

# TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: CURSE OR BLESSING?

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[This essay was published in *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on the Teaching of Philosophy* (January 1980), 14-19. Since things have changed – at least to some extent since 1980, and more than to some extent at Bergen Community College – the present version of the article contains bracketed and emboldened updating comments inserted in October 2003. Were I writing this article today, I might not include some of what is included here, and I might also include points that are not included here. However, I have made only minor updates, it not being my intention to radically alter this 1980 piece.]

There are two kinds of lower-division two-year colleges in the United States: the junior college and the community college. The junior college is the older of the two institutions, having played a role in American higher education throughout the twentieth century. The development of the community college is a phenomenon of the period since World War II. Traditionally, the junior college was a privately-supported institution which offered the first two years of a liberal arts college education to students who, for a variety of reasons, had found it necessary to postpone their entry into four-year college or university baccalaureate programs. Having received their Associate of Arts degrees, most graduates of the junior college would transfer to four-year institutions of higher learning and continue their pursuit of the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degrees. **[There are now very few junior colleges remaining in the US. Most have been replaced by community colleges.]**

The community college is a public institution which offers a wide range of post-secondary educational opportunities to a number of different student populations. In addition to its continuation of the junior college tradition of granting Associate of Arts degrees to students who intend to transfer to four-year colleges and universities, the community college also provides one- and two-year career programs in a variety of vocational, technical, and middle-level professional fields (e.g., dental hygiene, laboratory technology, respiratory therapy, nursing, fire science, police science, accounting, computer programming, hotel-restaurant management, etc.) for those students who have no intention of seeking baccalaureate degrees. Indeed "terminal" career programs are, at present, attracting more students in many community colleges than are traditional general and liberal studies curricula. **[This trend did not become the established pattern at Bergen Community College. Currently, more than 70% of BCC matriculated students are enrolled in AA and AS – i.e., transfer – degree programs.]** Aside from its transfer and career programs, the community college also offers a large selection of educational services to

members of the general public who may not be pursuing either bachelor's degrees or career training: college-level courses for self-enrichment; cultural events; athletic programs; high-school-diploma-equivalency courses; non-credit courses in real-estate, arts and crafts, current events, etc.; correspondence courses by newspaper, radio, and television; **[online courses;]** and so on. In serving these several purposes and constituencies, the community college makes various kinds of higher education available to large numbers of people who might not have otherwise "gone to college."

In recent years, the traditional junior college has been rather decisively eclipsed by the rise of the multidimensional community college. At present, the overwhelming majority of lower-division two-year colleges in the United States are community colleges. A **[small]** number of junior colleges have survived; but in adapting themselves to the new situation created by the development of the community college movement, these older institutions have become virtually indistinguishable in their educational formats from their younger competitors. The major difference between junior and community colleges today is that the former are privately-funded while the latter are tax-supported institutions. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, I shall use the community college as my major point of reference.

Many community colleges offer no philosophy courses whatever. Many others offer one or two sections per semester, taught either by a full-time faculty-member without a graduate degree in philosophy (e.g., someone from the social sciences or from the English department) or by a graduate-trained philosopher hired on a part-time basis. At a growing number, however, instructors in philosophy are employed as members of the full-time faculty, although the employment of more than one full-time philosopher at such institutions is rare. Community colleges with departments of philosophy are few and far between. Philosophy courses are usually offered under the aegis of the social science or humanities departments. Thus, the full-time philosophy teacher in a community college is likely to find himself rather isolated, professionally speaking. As the only representative of his discipline at his school, and having non-philosophers as his (geographically) closest colleagues, he will find the occurrence of intellectual exchanges which are specifically philosophical in nature to be exceptional rather than regular. One can certainly gain intellectual stimulation from "interdisciplinary" dialogue; but the complete absence of regular conversation with other trained philosophers is a potential source of discontentment for the community college philosophy teacher. Many such teachers, of course, find full intellectual companionship "off campus" (with friends, at professional meetings, etc.), and are not disturbed by its absence in their places of employment.

**[The situation at Bergen Community College has changed dramatically since 1980. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Philosophy (and Religion) program at BCC began to expand significantly. The BCC Department of Philosophy and Religion now offers approximately 50 sections of**

**philosophy and religion courses per semester and employs seven full-time members. However, the description contained in the preceding paragraph is still, unfortunately, applicable to most community colleges in the US. See the BCC Department of Philosophy and Religion website at [www.bergen.edu/phr](http://www.bergen.edu/phr).]**

