

Chapter 13. Community College Work

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COLUMBUS STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Following undergraduate studies at the original progressive liberal arts Antioch College and then a Master of Arts in humanities at the University of Chicago, Shawn Casey completed his PhD at The Ohio State University in English and composition studies with a focus on late 18th-century English literacy. On finding a community college teaching position, he quickly surprised himself and became a successful and devoted full professor and advocate for community college work.

When I started graduate school in 2004, I had some experience in higher education, first during a brief stint as a graduate student at the University of Chicago and then in the instructional design department at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. I understood that pursuing a graduate degree in English was not a practical plan for a career path; however, I rationalized that the opportunity to pursue a doctorate and write a dissertation was a privilege I couldn't pass up.

So, I embarked on this journey without any particular hope that it would result in gainful employment or a meaningful academic life. My current role as a faculty member at Columbus State Community College was not a destination I had in mind. Instead, I idealistically worked to balance my academic interests and curiosities against potential work and funding in graduate programs while trying to ignore the generally pessimistic narratives about the market for faculty positions in universities and four-year schools.

My experience as a community college teacher contradicts both the dominant narrative of a dismal academic job market and the general perception that community college working conditions are less desirable than faculty work in four-year colleges and universities. I had to discover this for myself, as community college teaching was not addressed in my graduate training even though I was enrolled in a rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies doctoral program.

An important part of my journey to community college teaching involves reflecting on my own life path and career expectations. These often exceeded the simple image of the linear career track from research to publication to tenure that preoccupied me and my peers in graduate school. I don't think I'm alone in missing the discussions of meaningful work, considerations of community and place, and open sharing of working conditions—including the benefits of a faculty union—my graduate training overlooked.

I served for several years on the Modern Language Association community college forum on higher education professions. In this role, I worked to promote community college work in our field's most conservative and entrenched

professional organization. In January 2023, I presented on a panel discussion of the community college job search at the MLA annual convention in San Francisco. I titled my presentation “The Community College Ethos.”

I tried to articulate what made community college work so satisfying and what characteristics we are looking for in future community college faculty. I continue to take what professional opportunities I can to help future faculty reflect on both their future working conditions and their purposes for pursuing an academic career. I am especially interested in promoting the idea that community college work should be considered a valuable and even desirable career path. One obvious place to add this emphasis is in graduate training. Doing so, however, will require a shift in the dominant narratives of the academic career path.

I began working at Columbus State in 2010, and since then I have served on hiring committees in my English department and across several academic divisions. Columbus State is a large and diverse college, enrolling over 40,000 students. Columbus is Ohio’s largest and most rapidly growing urban area. We’ve hired several times and expanded the ranks of our full-time faculty.

Like most two-year schools, we rely on contingent and annually contracted faculty to teach most of our first- and second-year English composition courses. Regardless, my experience during the decade and a half since I began working at Columbus State contradicts the dominant academic career narrative. The headlines in this narrative include retreat from tenure, full-time faculty reduction, department and college closings, and a generally dismal outlook on the job market and working conditions in higher education.

In my experience, most of our faculty candidates don’t have a full picture of community college work and teaching. This includes reflection on the role and purpose of academic training and academic work in the course of a life path. Instead, most candidates, and this was true for me, bring a sense of their academic discipline, an assortment of narrative frames from undergraduate experience and graduate training, and a sense of purpose and even joy in teaching that is sometimes difficult to articulate amidst the requirements to highlight authority and technique in a teaching philosophy.

To help address the gap in understanding that we sometimes see in community college job applicants, faculty mentors frequently emphasize the importance of understanding the community college teaching environment in the annual community college jobs panels at the MLA. This includes understanding the diverse structures and histories of two-year institutions—which often vary from state to state—as well as the diversity of the student body, which typically more greatly reflects the community in which the college is embedded than the local four-year college or university.

In my MLA presentation, I chose to focus on the concept of ethos to help candidates think about how the guiding values and purposes of a community college and the experience of community college faculty members might define a sunnier, even gratifying, experience of a career in higher education. This is one

of the most important points I wanted to share with potential candidates: The community college work environment and the attitudes among community college faculty sometimes offer a brighter alternative to the gloomy outlook on an academic career that we encounter on the job market.

