

Guest Editor: Kerry Edwards, Red Rocks Community College

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This *Spotlight* continues the journey through the American education system that began in the last issue with an account of the teaching of religion in the public schools. The next step for many public school students is into a community college. This segment of American higher education is often neglected by the Academy. If my own experience is a reliable indicator, there are very few graduate students in religion who enter the profession with the goal of becoming a community college professor. I have not asked the other contributors to this *Spotlight*

about their pathway into community college instruction but I am willing to bet that most of them did not think about it as a career option until well into their graduate work. There are probably a lot of reasons that explain this including the fact that many graduate students may have never attended a community college themselves. There is a fair amount of irony in this fact because the father of the community college movement in the U.S. was one of our own: William Rainey Harper, Professor of Biblical Literature at Yale. When he became president of the new University of Chicago and began thinking about how students would matriculate there, he concluded that one inexpensive way for students to begin their college education would be to create a number of two year colleges, spread throughout the state of Illinois. These rural students could begin their college education while living at home and transfer to Chicago to complete their degrees.

The movement that he began is generally considered to be the most successful unique American contribution to higher education. In 1900 there were seven junior colleges in the U.S. By 1937 that number had climbed to 528. This growth took place largely in the Midwest and West when the burgeoning population of new states had to deal with the lack of educational institutions. This was complicated by greater distances between large urban areas and the need for educating more of the population as the U.S. industrial economy expanded. As higher education made inroads into lower socioeconomic classes, the expenses associated with higher education became more of a factor in the design of new educational institutions. Today there are over 1,100 community colleges. Forty-five percent of all U.S. undergraduates attend community colleges. In California there are over a million students attending community colleges. In Colorado, where I teach, 71 percent of all lower division college students attend community college.

The study of Religion at these unique American institutions has an uneven history. In 1930 a study of the curriculum of community colleges revealed that 45 percent of the 279 colleges studied, offered courses in Bible and Religious Education. Similar studies in the 1970s and 1980s showed this number hovering in the mid-20 percent but in 1998, the percentage leaped upwards to 42 percent. While these classes comprise a limited proportion of all the courses at community colleges, the number of students and percentage of enrollment is roughly equal to the students in Sociology. My own recent investigations indicate that there are at least 150 community colleges that offer distinct Religious Studies majors (This number does not include departments that might offer a joint emphasis in religion and philosophy). While this number is substantial, it strikes me that community colleges are fertile ground for the expansion of the study of religion. Such an expansion would serve the interests of the Academy by providing employment for our members but it would also serve as one of the most effective ways of spreading the influence of the scholarly study of religion throughout the community. (For those of you interested in pursuing this career option, see the article entitled "[The Community College Job Search](#)" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*

My own journey into community colleges began as an undergraduate when I took two summer courses at the local community college. I thoroughly enjoyed those courses, at least partly because of the diversity of the student population. The liberal arts college I attended during the school year was populated almost exclusively by 18–22 year olds. The community college class had people of all ages with very diverse outlooks on life which made the classes much more interesting. This appreciation for the value of institutional context was soon lost as I focused my attention on graduate work. I forgot about community colleges until I was working on my doctoral dissertation and looking for places to hone my teaching skills. There were a number of community colleges in the Denver area and I was able to secure part time employment teaching philosophy and religion. Since my degree was in philosophy of religion and theology, I was able to obtain full-time employment as a philosophy instructor at Red Rocks Community College and took the opportunity to begin developing and expanding our offerings in religion. When I arrived

at Red Rocks in 1992, we had one Philosophy of Religion course and a Comparative Religion course in the works. We have since added courses in Religion and American Culture, Psychology of Religion, Religion and Film, Early Christian Literature, and Literature of Ancient Israel. Because of the peculiar nature of course prefixes in the Colorado community college system, these courses are all taught under the Philosophy prefix or jointly listed with the Psychology or Humanities departments.

Community colleges have a number of distinct characteristics that influence the teaching of religion. One is what Peter Jauhiainen in his essay calls the “pragmatic dimension.” They draw no sharp line between academic and vocational education. This results in an unusual mix of students and faculty. Your colleague down the hall is as likely to be able to give advice on plumbing the new addition to your house as she is on interpreting the economics of Taiwan. Another characteristic is the emphasis on the lifelong learner and the local community. Community colleges aim to provide educational opportunities for the lifetime of an individual. To us, the years between eighteen and twenty-four are not the sole or prime years for learning. Doug Nelson’s essay on how he developed the study of religion at Northwest College explains the results of this. He tells a delightful story of educating an elderly gentleman in Greek and how the interests of the adult learners in his community shaped the direction of his program. These distinctive characteristics lead to a kind of maverick or experimental attitude amongst community college educators.

They are willing to try just about everything. Paula Drewek provides an interesting example of this. Community colleges were some of the first schools to experiment in online education. In fact, Colorado, has a completely online community college. Paula provides a detailed account of how this attitude of experiment can translate a traditional religion class into a successful online experience. Joy’s account of her teaching will be foreign to most since few of her classes last for less than four hours and an eight hour class is just a normal day for her. Her description of life as a community college adjunct instructor is far from pretty but it is the reality for 75 percent of the teachers at my college. I have contributed to it by offering courses for which I know my college will only hire part-time instructors (at least at the moment). Mary Karen Solomon, like Doug Nelson, writes from a rural college. A typical teaching day for her would not only include a course in religion but also courses in Philosophy, Literature, English or Humanities. This requires a breadth of knowledge and courage unknown to most of us. These unusual characteristics of community colleges can provide both challenges and opportunities for the scholar of religion who chooses this career path. For me it has been deeply rewarding.