

Interview with Borough of Manhattan Community College Faculty Members and Higher Administrators in Languages

James Berg, Maria Enrico, Ángeles Donoso Macaya, Sophie Maríñez, and Kristina Varade

James Berg is associate dean of faculty at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York. He is also adjunct assistant professor of higher and postsecondary education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Maria Enrico is professor and chair of the Modern Languages Department at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York.

Ángeles Donoso Macaya is associate professor in the Modern Languages Department at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York.

Sophie Maríñez is a faculty leadership fellow and professor of French and Spanish at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York.

Kristina Varade is associate professor in the Modern Languages Department at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York.

IN October 2018, MLA Executive Director Paula Krebs and MLA staff members Stacy Hartman, Dennis Looney, Natalia Lusin, Steve Olsen, Annie Reiser, Doug Steward, and Lydia Tang visited the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) at the invitation of James Berg, associate dean of faculty. The MLA team had the opportunity to meet with the provost, advising staff, and librarians as well as with faculty members in English and modern languages. The following interview with James Berg and professors in Italian, French, and Spanish is an outcome of that visit.

To what extent did graduate school prepare you for a career at a community college? What are some of the lessons you learned during your first year on the job?

Sophie Maríñez: I completed my doctorate in the program in French at the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). The program itself did not include in its curriculum anything pertaining to careers at a community college, but it allowed me to teach language courses as an adjunct instructor at various CUNY campuses, including Hunter College and BMCC. I received training in the communicative approach for teaching foreign languages at Hunter and participated as a writing fellow in the Writing Across the Curriculum program at Lehman College. My first year in a full-time position was, in fact, at a private liberal arts college in upstate New York, where I had to adjust to an entirely different set of expectations. When I returned to BMCC, it felt like home, but I quickly learned that the expectations placed on a full-time faculty member are quite different from those placed on an adjunct. Still, I was happy to bring to the college the experience gained at my first job.

Ángeles Donoso Macaya: I did my PhD at Washington University in Saint Louis. We were prepared to get jobs at research institutions. We did teach every semester, all levels of Spanish language and also a few literature classes, so by the time I graduated I felt very prepared to teach. Before coming to BMCC, I worked as an adjunct for a year (one semester at Johnson C. Smith University, a historically black college in Charlotte, North Carolina, and one semester at the State University of New York at New Paltz). I also had a tenure-track position at a liberal arts college in a small town in Maryland. So by the time I arrived at BMCC, I had had different teaching experiences.

Kristina Varade: My MA in humanities and social thought was completed at New York University (NYU), and my PhD in comparative literature with a specialization

*Interview with
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
Faculty Members and
Higher Administrators
in Languages*

James Berg, Maria
Enrico, Ángeles
Donoso Macaya,
Sophie Maríñez, and
Kristina Varade

in Italian and Irish was completed at the CUNY Graduate Center (both in New York City). At NYU, I elected to teach Speaking Freely courses in Italian, which were continuing education courses targeted to NYU faculty and staff members as well as graduate and undergraduate students. This offered me valuable experience working with a diverse variety of students. I was also offered the opportunity to accompany undergraduates to Florence, Italy, providing me with important study-abroad experience ultimately applicable to fulfilling my college service at BMCC. While I did not receive formal training for these courses, both of these opportunities helped to better prepare me as a newly hired, tenure-tenure track professor at BMCC. As a CUNY graduate student, I again received no formal training to teach, but, as a fellowship recipient, I was required to do so throughout my degree. I learned how to teach an effective language course and how to manage course work and teaching. I would have appreciated a course in pedagogy or the opportunity to shadow a more experienced professor in my first year. While I had elected to take on a wonderful college-preparatory course at CUNY, a Honors in the Humanities course for advanced high school students, I had yet to teach at a community college. I would not do so until I was hired at BMCC in 2012. I believe my work with the advanced high school students significantly contributed to my understanding of the two-year community college setting.

What advice do you have to motivate current graduate students to consider a career at a two-year college?

SM: I suggest they look at the impact community colleges have in this country and their crucial role in fueling the social mobility of underprivileged populations. As Russell Lowery-Hart, president of Amarillo College, Texas, said in a recent faculty-development seminar here at BMCC, “community colleges are the future of higher education.” I agree that community colleges are a place in which we get a chance to reflect about our roles in the world and the kind of impact we want to have, make a difference, and return to society the privilege we had to go to graduate school. At BMCC, an institution ranked among the nation’s top community colleges (and third nationally in contributing to student socioeconomic mobility), it is particularly rewarding to see students feel validated and cared for, succeed academically, and realize their aspirations. In this spirit, I suggest spending some time while in graduate school teaching a course or two at a nearby community college to gain valuable teaching experience. Not all available jobs are at R1 institutions; many good jobs are in state colleges or private liberal arts colleges that value best teaching practices. Likewise, community colleges often provide faculty development and pedagogical workshops that help make job candidates more marketable.