It is an unfortunate fact of life that more students will take philosophy courses when they are required to do so than when they are allowed to choose or not to choose philosophy as a "free elective." Philosophy, then, may be required of the many or simply offered to the few. At most community colleges where philosophy courses are offered at all, they are offered as electives to anyone who wishes to take them – i.e. to the few. No more than 5%, and usually less than 3%, of all community college students will take philosophy courses when given the opportunity to do so. Most of the "takers" are transfer students in the liberal arts and sciences, but almost every class will include some students from career programs who are taking philosophy as a "social science" or "humanities" elective. Philosophy classes also very commonly contain a few (usually "older") people who are seeking self-enrichment rather than a degree or certificate. None of these students, of course, will be philosophy majors; but it is my impression, based upon my seven years of experience as a philosophy teacher in a community college, that most of them are sincerely interested in learning something of the history of philosophy, the nature of valid reasoning, and the ways in which philosophical analysis might be employed in the discussion of current moral, religious, and political issues. Students taking philosophy on an elective basis are not, however, interested in highly specialized philosophical discourse which goes "too deep." They seem to want survey courses which leave them with a general sense of the role which philosophy has played in the history of civilization and of the relevance of philosophy to the problems and concerns of contemporary humanity. **[BCC now has AA degree concentrations in Philosophy and in Religion.]**

Furthermore, while most students taking philosophy courses in the community college can read and write at a minimally adequate level, they are not highly skilled in the use of these basic tools of learning. They find both primary and secondary readings in philosophy exceedingly difficult; their vocabularies are quite limited; they are not accustomed to rigorous conceptual analysis; and their written work (essays, papers, book-reviews, etc.) leaves a great deal to be desired. The community college philosophy teacher must therefore make every effort to select reading materials which are at least close to his students' average reading comprehension level, and to plan class sessions so that the required readings can be discussed at length and in some depth in class. Technical terminology and concepts must either be avoided or very carefully defined and reviewed. The instructor must also strive to formulate writing assignments with the utmost simplicity, clarity, and specificity. Community college students (and perhaps all contemporary college students) seem to require a great deal of specific and detailed information concerning exactly what their teachers expect of them, with reference to both reading and writing assignments. The

philosophy teacher should, above all, take nothing for granted concerning his students' vocabularies, their comprehension of concepts, or their readiness for philosophical reading and writing. He must make himself ready and willing to get "back to basics" and to build from "Ground Zero."

In those very few community colleges where philosophy is listed as a general studies requirement (e.g., for all students in transfer degree programs), there will be fairly large numbers of students in philosophy classes, but the pedagogical problems confronting the philosophy instructor will be even greater than those existing under the elective system. Students for whom philosophy is a required course are both less interested in philosophical studies and more deficient in learning-readiness (e.g. in basic reading and writing skills) than are students who choose philosophy as an elective. The reason for this difference is that when philosophy is given as an elective rather than as a required course, those students who are weak in basic learning skills and those students lacking interest in philosophy will shy away from it. **[Since the mid-1980s, the BCC general education program allows students to select philosophy and religion courses in partial fulfillment of their general education requirements in the humanities. A great many students – approximately 5,000 per year – now do so.]**

In spite of the pedagogical difficulties associated with a general studies requirement in philosophy, however, I believe that all community college students – or at least all those in transfer programs – should be required to take at least one course in philosophy as part of their general education. Philosophy is, after all, one of the classical academic disciplines (along with literature, languages, history, mathematics, and the natural sciences); and it is a discipline especially suited to the "basic training" of the mind. As such, philosophy should be included as a requirement in any serious general studies (or "liberal arts") curriculum. Needless to say, the institution of such a requirement in the general education program of the community colleges would also make possible the employment of more full-time philosophers in those institutions than is now the case. This may be a consequence of, but is certainly not a reason for, the introduction of a philosophy requirement at the two-year college level.

Since the community college is a lower-division college, and because student interests in and aptitudes for philosophy are such as described above, community college course-offerings in philosophy are mainly introductory in nature. The courses most commonly given are Introduction to Philosophy, Elementary Logic, Ethics, and Contemporary Philosophy. Introduction to Philosophy classes are presented either as surveys of the history of Western philosophy or as elementary inquiries into traditional philosophical problems. Some courses in Elementary Logic are based upon I.M. Copi's *Introduction to Logic* (5th edition, Macmillan, 1978) or S.F. Barker's *The Elements of Logic* (2nd edition, McGraw-Hill, 1974); but increasing numbers of community college instructors are developing less formal courses in logic and are utilizing such texts as V.E. Barry's *Practical Logic* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), L. Ruby and R.E. Yarber's *The Art of Making Sense* (3rd edition, Lippincott, 1974),

and M. Scriven's *Reasoning* (McGraw-Hill, 1976). **[Currently, the two logic texts most in use at BCC are P. Hurley's *Concise Introduction to Logic* (Thomson-Wadsworth) and B.N. Moore and R. Parker's *Critical Thinking* (McGraw-Hill).]** Ethics courses usually concentrate upon controversies in professional (medical, legal, business) ethics and upon the normative analysis of contemporary moral issues. Topics of discussion in such courses will include abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty and other forms of legal punishment, sexual and racial discrimination and "reverse" discrimination, homosexuality and other issues in sexual ethics, pornography and censorship, the ethics of environmental and population control, and so on. Ethics courses dealing with the history of moral philosophy or with modern metaethical questions are uncommon.