I realize now I was mainly advising my younger self in this presentation. I wish I had known enough to check out the popular community college job talk sessions during the MLA conventions I had attended as a graduate student. However, the truth is that community college work was not promoted or talked about as a career path in my graduate program.

In graduate school, the diversity of academic workplaces and roles was overlooked in favor of scholarship, research, and publishing. I loved this aspect of graduate study, but in my situation, training within my discipline did not prepare me to anticipate and build a life in academia. Teaching was something we trained for, something we studied, but not necessarily the key focus of an academic life.

Instead, even from my perspective as a graduate student in rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies at The Ohio State University, teaching appeared to be a task that helped pay the bills for the more lauded activities of research and scholarship. This is contradictory, given my field's focus on pedagogy and the teaching of writing. I see now that part of the reason I chose rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies as a field is because I knew classroom teaching was a focus for me. But even there, the community college, an obvious choice, wasn't an institutional context we spent any significant time exploring. The problem here doesn't lie with my field but with the dominant narratives of academic life in the university as a whole.

The university's structure exploits graduate and contingent teaching assistants to subsidize the work of the full-time faculty and the graduate program. Teaching, as this structure implies, and promotion requirements reinforce, is the least important task for a serious academic. If I were to follow the university's model of the academic career path, then it seemed that I should aspire to reduce my teaching load, transfer the essential teaching tasks to the least supported instructors, and get on with the business of preparing an academic monograph attractive enough for a university press to publish to move me along toward job security. Even the idea of "choosing" a career path seemed out of reach to me in an environment where conforming to the narrow and obtuse expectations of the dominant academic narrative and its dismal job market appeared to be my most important task.

I hope that the experience of graduate students today has changed. I've had the opportunity to mentor and recruit faculty from my former graduate program. They seem to appreciate the opportunity to pursue an "alternative" career path, though I know that for most English graduate students, the opportunity to pursue a career in any form is welcome. I also think it's been easier for the Columbus State English department to see the value of PhD graduates on the faculty since I applied for my position.

Whereas some department members viewed my hiring with suspicion, most now seem to understand that good teachers and colleagues can emerge from doctoral programs. These developments suggest that university and community college career paths may be better connected now. I hope our image of the people who hold and promote academic careers continues to broaden alongside our expanded sense of the careers available in academia.

A more diverse faculty with a broader range of experiences is needed to help promote student success in two-year (and, in fact, all post-secondary) schools. We won't have this kind of faculty if colleges and universities don't expand their thinking and their teaching about who follows an academic career path, into what kind of institution, and how and why they choose the institutions and roles they take on.

I was woefully ignorant of the community college world when I first applied for my faculty position. I only knew that I was out of graduate student funding at Ohio State and that my contingency plan to finish writing my dissertation while working for the university writing center was cut short because of budgeting changes that followed the 2008 recession. While my decision to apply to Columbus State was economic, I soon found that the institution offered a collegial work environment and gratifying opportunities to teach and serve in a community where I had lived for more than a decade. I wish I had considered community college teaching a valued and valid life path earlier in my academic career. And I wish I had been a little clearer about the collegiality, stability, and purpose I expected from my job because this is what I found at my community college.

My first experience with Columbus State's working conditions and how they differed from what I expected from the academic job market began when I contacted a faculty member in the English department during my application. We met for coffee and discussed the school, the work, and the value of the faculty union.

This was the first time in more than six years of graduate study and advising that anyone had suggested that working within a faculty union could add real value to my experience as an academic. I was under the impression that any job prospects, both on the market and in my future work toward tenure, involved a precarious mix of scholarly success, social networking, likability, student and mentor evaluations and recommendations, and being "our kind of person" (a droll phrase shared with me by one committee member).

In short, my impression of academic work confirmed an overwhelmingly affective atmosphere of dependency in which there were "no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built," as one of my former teachers put it (Berlant, 2011, p. 192). Yet here, at a coffee shop where I regularly brought homework and grading, was a community college faculty member explaining how unionization stood against the labor model that I had been led to believe was my only choice in pursuing an academic career path.