ÁDM: To me, education is a right. It should not be a privilege. I teach at a community college because I believe in this principle and I like working with colleagues who also do. Another reason is the experience of teaching itself and the value of teaching. As I said before, I was prepared to get an R1 job. I was also trained to get a job where I would have to teach the least amount possible. In a way, teaching was seen as something you had to do in order to be able to do what you really wanted:

*Interview with
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
Faculty Members and
Higher Administrators
in Languages*

James Berg, Maria
Enrico, Ángeles
Donoso Macaya,
Sophie Maríñez, and
Kristina Varade

research. But I never thought of teaching this way. At BMCC, I have met students from so many different backgrounds, with different life experiences and interests. This makes the experience of teaching rewarding and motivating, every day.

I would also advise graduate students to do more research on the different kinds of community colleges there are. BMCC is part of the CUNY system. There are many possibilities for professional growth in an institution like CUNY, and this, for me, is very important. I care about my research and about my writing. I wouldn't be the teacher I am if I were not able to develop my research and writing projects. Even my introductory Spanish classes are informed by my research—it is part of what I do, it is what interests me, so if we are talking about what we do or what interests us, I talk to my students about my research projects.

KV: I would highly encourage current graduate students to consider tenure-track careers at community colleges. However, with the career comes the responsibility. These responsibilities are entirely different and, in many respects, more challenging than those at R1 colleges and universities. Not only must you work with a student body facing enormous social and economic challenges, but you must do so while also maintaining a competitive research career. Community college positions are not for ivory-tower scholars. These types of researchers, who take the job to be in a certain location or for the perceived easy nature of the job, are doomed to failure. You will also be required to significantly contribute to college service, something that doesn't usually register among graduates until they're baptized by fire, so to speak. That being said, community colleges afford excellent opportunities for scholarly growth, stability, collegiality, and, in my experience, working with students who genuinely understand the value of an education and rarely take it for granted.

BMCC has a large population of heritage speakers. What advantages does that create for you as a teacher in the classroom? Are there any disadvantages?

SM: The advantage of heritage speakers is that they allow us to teach upper-level courses in these languages, including courses in culture, film, and literature. Some of us teach courses in our research area, including women and gender studies, cinema, poetry, Caribbean studies, and so on. This can be particularly rewarding because many of these students bring knowledge from their cultures that enrich class discussion and the content of their essays. Many of them also realize that this heritage is an asset that they can hone to make themselves more marketable.

One of the policies of our department is that heritage speakers in liberal arts programs and some professional degrees don't test out of a language requirement. If they are fluent in a language, they can either take an upper-level course or take a beginners' class in another language, but they must take a language course. As courses in our department fulfill the general education requirement of World Cultures and Global Issues mandated by CUNY, we have a steady influx of students from the entire college. Currently, we have 217 sections. As of February 2019, our major, which was officially launched in the fall of 2015, has seventy-three students (fifty in Spanish, seventeen in French, and six in Italian).

*Interview with
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
Faculty Members and
Higher Administrators
in Languages*

James Berg, Maria
Enrico, Ángeles
Donoso Macaya,
Sophie Maríñez, and
Kristina Varade

The challenge is that heritage speakers bring with them a heterogeneous command of the language. We constantly need to reevaluate and update our pedagogy for heritage speakers. The resources are plentiful and accessible for heritage speakers of Spanish but much less available (if not nonexistent) for heritage speakers of French.

ÁDM: The term *heritage speaker* can be misleading. (I can't recommend Jonathan Rosa's work on these matters enough; his book *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* just came out.) Not every heritage speaker is the same—some students can understand what you say but can't read or write; others understand but can't speak; others only know a few words but are familiar with the culture. To me, having heritage speakers in the classroom is always an advantage. If I have heritage speakers in an introductory class, I ask them to share what they know about their country of origin, food traditions, family holidays, etc. so that the other students can learn about different Latin American cultures and traditions from their own classmates; in more advanced levels, some heritage speakers are more familiar with the literature and culture, which is also an advantage. I believe that my colleagues at the Modern Languages Department and I have been able to understand these differences and transform our curriculum so that we can better serve different groups of heritage speakers.

KV: I do not have many heritage speakers. I do have some students familiar with Italian, but most students that elect to take Italian at BMCC come from a Spanish-speaking background. This is advantageous, in the sense that students are often already familiar with words or grammatical constructs, but it is also surprising to them when they realize that many linguistic points change. It can be challenging to motivate students to engage with and master a language that is frustratingly similar to yet quite different from their own.

