Chapter 2

Life in a Community College: A Day in the Life of a Community College English Professor

Rob Jenkins

It’s still dark as I steer my aging economy car into the parking lot and choose a spot next to a late-model Mustang. Obviously a student’s car. This is the smallest and most suburban of my college’s five campuses, with students who are correspondingly more affluent than their counterparts at our urban locations. We also don’t have separate parking for faculty.

Which is fine, because I’m here at 6:45 a.m., and the parking lot is almost deserted. In approximately ten minutes it will start to fill, mostly with cars driven by teenagers taking an early-morning dual-enrollment class before heading over to the local high school. That’s why I’m here bright and early (well, early, at least) on this frigid February Wednesday morning: I have a 7:00 a.m. section of English Composition that’s populated almost entirely by dually-enrolled high school kids. I also have several dual-enrollment students in my 8:30 class, and even a few in my 11:00 one.

And no, I’m not being punished by having to teach these early-morning classes or, for that matter, by having to teach high school kids. I chose this. After 27 years as a full-time faculty member, including 14 years at this institution, I have enough seniority to put
together my own schedule, within reason. Classes meet on this cam-
pus from 7:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night, and some of my
colleagues prefer to teach in the afternoon and evening. But I’m a
morning person. I like my early classes and, for some odd reason,
everybody else seems content to let me have them.

I enjoy my dual enrollment students, too. On average, they tend
to be a little better writers than most community college students.
At the same time, I also enjoy my traditional-age students, as well as
the non-traditional students—many returning to school after years
away—that I see in my later classes. I had a lot more of those non-
traditional students when I taught on one of our larger campuses in
town, back before I transferred to this suburban outpost because it’s
closer to home. But despite being located in a relatively affluent area,
this is still a two-year school, and we still attract a wide range of stu-
dents, most of them looking to pick up anywhere from a single class
to a couple years’ worth of coursework before moving on to one of
the surrounding state universities.

I throw my backpack over a shoulder, shove my hands into my
pockets, and make my way over to the building—we just have one—
pausing to hold the door and exchange pleasantries with a couple of
early-arriving students. There’s just enough time for me to drop my
bag by my office, fish out the sheaf of essays I finished grading yester-
day afternoon, and get to my classroom with a few minutes to spare
for booting up the computer and the overhead projector. One thing
I’ll say for this campus, small as it is: when it comes to classroom
technology, we’re pretty much set. But then, that’s fairly typical of
community colleges, many of which had SmartBoards and data pro-
jectors long before most four-year campuses. I can remember, back
in the early 2000s, hosting visitors from some of our state’s regional
universities who were amazed at how well equipped our classrooms
were. Two-year colleges might not receive as much in-state appropria-
tions as their four-year counterparts, but what money we do have, we
tend to spend on improving teaching and learning.

On the other hand, the truth is I don’t really have an office. I
have a cubicle in a cubicle farm in a converted classroom. Although
our campus is small, it’s growing fast, and space is at a premium. I
had a nice office at my previous campus, but I gave that up to shave
ten miles (16 km) each way—which, in Atlanta traffic, equates to
approximately 40 minutes—off my daily commute. That has made a
tremendous difference in my quality of life. Between my early sched-
ule, which allows me to leave campus by 2:00 most days, and my
shorter commute, I’ve been able to carve out more time for exercise