

career paths

Josh Franco, PhD, Provides Advice for Graduate Students Interested in Pursuing a Career at a Community College



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Josh Franco is an assistant professor of political science at Cuyamaca College, which is located in east San Diego County. He earned his PhD and MA in political science as well as his BA in public policy from UC Merced, and also holds AA degrees in economics and political science from Cerritos College. He also has five years of professional experience working in the California State Capitol and US Congress.

“ ...Learn the difference between diversity, inclusion, and equity. Community colleges, by definition, are open access institutions. Everyone is invited to attend (diversity), all who attend should be invited to succeed (inclusion), and each person should be uniquely supported so they can succeed (equity). ”

What's a typical week like at Cuyamaca College? What energizes you about working at a community college?

A typical week at Cuyamaca College includes teaching five sections of introductory courses, hosting five office hours, advising the Political Science Club, and attending a committee or council meeting. As a former community college student, being back in the setting as a professor is invigorating because it's my opportunity to give back, evolve the discipline, and serve as a role model to the next generation.

More generally, what really energizes me is the difference between a community college student and other students. What I mean by this is that community colleges by their nature are “on the move” and students typically have at least one of three initial goals: transfer to a 4-year university; earn a certificate or degree and immediately enter the workforce; and/or continue their life-long learning. What I get to do is introduce students to our discipline, and I also get to expand their horizons beyond these initial goals by encouraging them to think about earning a graduate degree, studying abroad, or experiencing an internship.

What did you study in graduate school? Can you say a little bit about your research?

I attended the University of California, Merced and was a member of the inaugural cohort of PhD students in the Political Science program. The novelty of my program was the non-traditional approach to studying the discipline. Instead of specializing in traditional sub-fields like American Politics, Comparative Politics, or International Relations, my major field of study was Political Institutions and Political Economy and my minor field was Political Cognition and Behavior.

My dissertation focused on the Congressional allocation of judicial pork, like districts, seats, meeting places, and courthouses, to US states. My current research agenda consists of two tracks. My first track is in political science education. I am fascinated by how our discipline is taught by faculty and learned by students. I think we need to rigorously question how we teach, how our students learn, and how our pedagogy needs to evolve as the world and our students change. Last year, my article “Integrating the “Science” and “Practice” of Politics in a Single Course: A Proof of Concept” was published in the *Journal of Political Science Education*. The article asks “How can we merge the science of politics and the practice of politics into a single course?” I've used the findings to design courses that blend the two approaches to help better prepare students for the real world or the academy. I look forward to contributing to this sub-field throughout my career. My second research track focuses on oversight of local governments by quasi-judicial institutions of civil



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grand juries in California. Like my dissertation on judicial pork, I am interested in examining political processes and political institutions that are overlooked in the discipline.

Why and when did you choose to pursue a career in a community college?

As a former community college student, my heart has always been with teaching and learning. Part of the reason I decided to earn a PhD was for the love of learning, not necessarily for the research career it could afford me. I specifically chose to pursue a career as a community college professor as I was writing my dissertation. During this process, I served as an Instructor of Record, meaning I got to teach my own courses. I truly enjoyed organizing content, preparing lectures, designing learning assessments, and interacting with students. Additionally, as I labored through my dissertation, I realized that I did not want a research-centered career.

In what ways did your doctoral training help you in your career?

My doctoral training helped me in two ways. First, the non-traditional approach to the discipline offered by UC Merced provided the knowledge and confidence necessary to be able to teach all introductory courses in the discipline: Political Science, American Government,

Comparative Politics, International Relations, California Politics, and Research Methods. If I was in a traditional PhD program, I would not have earned the breadth of knowledge needed to be a versatile community college professor.

Second, my methods training imparted a clear sense of the science of political science. I took seven methods courses during graduate school: research design, quantitative analysis I, II, and III, experimental political science, game theory, and practicum. Frankly, I struggled through my methods courses. While I was considered “creative” by the faculty, they were concerned that I wasn’t understanding the “science” of the discipline. So much so that I had to retake the core methods sequence.

Luckily, with support of my advisors and peers, I was able to grasp the science of our discipline. This struggle is helping me now as I introduce community college students to the discipline. Within three months of beginning my tenure-track position, I created an Introduction to Political Science Research Methods course and will be teaching it for the first time this spring using an Open Education Resource textbook I wrote with colleagues.

Do you have any advice for PhD students considering a career in a community college?

Yes, I have four pieces of advice. First, learn the difference between diversity, inclusion, and equity. Community colleges, by definition, are open access institutions. Everyone is invited to attend (diversity), all who attend should be invited to succeed (inclusion), and each person should be uniquely supported so they can succeed (equity). If you want to be a successful faculty member at a community college, then you need to have the mindset of diversity, inclusion, and equity infused in who you are, what you do, and how you do it.

Next, teach at least one class at a local community college. All community colleges need part-time (aka adjunct) faculty to teach courses. As I was finishing my dissertation, I applied for a part-time position. And luckily, I was hired to teach an Introduction to American Government course. After my first week, I knew this was the setting for me.

Third, prepare yourself to teach online courses because community colleges have embraced them, and students need the flexibility such courses provide. As I was working on my dissertation, I took two semester-length courses through the Online Network of Educators (aka @ONE): Introduction to Online Teaching and Learning and Online Education Standards and Practices. In California, most community college required some type of training before you can teach online.

Finally, consider sharing your interest to teach at a community college with trusted faculty members or doctoral student peers. Personally, I don’t think you need to be afraid to tell faculty or peers of your professional interest, especially if it’s rooted in a sense of purpose and social justice. As a first-generation college student, I feel it is important for some of us to return to our humble beginnings and light the way for the next generation. However, I am aware of the pressure of doctoral programs to train researchers, so continue using your judgement as you navigate your program and its personalities. The key is to feel supported as you pursue a path that varies from your faculty advisors and most of your peers. Remember: no one is going to live your life, personal or professional, so do what is fulfilling for you. For me, it’s teaching at a community college. ■