Courses in Contemporary Philosophy are most often historical surveys beginning with the post-Kantian era and dealing especially with the rise of the Existential, Marxist, Pragmatic, and Analytic schools of contemporary philosophical thought. Depending upon their interests and graduate training, some community college instructors concentrate upon the development of Existentialism and Marxism, while others emphasize the importance of Pragmatism and Analytic Philosophy. Some community colleges also give courses in the Philosophy of Religion, Oriental **[Asian, Eastern]** Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and so on; but the four courses described in these paragraphs constitute the teaching opportunities of most full-time community college philosophy instructors.

While the effort to introduce a requirement in philosophy at more community colleges is well worth making, the fact remains that the average community college offers barely enough sections of philosophy to allow for the presence of a full-time philosophy teacher or its faculty. For this reason, the community college philosophy instructor will often be asked and expected to teach subjects other than philosophy (e.g., comparative religion, history, sociology, political science, economics, etc.). Should a section or two of philosophy be cancelled because of insufficient enrollment (a not infrequent occurrence), a philosopher who is able to pick up a section of history or sociology will be better able to justify his full-time status at his institution. Exclusive specialization in philosophy is not considered a virtue by most community college personnel officers. An administrator seeking to hire a full-time instructor in philosophy will therefore be especially interested in candidates who are qualified (and willing) to teach in more than one academic field. A person with a Ph.D. or M.A. degree in philosophy and a second graduate degree in a field other than philosophy will have a greater chance of being hired than a person with B.A., M. A., and Ph.D. degrees in philosophy alone. The interest of community college administrators in multi-field competency – not only among philosophers, but also among other humanists and social scientists as well – is likely to increase during the 1980's if, as is widely predicted, enrollments in transfer programs (i.e. the "liberal arts" areas) continue to decline. **[As stated earlier, enrollments in transfer programs have not declined at BCC. On the contrary, they have increased over the years relative to enrollments in non-transfer programs.]**

The community college teacher must, of course, have a master's degree in his field of specialization. But the possession of a doctoral degree and an interest in scholarly research, writing, and publishing are not prerequisite to gaining employment, tenure, or promotion. At a typical community college, no more than one-fifth of the total full-time faculty (say 50 out of 250) will hold doctorates (and these will include Ph.D.'s, Ed.D.'s, J.D.'s, D.D.S.'s, D.L.S.'s, and so on). And the "publish or perish" syndrome is entirely absent. **[The portion of faculty with doctorates may have increased since 1980. At present, of the 250-member faculty at BCC, about 70 hold doctoral degrees of one kind or another.]**

Indeed, those few community college instructors who do seek to publish scholarly articles and books often complain that their efforts are neither supported nor rewarded sufficiently by their colleges. Doctoral degrees and scholarly publications are simply not as highly valued in the community college as they are in the four-year college or university. The primary task of the two-year college instructor is, after all, instruction. He is employed as a teacher, and not as a researcher or writer. And there is great (and perhaps justified) skepticism among community college administrators and faculty-members concerning the connection between doctoral studies or research work and effective teaching. The point is not that those with doctoral degrees, or those who publish articles and books, cannot teach effectively (since many obviously can do so), but that many very knowledgeable and effective college teachers do not possess doctoral degrees and do not seek to produce scholarly publications.

The philosopher who secures a faculty position at a community college, then, is very definitely taking a teaching job. Whatever research and publication he does, will be done, in a very real sense, "on his own," and it will have very little relation to his overall security or advancement within the community college superstructure. His primary task – the job he is paid to do – will be classroom teaching. The standard work-load is fifteen class-contact hours per week, i.e., five three-hour courses. Usually, this work-load will require two or three preparations, and one's teaching schedule will be spread over a four- or five-day week (often including both day and evening classes). Faculty-members seeking tenure or promotion will also be well advised to participate actively and enthusiastically on a few departmental or college-wide committees.

In the foregoing analysis, I have tried to present some of the major features of a full-time teaching career in philosophy at the community college level. Graduate-trained philosophers who work in community colleges are likely to regard their employment as simultaneously a curse and a blessing. It is a curse because one is significantly cut off from regular communication with other philosophers; because one's efforts at scholarly research and publication are not institutionally encouraged or appreciated; because one's students are not philosophy majors and are less than learning-ready for intense philosophical inquiry; because one can teach only introductory and no upper-division courses in philosophy; and because one's work-load is much heavier than one would like it to be. But teaching philosophy in the

community college is also a blessing because one has the opportunity for close contact and dialogue with colleagues from disciplines other than philosophy; because one is able to teach subjects outside of one's major field; because one is not pushed to earn a doctoral degree; because one is not threatened by the "publish or perish" game; because one is not expected to become a "superspecialist" or a "superprofessional;" and, most of all, because one has a real opportunity to bring philosophy "to the people," to teach philosophy to a diverse and fairly receptive and appreciative general audience. The curse and the blessing of teaching philosophy in the community college, it would appear, are very much mirror images of one another. To teach philosophy in the community college is, indeed, to be faced with a set of (apparently) unresolvable practical contradictions; and it is therefore not surprising that the characteristic attitude of the community college philosophy instructor toward his job is one of deep ambivalence.