H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Arthur M. Cohen, Florence B. Brawer. *The American Community College.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996. 488 pgs. $36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55542-178-6.

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When the job market for Ph.D.s looked more optimistic, many graduates summarily dismissed community colleges as an employment option. Underprepared students, insufficient opportunity for research and the general hierarchy of academic snobbery made community colleges unappealing. However a tighter job market has forced many graduates to reconsider this option, or at least to learn more about it. Surprisingly, for many people including those more interested in teaching than research or in reaching out to more diverse populations, community colleges can be a very positive place to teach. The authors of *The American Community College* are strong advocates for the positive roles community colleges play, while also providing a clear picture of the pros and cons of teaching at that type of institution.

Since the book aims to provide a "comprehensive one-volume text useful for everyone concerned with higher education" (p. xvii), it contains a huge variety of material. Individual chapters explore the diversity of students, faculty, college management styles, funding patterns, advising needs, and educational purposes, while also interweaving a history of how these colleges developed and where they are going. Although generally the book is so thick with information and data that most readers will want to skim through, graduate students should focus carefully on the first three chapters.

The opening chapter provides an historical overview of the development of community colleges and lays out the various educational goals that these schools have tried to fulfill. The authors trace the debate over whether community colleges are extensions of high school or stepping stones to four year colleges, and present the arguments for and against vocational and technical training, versus a liberal arts education. The types of educational options offered dramatically affect the types of students which enroll at that particular school, thus making generalization about community college students problematic. However, while the majority of students are still nineteen, the average age for a community college students is thirty-one and rising, and part-time students far outnumber full time students. Community college learners are in general less well prepared and socioeconomically poorer than traditional college students, although an increasing number of community colleges have created honors programs in addition to their remedial programs. Perhaps most important for job seekers, the authors note that by 1990, fifty percent of all students starting college enrolled first in a community college. Those numbers do not seem to be declining, implying that the need for community college teachers may remain steady for at least a while.

The third chapter of the book focuses on the faculty role at community colleges. The authors note that these faculty are likely to have higher percentages of female and minority members than University faculty, and that the number of community college teachers with Ph.D.s is rising rapidly. Teaching loads average 13-15 lecture hours per week and while the average salary is lower than that of public universities, it is easier to reach the top of the pay scale more quickly. Tenure is usually awarded after one year of teaching, rather than after six or seven, and committee requirements are often less than at four year institutions. Part time teachers make up approximately forty percent of community college faculty, many of them by choice. Although clearly excited by the potential of community colleges to reach a broader range of students, the authors do make clear that the faculty must have a commitment to teaching and perhaps a sense of mission. Students are, overall, less well prepared, and the time-pressed faculty tends to become more focused on teaching than discipline-specific research. On the other hand, community college faculty are beginning to create their own career identities through conferences and seminars, celebrating what they do rather than feeling like step-children to the other parts of higher education.

Interwoven into the various chapters are excellent thought questions for potential community college

teachers. Job seekers should ask themselves, would you be happy with: squeezing research in at the edges of a career? having a predominant focus on teaching? serving a population drawn primarily from the area adjacent to the school? dealing with students who may need remedial skill building? interacting with students who have a clear sense of why they are attending college and what they want out of it? The authors also provide some useful questions to ask of a potential employer (or to find out without asking): Are the majority of the students transferring to a four year university, are they pursuing terminal vocational programs, or are they life-long learners there for enjoyment? What are the school's educational goals–liberal education or technical skills?- Are there funds or release time available to facilitate faculty research? Is there a faculty community, or simply a group of part-timers all teaching one individual class? *The American Community College* continually emphasizes the diversity among community colleges, and thus the need to move beyond the generalizations in the book to specific questions of the school where you hope to work. They also provide penetrating discussions of higher education in general and the liberal arts more specifically. Overall, however, the book is a celebration and analysis of community colleges, and it provides an excellent resource for anyone interested in community colleges generally, or people thinking specifically of broadening their job search to include this type of school.

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