To be clear, the benefits of Columbus State Education Association union membership, beyond collective bargaining, include a contract that anyone can

view that explains both hiring and compensation formulas for all faculty, transparent performance and advancement expectations for both the faculty member and evaluating peers and department supervisors, union protections against retaliation for unfair or uneven application of performance expectations, and protection from additional work expectations without adequate compensation. In addition, working within a union offered a form of solidarity between full-time and contingent faculty and the interests of students and the institution against the volatile forces of capitalism on the one hand and government corruption on the other. My first significant conversation with a community college faculty member presented a very new way of thinking about my academic career path.

I continue to be impressed by how gratifying and essential union membership has been to me. But Columbus State has its challenges. As one union president explained early in my career, our union is comparatively young. Columbus State and the entire community college system are relatively young. Founded in 1963 to address career and technical training needs, Columbus State has grown exponentially alongside the explosion in demand for credentialing and certification in the workplace.

In the last two decades, the union and the college have grown together. The union is instrumental in helping the faculty and the college uphold academic standards. The college and our students benefit from a unified faculty addressing changing delivery modes, the expansion of dual credit, a pandemic, a volatile legislative environment, and many other challenges. The union, and a collaborative approach to academic labor in general, helped to advance the critical goals and ideals that I first encountered in academic study. This is one of the reasons why I think better connections are needed between academic working conditions and graduate school training.

The relative newness of the community college model helps us adapt to many of the challenges of the 21st century that have proved fatal for so many traditional four-year schools and even universities. However, the newness of the institution can also be detrimental. One dean shared with me during my interview his perception that many faculty at the college hadn't worked at other institutions and, therefore, didn't have much perspective on the wider world of higher education themselves. This might explain the uneven hiring criteria that I think still characterize the community college job search.

For example, I was hired at the dean's suggestion specifically because I was on my way to completing a doctorate. To his mind, more PhDs on the faculty meant more prestige. But members of my department looked at the PhD with suspicion. Rightly so: my university experience had not prepared me for community college work.

My graduate work itself was evidence of the continued expansion of degree expectations across the job market. It meant something significant; that is, I wouldn't, and I didn't, understand the community college ethos. The industry and the market have changed in the fifteen years since I began at Columbus State.

We still do not require the doctorate, but candidates holding a PhD are given even consideration, and many, but certainly not all, of our new hires include some combination of an advanced degree and experience teaching in higher education beyond the community college.

In the first decades of the 21st century, it seems that community colleges and doctoral candidates are beginning to find each other more often. I know this development is driven by the dwindling prospects for a “traditional” academic career path in the university system. When I speak to community college faculty applicants, I try to emphasize the shift in mindset required to see community college work as a value in itself and not just one of many desperate alternatives possible at the end of a graduate career.

This is the perspective I wish I had developed sooner as part of my graduate studies. Instead, in graduate school I read Ohio State English professor Frank Donoghue’s (2008) *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*. It has joined the chorus describing the discouraging outlook on the university job market among graduate students and professors. I note now that the index includes several references to Columbia University but none to Columbus State, even though Columbus State offers a local example of the kind of professorial role that might serve as an alternative to the shrinking university professoriate becoming the looming wage earners of the corporate university.

Articles and monographs on the collapse of American universities in general and the humanities in particular were and are ubiquitous. I suppose they are prescient—in part but only in part—as college and university closures and department consolidations are more common after our most recent pandemic. But by the time I reached Ohio State, I at least knew enough about the history of education to look at the sky is falling narrative with a critical eye.

I liked Donoghue’s book and his class enough to remember some of his statistics on publishing and tenure. For example, he shares the anecdote that academic presses could only rely on selling about 200 copies of any monograph to university libraries, their biggest market. This was in 2008. The more widely cited statistic that Donoghue (2008) shares is one collected by Deborah Rohde, stating that “ninety-eight percent of all publications (articles and monographs) in the arts and humanities are never cited” (p. 48).

