students are laboratory instructors so they get significant lecture experience, but usually are still lacking in their development since they do not write syllabi or exams. Despite these deficiencies, they are working towards a career in academia. Typically, their graduate student responsibilities do not fully prepare them for their future faculty positions.

Normally, when recent graduates start their first academic jobs, they have immediate job pressures. They are expected to quickly learn the inner-workings of their new department, school, and university, while adjusting to life in a new city, starting a research program, serving on a committee, advising students, and, time permitting, teaching. This can be a daunting task for someone straight out of graduate school. Sometimes schools give new faculty members reduced workloads in their first couple of terms to ease the transition, but not always. There is precious little time for new faculty members to learn their place in the department and develop a plan for a course they have most likely never taught before.

By teaching at a two-year college, graduate students can gain classroom experience while still in school. More than likely, an engineering graduate student will not have the opportunity to teach courses in their major at the two-year college level, but the experience still offers a valuable perspective. Even teaching just a few semesters can be invaluable for a future faculty member. It gives them the opportunity to improve interpersonal skills, hone classroom presentation, and develop an educational philosophy, all before the rigors of a full-time appointment start.

When teaching at a two-year college there are many opportunities for graduate students to grow academically. Most community colleges have significant resources for faculty development that an adjunct faculty member can take advantage of. These resources can include teaching evaluation, course development, and literary sources. For example, at Jackson Community College, adjunct faculty members are encouraged to develop as a teacher and have the following tools available:

- mentoring programs where young faculty can ask questions from more experienced peers.
- course syllabus records, which give examples of previous used syllabi and suggestions on syllabus improvement.
- student evaluations of your classroom performance.
- optional professional evaluations of classroom performance.
- numerous professional journals both on teaching and specific subjects.
- reprints of articles on effective teaching, classroom enhancement, and student interaction circulated in a newsletter titled “Teaching for Success.”
- professional staff trained to deal with classroom problems and special student needs.
- seminars, workshops, and departmental meetings.

While all two-year colleges may not have the same programs, most have some form of faculty development for adjunct faculty. Some of these programs may exist at the university level, but many do not have the infrastructure in place for a new faculty member to thrive in the classroom.

Additionally, teaching at two-year school can give a graduate student another perspective on college life. Many of them have only experienced large-scale research institutions, which

contrast significantly from two-year schools. Two-year schools frequently offer smaller class sizes, more student interaction, no research pressure, and fewer hours. These features make teaching at a two-year school a very personally and professionally rewarding experience. It may also open a future job opportunity for a graduate student who decides that teaching at a two-year college is a good career choice.

Finally, working at a two-year college is a way for graduate students to earn additional income while doing something extremely beneficial to their future career. Locally, I have found that two-year colleges pay between \$22.50 and \$35 per contact hour. This may not be significant income to a professional making upwards of \$35,000 per year but the extra \$1500 per semester can be of extreme benefit to a graduate student who may be struggling to make ends meet. Plus, two-year colleges offer many courses at night and in the summer which are ideal times for graduate students to work. Finally, most two-year colleges offer tuition credits for employees and their immediate family. This may be an opportunity for a graduate student or their spouse to take a “fun” class such as dance, cooking, or aerobics for free.

### College Perspective

Many two-year colleges rely significantly on part-time or adjunct faculty to cover course offerings. I found that in many departments, part-time faculty outnumbered full-time faculty by 3 to 1 and covered around 35% of all course offerings. In fact, some larger schools use hundreds of part-time faculty. For instance Lansing Community College routinely employs 700 to 800 part-time faculty and Oakland Community College over 500, including 80 new hires for this fall. The reliance on so many part-time faculty can put tremendous pressure on departmental heads searching for good people. Graduate students can play an important role in filling the voids.

Graduate students interested in academia have a strong desire to teach and can be a good addition to any department. They may have limited time in front of a classroom, but should adapt quickly to their new role. Several of the people I interviewed while researching this paper commented that their graduate student part-time faculty were quick to learn and adapt to teaching unfamiliar courses. They added that graduate students bring energy to the classroom and to the department, sometimes bringing added enthusiasm and fresh ideas to more senior faculty members (something they saw as a significant plus to the hiring of graduate students). Also, being students themselves gives them a good perspective of what their students need and the ability to understand them. A two-year college student may differ from your typical university student, but most graduate students are, or have recently been, in classes themselves.