To what extent do you use digital technology in the classroom?

SM: I use it like I would at any other college, except that we don't have smart boards. But other than that, I use *PowerPoint* presentations to introduce a topic, I use *Blackboard* to manage my courses, and I have students upload audio recordings to online discussion boards. Students, too, are encouraged to make presentations using *Prezi* or *PowerPoint*.

ÁDM: I use videos, audio material, and *PowerPoint* presentations. Students also record themselves in the lab.

KV: We use a combination of tools in the Italian language classroom at BMCC. Our Italian language coordinator, John Thomas Means, stresses a flipped classroom, so we use videos, *Blackboard*, group work, voice recordings, online resources, music, and *PowerPoint* presentations to engage our particular body of students.

*Interview with
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
Faculty Members and
Higher Administrators
in Languages*

James Berg, Maria
Enrico, Ángeles
Donoso Macaya,
Sophie Maríñez, and
Kristina Varade

What do your students do after graduating from BMCC?

SM: Nine out of ten of the students who graduate from our program in modern languages transfer to a four-year college. Most of them pursue bachelor's degrees in French, Spanish, Italian, education, or translation. Others decide to go for a BA in international relations, linguistics, business, history, or Latin American studies with a minor in French or Spanish. As in many colleges across the country, students tend to pursue bachelor's degrees with a double major. Others transfer their language credits toward a minor. Our program provides thirty credits in general education and thirty credits in the major, all of which is completely transferable. Most of our students go to CUNY senior colleges, but some also get accepted to highly selective schools. One of our French majors, for instance, was just accepted into four prestigious universities in the United Kingdom system: the Universities of York, Essex, Exeter, and Sheffield. We are always looking for selective private colleges and universities interested in recruiting promising, high-achieving students from diverse backgrounds. If your school offers full scholarships to underprivileged, first-generation, or minority students with high GPAs, please contact us!

KV: I am continuously awed and inspired by the success of our students at BMCC. Italian-language students I have taught have gone on to prestigious private schools such as Cornell, Mount Holyoke, New York University, Columbia University, etc. Many go on to the CUNY four-year colleges, and several to honors programs at these schools. Most of my former BMCC Field Experience to Italy study-abroad students have continued to study abroad during their subsequent college or university programs, not only returning to Italy but even to places as far away as Mongolia! Several of my Italian-language students have sought career paths that allow them to continually benefit from their experience and choice of Italian as an area of scholarly inquiry. Some students have jobs working in the Italian or New York City fashion industry, some in the Italian restaurant industry in New York City, and one even works for an Italian motorcycle company as an engineer.

How do you and your colleagues define and measure student success?

ÁDM: We do have student learning outcomes for every language level and different ways of measuring student progress (from low-stakes writing assignments to formal papers, quizzes and tests, and oral presentations). For me, it is crucial that students are able to communicate and express their ideas, that they understand what they read or watch, and that they are able to formulate ideas about what they read or watch, at every level.

KV: I second Ángeles's perspective. I would only add that, at least in Italian, we are particularly focused upon oral proficiency. We realize that our students are at BMCC for a limited amount of time, and, as such, we want to encourage them to feel comfortable and confident in speaking from the beginning. Oral comprehension and communication are key to dialogue, and we want our students to venture out, engage, and interact with Italians to the best of their ability, even if that is in their own New York City backyard.

*Interview with
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
Faculty Members and
Higher Administrators
in Languages*

James Berg, Maria
Enrico, Ángeles
Donoso Macaya,
Sophie Maríñez, and
Kristina Varade

James Berg: We ask the students what their goals are when they apply. Mostly, they tell us they intend to get a degree or to get a degree and transfer. Our graduation rate is low but improving, and sixty-five to seventy percent of our students who graduate transfer within eighteen months.

What is your proudest moment as an instructor, department chair, or administrator at BMCC?

Maria Enrico: My proudest moment was when our associate in arts degree in modern language (with a specialization in French, Italian, or Spanish) was approved by New York state and the CUNY chancellor. We are the only community college in CUNY to have one.

SM: There are many moments: watching students receive a scholarship or get accepted into a school for which I recommended them; hearing their stories when they come back from our study-abroad programs in France, Spain, and Italy; seeing them develop and blossom, validated and empowered by our high-impact practices; getting e-mails and postcards years later telling me about how they applied what they learned to a trip or in a personal or professional moment. It is the rewarding aspect of our profession.

ADM: There have been many, many moments, and they are very different. I felt proud when a student told me he had won a fellowship to study at NYU; I felt very proud when a student told me she had got into the teaching program she wanted. But perhaps my proudest moment was when a student told me, after a class, that the readings and discussions had made her realize that she didn't need to get married right away, that there were other options for her, that she was considering to study a career.