I remembered these figures when I evaluated my own prospects as a community college teacher. I realized fairly quickly that teaching an average of 75 students a semester—a horrifying number to colleagues unrealistically expecting to teach one or two graduate-style seminars a year—gave me a far larger audience than any monograph or article publication would. The bonus was that I might even enjoy that work and see it connected to a life path less precarious than the bleak picture painted by Donoghue (2008) and other academic storm crows.

To position myself better as a teacher in the face of what seemed insurmountable odds, I pursued a Preparing Future Faculty Fellowship through Ohio State. The fellowship offered graduate students across the college an opportunity to

teach and train with a partner institution. I was placed at nearby Denison University. I worked alongside a faculty member at Denison in the education department where I was hired as an adjunct the following year.

Denison was indeed that “college on a hill” in the most classic and expensive residential liberal arts school tradition. However, I quickly realized that despite the resources of the college I was not the right fit for their population. I appreciate that fellowship program for this experience because it was perhaps the first time I had thought about job satisfaction, not just landing a job, in my path to an academic career. My challenges at Denison were, most simply, a matter of class, caste, preparation, and social and economic background. I shared little with the students I was teaching.

The colleagues I found there were quick to emphasize the quality of the facilities but little else. In contrast, at the same time, I interviewed at Columbus State, where department members were quick to praise the students, share their joy in teaching, and appreciate the collegiality and protections of the faculty union. I know Denison still finds excellent faculty and students, but I do wish Ohio State’s future faculty program would consider at least offering graduate students the opportunity to experience a community college environment as one option for those of us who might find a better fit at a two-year school.

One event that helped me reimagine my life as a teacher rather than a researcher occurred during a graduate student meeting with a visiting scholar at Ohio State. This person was a faculty member at a smaller university nearby. It was rare to have a guest speaker from within the state. Further, the speaker shared that she carried a four/four workload. In my imagined memory of this conversation, I hear the collective gasp among my fellow graduate students.

My impression of workload in academic life involved efforts by full-time faculty to reduce teaching commitments to carve out time for the real work of scholarship. As a follow-up, this guest assured us that it was possible to teach full-time and have an academic career. I think this was the first time I had heard a faculty member admit that teaching wasn’t a burden to be avoided but a job to be embraced.

When I look back on this moment, I also see an explicit acknowledgment that academic work is labor. I remember Lauren Berlant explaining to us at Chicago that academics don’t want to admit they are laborers. This is a major problem for academic organization and solidarity. At that moment, I felt solidarity with another teacher. This made it possible for me to imagine my work within the context of both a classroom and a union and outside the equally demanding labor of scholarship and publishing.

This shift in identity from scholar to teacher, viewed in a positive light as one possible unfolding of an academic life, is part of the community college ethos I try to share with prospective two-year faculty. This shift in identity also helps me connect with the many excellent high school teachers I’ve worked with in Columbus State’s successful dual credit program. In my role supporting our high

school teachers delivering college courses, my background in university teaching and rhetoric, composition, and literacy scholarship helps provide an institutional bridge between high school and higher education. In graduate school at least, it would have been useful to me to understand earlier that the size of a teaching load does not diminish the value of the role.

I understand that workload makes the faculty role significantly different than the one modeled in our university graduate programs, but I think it is worth considering that the contrast in these roles does not represent a failure or deficit, rather a difference. A change in attitude and perception toward faculty roles as matters of difference rather than hierarchy or merit could help make university training for college teachers more effective. It might help community colleges recruit more faculty who have trained to teach in our environments and reduce our reliance on university aspirants who see community college work as a fall-back career.

I'm not sure if the elision of teaching labor and the failure to connect teaching styles and standards across institutions is a feature or a fallacy of academic training in the university. Or both? Ignoring the significance of developing myself as a teacher during graduate school may very well have been willful on my part. I've stated that my graduate education didn't prepare me for community college teaching, but that's not entirely true.

My first experience in graduate school was at the University of Chicago in the master of arts in the humanities program (MAPH). I was enrolled in the Little Red Schoolhouse writing program, where I learned some writing pedagogy. I also completed an elective course on community college teaching. I remember that we took a field trip to a community college in a far north Chicago suburb where a University of Chicago graduate was the college's president. I remember sitting in on a first-year college composition course with a classmate and not taking it in very well.