The majority opinion of the faculty and deans I interviewed were that graduate students made great additions to their departments. They found that graduate students were quick learners and, for the most part, received high evaluation marks from the students. In fact, one faculty member stated that the only problem he had with graduate student instructors was that they frequently leave after a couple of years for full time appointments elsewhere. Of course, he also mentioned that did not deter him from hiring graduate students in the past nor in the future.

The fact that the graduate student/two-year college relationship is frequently going to be finite should not be a deterrent. Many successful part-time faculty members leave after a couple of

years anyway, regardless of whether they are graduate students or not. A graduate student can give a department two or three good years and can be replaced by another graduate student, similar to a cooperative program.

Working a graduate student into your department need not be difficult. Most have flexible schedules and are looking for the opportunity to teach. This means that they are willing to take assignments that full-timers might not want. The key is allowing graduate students to teach outside of their actual “field.” Since many two-year schools do not offer many engineering classes, the only way to utilize engineering graduate students is to allow them to teach classes that are in their background. Engineering graduate students have strong physics, mathematics, and computer backgrounds and could successfully teach those topics. In addition, some disciplines of engineering might be good matches with other courses, such as a chemical engineer teaching chemistry, an electrical engineer teaching electronics, or a mechanical engineer teaching thermodynamics.

Some schools have set requirements that prohibit an individual from teaching a course that they do not possess a degree in (for example a BS or MS in Physics being a requirement for teaching a physics class). In those cases, there are obvious limitations in the employment of graduate students. For those schools without written restrictions, an open mind about what a graduate student is qualified to teach will allow their employment.

Some might not feel that graduate students are qualified to teach at a two-year school. In many cases, that might be true. After all, graduate students are lacking in course development and classroom time. However, if a graduate student has a good attitude, a strong desire to teach, and has some classroom time, many of their deficiencies can be overcome with a little departmental perseverance and support. Selecting the right person is the key.

In all fairness, I did interview a couple of people who were not in favor of hiring full-time graduate students and one who was opposed to the idea. Overall, I interviewed 12 department chairs, deans, and faculty members at 5 institutions in southern Michigan (see Acknowledgements section) and found strong support for the hiring of graduate students as part-time instructors. Several even commented that they wished more graduate students would apply to their department. Some of the colleges had regulations that made the hiring of graduate students more difficult but that did not change the positive opinions of the interviewees at those schools.

## Conclusion

The employment of graduate students at two-year colleges is a good opportunity that is rarely exploited. There are definite advantages for both sides. Graduate students gain valuable experience and an insight on their future career choice, while two-year schools gain needed part-time faculty. The question then is the feasibility of a more prevalent relationship between graduate students and two-year colleges.

The proximity of a two-year college to a graduate institution will vary, but chances are at least one will be within commuting distance. As of 1997, there were 1132 two-year institutions in

America including at least one in all 50 states. In addition, increasing enrollments should mean more opportunities for jobs. In 1997, 10.4 million students attended two-year schools, which represents 44% of the total U.S. undergraduate enrollment. Also, the number of associates degrees awarded by two-year schools has increased every year from 1992 to 1998, for a total of 35.8 percent over that time. With the government trying to make two-year degrees more affordable with tax breaks and Pell grants, enrollments should continue to rise in the near future. Therefore, the opportunity for graduate students to teach should exist. Since the opportunities appear to be there, the problem becomes awareness.

I have found at seminars, workshops, and through casual conversation that most graduate students do not realize they could teach at a two-year school while working on their degree. They seem surprised that I have been an adjunct faculty member for the last three years. Frequently they question me about how I became an adjunct and how they might also find a teaching position. It was through these conversations, and conversations I had with my peers at Jackson Community College, that I realized perhaps good opportunities were being missed. The goal then becomes informing both sides, especially graduate students, of the opportunities.

Overall, the majority opinion of the people I interviewed was that graduate students were good instructors. Therefore, two-year schools should recruit graduate students. This could be accomplished through a variety of methods, for example:

- flyer or email distribution to graduate students encouraging applications
- a local, regional, or national web-page clearinghouse to match qualified graduate students to departments
- partnerships between local universities and two-year colleges such that the university would regularly supply graduate student instructors to the colleges
- encourage current graduate student part-time faculty to recruit other good candidates

The important thing is not how this opportunity is exploited, but rather that it is.

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