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THE TWO-YEAR TRACK

Solving the Credentials Puzzle

By [ROB JENKINS](#)

Much of my e-mail this time of year comes from people thinking about going on the community-college job market in the fall — or going on it again, given that this year's round of hiring has just about ended.

Their questions often have to do with the issue of credentials: Am I qualified to teach such-and-such at a two-year college? Is a degree in X better than a degree in Y? Do I need more graduate hours in Z?

I answer those e-mail messages personally, but I believe the correspondents represent a large number of job seekers who are equally confused about the credentials they need to teach at a community college but are not sure where to turn.

For example, one woman wrote to ask the following: "My Ph.D. is in neuropharmacology. Most of my course work has titles like 'Advanced Pharmacology' or 'Receptor Biochemistry,' which don't seem to be a neat fit for either a biology or a chemistry position. I've been hired as a full-time person in both biology and chemistry departments at several [four-year] schools in [a Southern state]. I'm assuming that I'm SACS-qualified to teach [at a two-year college] in both these disciplines."

Well, maybe — and maybe not. Before I proceed, let me explain that SACS refers to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the regional accrediting body for the vast majority of higher-education institutions in the South, where I live. Each region of the country has its accreditor: the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, and so on. Because all of those organizations have similar criteria, what I'm about to say should apply to most people (although the specifics may vary).

Turning back to the issues raised in the letter, the fact that several Southern colleges have hired my correspondent in the past doesn't necessarily mean she is SACS-qualified to teach at a two-year college. Some institutions pay closer attention to accreditation guidelines than others, and four-year programs often have different rules.

Generally speaking, to teach in programs that award associate of arts or associate of science degrees — i.e., to teach at a community college — faculty members are required by accreditors to have at least a master's degree *and* a minimum of 18 graduate credit hours in the subject they are teaching. Read that statement again carefully and note the wording: While you need a master's, you are not required to have one in the specific subject you are teaching; you are required to have completed 18 graduate credit hours in that subject. And even if you do have a degree in the subject you hope to teach, that degree must have included 18 credit hours *in that subject* in order for you to be allowed to teach it at a two-year college.

The e-mail message above provides a perfect case in point. The writer has a Ph.D. in neuropharmacology and no doubt took graduate courses related to biology and chemistry. But the true test of whether she will be able to teach biology or chemistry at the two-year college level is not the doctorate itself, but rather, if it included enough courses specifically in

biology and chemistry.

Simply put, in order to teach biology, she must have earned 18 graduate semester hours in biology. To teach chemistry, she'll need 18 hours of chemistry credits. Without those hours, her Ph.D. is irrelevant. It would only become relevant if she were applying to teach courses in neuropharmacology.

Sounds a little nuts, I know.

Department heads and academic deans at two-year colleges deal with this sort of apparent contradiction every day. Because of the 18-hours-in-the-discipline requirement, we have medical doctors who "aren't qualified" to teach anatomy and physiology, coaches who can't teach physical-education courses, and professional actors who are not allowed to teach theater.

That can be frustrating for administrators but even more so, I know, for applicants.

Two other fields in which the 18-hour requirement often creates havoc are business and education. With recent fluctuations in the economy, two-year colleges are seeing a number of M.B.A.'s applying to teach full- or part-time. Once again, the problem is that, in most cases, their degree programs include course work in many different disciplines — nine hours in marketing courses, six in accounting, 12 in management, and so on.

No doubt the intent is to produce a broad base of business knowledge. But as beneficial as such a degree might be in the private sector, it poses problems for someone seeking a teaching position at a two-year college. If a community college doesn't offer upper-level business courses, what can an M.B.A. teach there? Very often the answer is "nothing," unless he or she happens to have 18 credit hours in a specific discipline such as accounting.

Education degrees can put job seekers in a similar fix. Of course, many two-year colleges do offer education courses, which can be taught by applicants with master's degrees in education. But often we'll get an application from someone with a degree in English education, for instance, seeking a faculty position in English.

The question becomes, How many graduate hours in English did that candidate actually complete? How many of the courses had an "EDUC" prefix, rather than an "ENGL" one?

At that point, the transcript-review process can become even more confusing. Some two-year colleges, in evaluating whether applicants have enough credit hours in the field in which they want to teach, will allow only courses with ENGL prefixes to be considered. By contrast, other colleges might allow courses with education prefixes to be counted if they use words like "language," "literature," or "composition" in the course titles.

As a department head, I frequently argued for such "exceptions," often submitting catalog-course descriptions in support of a candidate. Which brings us back to our e-mail correspondent. Is she qualified to teach biology or chemistry at a two-year college?

Now you know the answer: It depends on how many of her graduate courses had "BIOL" or "CHEM" prefixes — or on the number of pharmacology courses for which a supportive department head or dean could make a case that they should be counted as biology or chemistry courses.

And what if the candidate just doesn't have the hours? Say her transcript has been thoroughly evaluated, the department head has made a good pitch to hire her, but she's still been turned down for a biology teaching position because she doesn't have 18 hours in biology. Then what?

If she wants to teach at a two-year college, she will have to go back to graduate school and pick up the additional credit hours she needs. After all, she might be only two or three courses short; she needn't begin a new degree program. Then she should apply again, highlighting the fact that, along with her Ph.D. in neuropharmacology, she does indeed have 18 graduate semester hours in biology (or chemistry, or whatever). I think most committees would find her a fairly

attractive candidate.

So if you're thinking about going on the two-year market next year, you might want to double-check your transcript to make sure you're qualified (according to the accrediting agencies) for the position you want. And if you were turned down for jobs this year because you weren't qualified, consider going back to graduate school.

That way, during the next round of hiring, your application will find its way into the "qualified" pile from which the eventual interviewees will be chosen. That's still no guarantee you'll get an interview, but if your application is tossed onto the "not qualified" pile, I can guarantee you won't.

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