KV: While I have had the pleasure of instructing students that have overcome overwhelming challenges, been accepted to great schools, and realized incredible achievements, my favorite students are the ones that come back to me after failing. If a student can come back to my class after failing, can feel comfortable with me and have success the second time around, then I feel that I'm doing my job well. This demonstrates earned trust and personal tenacity, two aspects that are crucial for success in life.

For Maria Enrico: What are the three most pressing issues you face as department chair of BMCC's Modern Languages Department?

ME: The cost of textbooks—primarily for the beginner levels—is a major concern. Many of our upper levels use zero-cost open educational resources, and we are trying to develop our own materials for beginners' classes, but it is a challenge. One issue is developing relevant material for the mandatory lab hour. Another issue is accurate placement of heritage speakers. We have implemented a heritage-speakers track for Spanish, and, although brand new, it seems to be working. Lastly, and I am sure most if not all chairs will agree, is the ever-increasing amount of administrative work.

*Interview with
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
Faculty Members and
Higher Administrators
in Languages*

James Berg, Maria
Enrico, Ángeles
Donoso Macaya,
Sophie Maríñez, and
Kristina Varade

For James Berg: What are the challenges of your role as associate dean at a large, urban community college? What are the pleasures?

JB: Community colleges are the sites of much contestation and change. It can be confusing and tiring to keep up with the changes we see now or on the horizon. This is especially true for the workload of faculty members, and it's gratifying that CUNY has recognized this by reducing this workload. Still, the inequity in funding and appointment types that community colleges face—all while teaching students with the greatest needs—is draining on everyone. The joys are multiple: working with faculty members daily across the disciplines is invigorating, intellectually stimulating, and emotionally rewarding. We discuss their teaching, their research, and their commitment to the college and to CUNY. CUNY faculty members are dedicated to their students and to the social-justice mission of educating first-generation students, students of color, and immigrants.

Are there issues particular to the world of community colleges that you would like to see addressed more by the MLA and the ADFL?

SM: I would like to see more discussion of initiatives put in place by modern languages departments at other colleges or universities to welcome community college students, to support them as they make the transition, and to give them the tools they need to succeed in the new environment.

KV: I think that the MLA and the ADFL are taking an excellent first step in reaching out to recently hired and tenured community college faculty in order to realistically discuss the rewards and challenges of the job. The requirements for current community college faculty members are unique and different from those of times past. The stigma still exists that a community college job means teaching and no research. This couldn't be further from the truth. That being said, MLA and ADFL members interested in being hired at community colleges need to understand that they will be challenged financially to accomplish much in their careers with, I think I can say for the humanities in particular, very little. It is always possible to become a distinguished scholar in one's chosen field as a community college professor, but the challenges of competing on a top-tier research level become twice-magnified by the lack of research funding and punishing teaching schedules with which community college faculty members constantly contend. It is important that the MLA and the ADFL discuss these challenges and offer support and guidance for potential job candidates who are unwilling to give up research careers but who would also be excellent candidates for community college careers.

JB: As Professor Maríñez says, the issue of transfer shock is important, as a higher and higher percentage of the graduating class at four-year colleges is made up of community college students. Frequently, the issue is put in terms of community college students' preparation, but recent (and repeated) research shows that community college students who transfer graduate at levels just as high or higher than students who start at a four-year college. What the four-year colleges are often missing are

*Interview with
Borough of Manhattan
Community College
Faculty Members and
Higher Administrators
in Languages*

James Berg, Maria
Enrico, Ángeles
Donoso Macaya,
Sophie Maríñez, and
Kristina Varade

the supports that students need, particularly first-generation students, to succeed in college.

Please imagine one question we haven't asked you and answer it as well!

ME: Why should anyone study a language other than English? We live in a global city in a global world. Being able to communicate with others in their language creates a unique bridge that goes way beyond the purely linguistic and fosters understanding and appreciation of other cultures. And in terms of employment, it is a tremendous added skill. I always ask my students: If you were faced with two equally qualified candidates for a job but one could speak more than one language, which one would you hire given the global economy? They always answer: the one who is multilingual.

KV: As a postdoctoral candidate with an excellent research record and a potential career as a scholar of note, why should I consider a job at a community college? Not only am I allowed to experiment with new projects, areas of inquiry, and critical perspectives, but I can do so while working with colleagues and students who genuinely crave learning and rarely take their educations for granted. Community colleges are grounded in service and education for the greater good. And they keep us grounded, too, as professors and researchers.

JB: How can I partner with colleagues at community colleges in my scholarly and pedagogical research? E-mail me, and I'll hook you up!