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Can I Teach at a Community College?

By Rob Jenkins

Question: I have a quandary that I hope you can help me with. I hold a master's degree in information science, traditionally known as "library school." In the new digital age, however, library schools have emerged as iSchools, or schools of information science. I have 21 credit hours in my area of specialization: information economics, management, and policy. I graduated with 49 credit hours, 48 at the master's level. I consider myself an information expert, having taught computer-training courses and worked in the field for several years before graduate school.

The iSchool movement is interdisciplinary, spanning fields such as computer science, cognitive science/psychology, management, policy, engineering, and information technology. People from my program are information architects who design and build Web sites; policy experts at the Library of Congress; records-management folks who work at law firms; and "usability engineers" at marketing companies. The list goes on. Of course, we also have our fair share of traditional librarians who are media specialists, archivists, and preservationists.

I had never thought about working as an instructor again, but in today's economic climate, I might consider teaching at a community college. I just wonder: How will my credentials be viewed?

Answer: A few weeks after receiving that e-mailed question from "Alina," I was visited in my office by "Kathryn," a graduate student at a nearby research university who has decided she wants to teach at a community college but whose professors can't tell her how to do that (not surprising, given that research-oriented professors don't consider teaching at a community college to be a viable career option for their doctoral students, but that's a topic for another day). Kathryn is working on a master's of education degree in educational psychology and wondered if that degree would qualify her to teach psychology at a two-year college.
The short answer, in Kathryn's case, is "Probably not." Similarly, the short answer to Alina's question—"How will my credentials be viewed?"—is, "Not too favorably."

In both cases, of course, the long answer involves numerous "ifs" and "butts." However, both Alina and Kathryn face the same fundamental problem: They have pursued graduate degrees that might not actually qualify them to teach anything, at least at a community college.

Consider Alina's case. What can she teach? I don't know of many two-year colleges that offer programs in information science, so that's probably out. Her e-mail mentions economics and management; might she be able to teach in one of those disciplines?

That depends on the number of graduate credit hours she completed in each. Generally, accrediting bodies across the country stipulate that instructors at community colleges should hold at least a master's degree with 18 graduate hours in the teaching field. Most accreditation guidelines allow for exceptions, but, in my experience, they are rare. Exceptions require administrators who are willing to do the necessary paperwork and perhaps risk running afoul of their superiors.

Alina has a master's degree, but does she have 18 graduate hours specifically in economics? Or in management? If not, she probably won't be considered qualified to teach either of those subjects at a community college, unless she encounters an unusually accommodating department chair or dean. Her only realistic option, if she's truly intent on becoming a community-college instructor, is to go back and take additional graduate courses in the area in which she wants to teach.

Kathryn's situation is slightly better. For one thing, she's only a couple of semesters into her program, so she still has time to change majors if that's what she decides to do. In fact, she and I talked about that very thing. She wondered if transferring into the M.A. program in educational psychology—which would mean she wouldn't lose many credit hours—would put her in a better position than sticking with the M.Ed.

Here, the answer is, "Possibly." If she completes the M.Ed. program, whether or not she can teach at a community college may hinge on how many of her graduate hours are actually in psychology and how many are in education.
As chair of a humanities department, I often saw similar cases involving applicants who had English-education degrees. The question was always: How many of their graduate-credit hours were in English and how many were in education? To teach English, they needed at least 18 graduate hours with ENGL or similar prefixes in front of the courses, and many candidates didn't have that. Fortunately, they usually weren't far off (most had 12 or 15 hours), so they were able to go back and complete the courses they needed to be credentialed.

Even if Kathryn transfers to the M.A. program in educational psychology, she'll still take many of the same courses as she would have in the M.Ed. program—and therein could lie another problem. While we were talking, I pulled up Web sites describing both programs on my laptop and saw that all of the educational psychology courses had EPSY prefixes. Traditional psychology courses begin with PSY or PSYCH. Would someone evaluating her transcript—a dean, a department chair, or an accreditation reviewer—consider those EPSY courses to be equivalent to PSYCH courses?

Once again, the answer is: "Maybe, and maybe not.". To some extent, it might depend on the dean or the chair, and how far he or she is willing to go out on a limb. Institutional climate may also be a factor: Some two-year colleges interpret degree and course guidelines more broadly than others.

Or the decision might simply come down to catalog-course descriptions. As chair, I once hired an adjunct instructor with a theater degree to teach speech (imagine that). The dean who reviewed her transcript declared her unqualified, insisting that she had to have 18 hours of graduate courses with SPCH prefixes. Fortunately, I was able to show the dean a transcript from one of our tenured professors whose courses all had SPCH prefixes but were exactly the same as the courses the new hire had taken in her theater program: performance and, elocution, for example.

Ultimately, though, to get back to Kathryn, I doubt that most hiring committees at community colleges will give as much weight to a master's in educational psychology as they will to a traditional M.A. in psychology. My advice, then, was that she needed to transfer to the psychology department, even if that meant losing some credit hours.
Speaking more broadly, my advice to undergraduates is this: If you want to be a high-school counselor or a librarian, then a degree in educational psychology or information science might be just the thing. But if you want to teach at a community college, you should probably earn your graduate degree in one of the core disciplines.

If you're a graduate student in an interdisciplinary program, or already hold such a degree, and you decide that what you really want to do in life is become a community-college instructor, then you must next decide whether it's worth taking additional courses in a specific discipline to qualify. If you conclude that it is, we'll look forward to seeing your application in a few years.

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.