Thanks to my very small and very liberal undergraduate college, I had never been in a composition course. I might as well have been on another planet. I measured myself mostly in terms of scholarship and study. At Chicago, I certainly wasn't prepared to see myself as the kind of authority known as a teacher. At the end of the community college teaching course, several of us were invited to apply for positions at the suburban community college. I don't know if anyone took up the offer. Putting myself on a career track as a teacher in an environment that was absolutely new to me while I still felt I had so much scholarly knowledge to master was not something I could imagine for myself. I missed an important opportunity to start a new life in academia that semester, which would have led to a different essay.

Instead, after leaving Chicago, I moved to Columbus, Ohio, for personal reasons. I had a boyfriend, a family of choice, and no other roots to help guide me on my path. In Columbus, I found myself in one arm of the academic doomsday spiral that Donoghue (2008) wrote about, the for-profit corporate university. Before

enrolling in a doctoral program at Ohio State, I worked briefly as an instructional designer charged with taking courses online at Franklin University, a local business school. This was during a period of fierce competition with the now much-diminished University of Phoenix.

To Franklin's credit, this 100-year-old trade school that started in the basement of the downtown YMCA, which was now my neighborhood gym, transitioned to the digital age more quickly than any other school in Columbus. Unfortunately, as part of this transition, Franklin replaced most of its faculty with instructional technologists and course managers charged with delivering a curriculum as widely as possible and with the least labor cost.

I had my first real taste of classroom teaching as an adjunct instructor at Franklin. I also learned that, even at a school determined to eliminate or at least transform the role of full-time faculty, faculty status was the only way I would achieve what I perceived to be the autonomy and fulfillment I found in the classroom.

My decision to enroll in the rhetoric, composition, and literacy program at Ohio State reflected my growing understanding that academia was, in fact, an industry filled with laborers and some very uneven labor conditions. Compositionists found jobs more readily than those who specialized in literary analysis, but they earned less respect in the university than their peers in literary study.

I enrolled determined to focus on what seemed most ubiquitous in higher education and most significant in understanding how our culture worked: the teaching of writing. It wasn't until the end of my career as a graduate student that I heard the term generalist. Otherwise, I might have understood sooner that introducing students to critical reading and writing skills through both composition and literature courses could become how I would shape my purpose and work in higher education. I also might have understood sooner that two-year college teaching would be the place where I could teach both composition and literature as part of a broader approach to thinking critically about literacy.

I began my graduate study in rhetoric and composition, rationalizing that teaching college writing was both a secure career path and somehow also closest to the work of the educator and teacher I wanted to be. Then I discovered literacy studies. In literacy studies, I found a critical perspective on the cultural technologies and institutions of higher education that fit my growing awareness and critique of my material conditions in that field.

Literacy studies also promised engagement with the work of teaching and learning. The young graduate student interested in critical and cultural analysis was attracted to the idea that literacy and its rhetorical deployment might be effective intervention points for purposeful cultural change through advanced education and training.

Thanks to *The Literacy Myth*, my understanding was soon reversed. I began to see how ideas about reading and writing developed and changed in response to the material arrangements of social hierarchies. Far from diminishing my interest

in teaching reading and writing, this critical perspective on the history and role of literacy in our society opened new possibilities for working with students. I began to focus on critical literacy skills that pointed beyond the expectations of the English classroom to wider cultural critique and a wider appreciation of students' personal and community experiences of literacy. Here, my graduate training began to dovetail with my future perspective on community college teaching and curriculum work.

At Ohio State, I had the opportunity to reflect on my own relationship to ideas about literacy and higher education in a graduate class exploring literacy narratives in a digital format. My literacy narrative took the form of an audio file: that was the digital part. In the narrative, I shared how growing up in a small town in Indiana, I found myself regularly compared to my English-teacher grandfather.

Everyone in my parents' generation had taken his courses. Any bookish traits on my part and any physical resemblance, of which there were many, brought a comparison with my grandfather. I now saw how those childhood memories and my family's legacy of academic achievement continued to shape me. My grandmother was the town librarian. I watched my father work his way through law school as I struggled to adapt to kindergarten.

Together, they led me to pursue one of the only narratives, or myths, I could imagine for myself: scholarship and teaching. This assignment offered a rare moment of reflection on the connections between my life path and my academic career path. I will always appreciate this invitation to bring some of my own experience and identity into the classroom. I know now that helping students see their experience and identity as resources in the classroom is a key component of literacy pedagogy. But in graduate school, I was too busy attempting to conform to the university image of the scholar and researcher to bring these elements into my own work.

There's another side to this story. While I knew from my study of the history of literacy and education that people with backgrounds like mine were more expected and, therefore, more likely to pursue academic careers, I didn't quite understand at that time that most of those people's careers would be built, promoted, and advanced within a heteronormative matrix that resisted the inclusion of my experience as a gay man.

I also didn't quite understand what it meant that on my mother's side of the family, I would be the first to pursue a college degree. Beneath the superficial narrative of the pursuit of an advanced degree lurked complicated, and personal, social factors that I had been largely free to ignore while living my best gay life in Columbus.

These factors meant that while I always looked like a bookish scholar, I never really had the kind of cache, savvy, native intelligence, or instinct to understand what it meant to be a professional academic. And I was queer at a time when narratives of pride and legitimacy were poised in complex and contradictory relation to experiences of erasure, othering, and outright discrimination and stigma.

While I didn't know what I didn't know about teaching careers in community colleges, I was also ignorant of the ways that emerging into and striving for social acceptance as a gay man had shaped the life I was able to imagine for myself. I see now that I was pursuing a narrative of achievement in academia that fit partly because it allowed me to imagine a future that was measured by the clear expectations of the classroom and career path rather than the nebulous expectations of conforming, or failing to conform, to the social institutions available to my straight peers.

I now wonder if those family friends who remarked on my bookishness and aligned me with their image of my grandfather weren't also placing a young gay kid within a narrative that would make sense for me, my family, and everyone's comfort level and experience with queerness. I certainly didn't fit my father's mold of the high school quarterback and track star.

I now see that stories about literacy and the academic life had a shape and trajectory that could carry me into adulthood at a time when other narratives of queerness could not. This difference in my literacy narrative is much more critical than I realized when I was working to build my academic career.

After securing tenure at Columbus State and while grieving the early death of my father, in therapy, I learned that gay men of my generation and earlier were often overly identified with their careers. My therapist, Shawn King, had done research in this area, and his explanation seemed reasonable: without a family role, in the absence of legalized marriage and parenthood, often denied access to protections from home community institutions like religion, work, and property ownership, gay men overidentified with the institutions that were available to them, the most important being their careers (King & Orel, 2012).

This was a difficult distinction to discern during graduate school. I'm glad I found a safe space in my career to pause and reflect on how my life options had been determined or denied by my experience in a minority group. This perspective shapes how I approach my community college work. On the one hand, I carry privileged insider access to higher education and have been welcomed warmly within academic spaces. On the other, I grew up in a culture that subtly denied not just my equality but my very right to exist within its dominant narratives. Reflecting on my academic career path within this context, I can't help but wonder what opportunities for self-fulfillment I have missed. I also can't help but notice how this has strengthened my affective attachment to community colleges committed to reducing the harm caused by discriminatory practices in our society.

My joy at "discovering" union protection against discrimination on any basis and the collegial nature of a community college nestled in the heart of the most prominent queer community in Ohio makes sense to me now. But I am also very aware of the cost, in terms of mobility and career options, of growing up without an image of myself as fully integrated into a community through other social institutions. It feels surreal to be raising these concerns after the strides in equality that took place in the first decades of the 20th century.

Even though I know the protections enjoyed by queer people are still at risk in our current environment, I feel the pressure to exclude these factors when discussing career trajectory, perhaps because mentioning them feels impolite or ungrateful. I think it is worth noting, however, that our work to recruit a more diverse faculty means acknowledging the ways that the false narratives of individual meritocracy in higher education make it more difficult for us to integrate the strengths, resources, and motivations drawn from diverse personal experiences into our institutions.

In a workshop sponsored by our department's antiracist pedagogy group, compositionist Asao Inoue spoke to our college about the subtle habits of white language that lead to supremacist thinking in higher education. Inoue drew on Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun's *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change* to explain that assuming that all students have the same access to dignity and achievement that we imagine for ourselves is just one of the ways that we hide, and therefore uphold, the structures of a society that limit access to certain spaces and certain experiences.

Inoue also points out that keeping the burdens of discrimination and representation as theoretical concepts for inquiry and denying personal narratives of injury only reinforces the supremacist trope that achievement is the result of individual effort while discrimination is something that happens to an anonymous group. Inoue asked us to acknowledge that the discomfort of speaking to these issues is an important step in dismantling the expectations of the white supremacy culture that pervades our institutions (Inoue, 2021).

Reflecting on Inoue's comments, I now see how in my own efforts to conform to an ideal academic career path I have paid into models of hyper individualism, rational self-control, contractual and transactional relationships, and standards where discomfort, either my own or my teachers' or my students', was to be avoided. These are cultural standards that contributed to my own inability to explore meaningful work for myself until I stumbled upon it in a community and student-oriented institution. Interrogating these standards both for the lived experiences of individual students and in the histories of our institutions is one way to start broadening our perspective on how and why we undertake an academic career path. So, I include the challenges of teaching within and against a supremacist culture when I describe the community college ethos and the values and experiences that drew me to this work.

It wasn't until I had worked at Columbus State for several semesters that I began to understand that I did, in fact, "fit" within this new kind of institution. The community aspect of the community college shouldn't be underestimated. I knew several people in town who had taken classes at the school. And the college actively embraced its place in Central Ohio. We were not pursuing the best out-of-state students; we were actively working to bring attention to as many students in and around Columbus as we could reach.

In the years since I began at Columbus State, the college continues to commit to meeting students where they are. We were early to offer students chosen name options in our enrollment systems. We are committed to reshaping our faculty and staff hiring practices to reflect student communities and demographics. When state dual enrollment policies reinforced disparities in our local public schools, we doubled down on increasing access for high school students in our most underserved communities. Housing support and food and clothing banks are some of the other strategies the college has brought forward to both acknowledge and support the challenges our students face.

While our efforts to provide “wraparound” services may seem inadequate next to these material barriers to learning, I am proud to say that we no longer promote a narrative where we expect students to educate and perform their way out of the stark inequalities that exist in Columbus. This institution, in short, reflects and acknowledges my own experience as a community member, and it is therefore important to me to promote community college work and the community college mission as a possibility for pursuing meaningful work in an academic life.

In looking to the future of graduate training, I think it’s important to incorporate this option and to also allow future faculty to reflect on their life paths as a whole rather than just as a career path within academia. This requires first resisting the monolithic image of an academic career that is sometimes promoted based on the lived experiences of a limited number of faculty at specific universities and in specific departments. Part of this resistance is acknowledging conditions of labor and culture at different institutions. But an equally important component is an honest reflection on the variety and diversity of life paths that subvert the expectations of who will pursue an academic career. Finally, we need to acknowledge how any number of academic career paths can contribute to building a life that feeds and supports the expansion of the values and purposes that lead so many of us to academia in the first place.

These are some of the components of community college work that deserve a place on the university research and teaching agenda. When I speak to the Modern Language Association again in January 2025, I will share how this work has helped our literature faculty develop free and accessible digital anthologies that make our course costs easier to manage. I will focus on the collaborative and collegial nature of these projects. I will emphasize how we organized the distribution of labor and opportunity to make participation accessible to faculty with varying levels of availability.

An important component will be a description of how our students’ needs and identities help shape our approach to creating materials for our classes. This will be a small presentation on a very small and local contribution made by faculty at Columbus State. But I hope that I’ll share an image and a narrative of community college work that seems valuable and accessible. This is the image I needed as I pursued my academic career path, and I’m happy to think that I might be able to share it now with others.

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