

Posdoc Academic Chat #4

APPLYING FOR ACADEMIC POSITIONS – And You Thought Getting A Postdoc Was Hard

**Readings
9 April , 2010**

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1. Applying for Academic Positions

Exploring Faculty Careers in Higher Education: Advice from University of Delaware Graduates (University of Delaware - Center for Teaching Effectiveness)

How do I prepare to apply for an academic position?

As you begin your graduate program, or at least well before you are finished, start taking a look at the postings for the kinds of positions that interest you. Inquire for details about job requirements so that you have the time to acquire the skills the job market demands, before it is too late at application time. Try to develop as much varied experience as possible: teaching (if possible several different courses), research record, service, work, or leadership experience--basically, anything that will give you experience and set you apart from others. If that means publications, take time to include them in the process of your research. If teaching experience is expected, make your TA position meaningful by taking some initiative and responsibility in the planning of coursework or by trying innovative teaching methods you may have heard of. Your department and CTE can help you get started.

What does an academic search committee look for?

The search committee looks for an experienced teaching and/or research background and faculty approval of you and your work. Where possible, make friends among faculty (network!). Seek out a faculty mentor or several mentors. Mentors can be helpful in understanding the expectations and job requirements of a professor. A mentor can also help you start a research history through collaborative research efforts. Find someone you can trust and feel comfortable with. Mentors are also helpful when they can write letters of recommendation, not only about your professional abilities, like teaching and research, but also about personal qualities like "works well with others." Take the time to develop these relationships with mentors. Keep a dossier of every accomplishment while you are in your program; save this list for your Curriculum Vitae (CV). Make sure to document all of your responsibilities for each job and have the supervising/mentoring professor write a knowledgeable letter of recommendation for you.

How do I market my abilities, qualities, and qualifications?

During the searching process, tailor your letters to specific institutions. Tailor your application letter and CV to the specific position. Try to learn as much about the position as possible; visit the institution's websites. Also learn as much as possible about the department and institution in terms of teaching philosophy, so that you appear more compatible with the department and institution.

How do I prepare for the interview process?

Be prepared for the interview process by surfing the WEB for additional info on the department, faculty. Prepare yourself with information about the institution, department, philosophy, mission, etc. Have questions prepared for your potential employer such as "Where do graduating students go from here?" Is this a new or replacement position? Is collaborative work encouraged or discouraged? How often are new faculty expected to publish?" Basically, know the department before interviewing and demonstrate an interest in the job. Take time to research the interests and subdisciplines within the prospective department and state in your application how you would advance their research agenda. Before an interview, conduct research with respect to the faculty. Try to be familiar with the kind of work the department does, what particular faculty are known for. Remember that if you have been given an interview, the faculty are interested in you. Also, remember that you are also interviewing the department.

What can I expect during the interview process?

At an interview, you will be nervous. Try to be genuine and interested. Make certain that you have questions for the committee. Questions indicate that you are considering them seriously as a place of employment. Be prepared to answer questions such as "Why do you want to go into teaching?" How would your colleagues describe you? What experiences do you have teaching? How do you see yourself fitting into this department?"

If you are offered a position, get a clear indication of when you need to respond. Then contact an impartial faculty member at another institution to inquire about the position particulars, such as course load, compensation package, etc. Compare notes to determine whether or not the offer is a good one, or at least one you can live with.

CTE thanks the following panelists for their recommendations:

*Catherine Bentzley, Ph.D., Chemistry and Biochemistry, University of the Sciences, Philadelphia, PA (1997, Analytical Chemistry).

*Shawn Christiansen, Ph.D., Human Development & Family Studies, Penn State Worthington Scranton, PA (1997, Individual & Family Studies).

*Janet Manspeaker, Ph.D., Social & Behavioral Sciences, Cheyney University, PA (1990, Political Science).

*Michael O'Neal, Ph.D., Science Education, Loyola College, Baltimore, MD (1997, Geology).

2. The Academic Job Talk.

Dr. Michele Marincovich,
Associate Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
Director, Center for Teaching and Learning
Stanford University

General Tips:

- * Make sure that your talk has a broader context, so that the importance and implications of your work are clear, not merely implied.
- * If, when you write your talk, you focus on what you want people to be thinking about as they leave your talk, it will help you concentrate on the essentials.
- * Don't wait to prepare your job talk until the last minute - it is more than just a "brain dump" of your dissertation. It's very important to be able to go beyond your dissertation.
- * Be prepared enough to allow yourself to be spontaneous; preparation will also help you handle the unexpected.
- * Make your talk interesting with good examples, relevant anecdotes, and significant details.

- * If speaking to a mixed audience, avoid highly technical or specialized terms.
- * Academia is changing and now includes previously underrepresented groups. Use inclusive language - she as well as he, for example - and language that is respectful of all groups.
- * The biggest correlates of effective teaching are enthusiasm, organization, and the ability to engage your students.
- * Using humor in your job talk can be risky, but if it comes naturally to you, use it. But you don't have to, so don't fake it.
- * There will usually be a "Question and Answer" period. There is no way to predict all the questions you might be asked, but you can practice by having friends listen to your talk and then ask you the hardest questions they can think of.
- * Being a good public speaker helps - a well delivered talk will carry your message more effectively.

Practicing and Nervousness:

- * Practice/ do your talk in front of friends who can give feedback.
- * Try to view any nervousness in a positive way, as energy or dynamism.
- * Few speakers reach everybody all the time--don't focus on unresponsive audience members.
- * Some audiences (especially in science and engineering fields) will be serious and unresponsive on purpose to make it more challenging or simply because they're concentrating on the presentation and critiquing it.
- * Stay in touch with your audience, but don't try to decide the success or results of the talk during the talk.

3. Search Committees - The Long And Winding Road Of Academic Hiring

Author: Karen Young Kreeger

Date: November 8, 1999

Only in academia does it take a committee and several months to a year or more to hire someone. In industry, most often a supervisor can hire an employee. But searches for new faculty are complicated.

The mechanics of a search are fairly simple; it's the nuances at each step that challenge participants. First a position opens up, then the department chairperson or dean decides on the disciplinary background of the position and the level: assistant, associate, or full professor. Usually a chairperson appoints a search committee of three or more faculty members who make sure ads get placed in prominent publications. Phone calls are made, and letters soliciting applications are written to colleagues.

The committee reviews typically 200 to 500 applications and whittles the mountain of packages to a short list of three to six researchers who will be invited for a two-day round of interviews and a formal seminar. After that, the committee recommends the top candidate to the department chairperson, and the offer usually comes from the dean.

"If scientific meetings are timely, there can also be some interviewing or previewing there," says David Burgess, a professor of biology at Boston College. "That's a perfect time to hear the talks and view the posters of people who might be on a semishort list."

Committees typically assess such candidate attributes as scientific lineage--where they did their Ph.D.s and postdocs, the quality of their publications, and the strength of their letters of recommendation--as well as teaching and communication skills, says Burgess.

"Search committees, in my experience, develop a group dynamic that varies quite a bit with the constitution of the committee," says Jon Dantzig, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "I think we do a pretty good job of dealing with the real issues as opposed to the politics of who likes whom." From his experiences on several searches, Dantzig wrote a Web site handbook entitled *Finding an Academic Job: The Process and the Pitfalls* (quattro.me.uiuc.edu/~jon/ACAJOB/academic_job.html). He adds that the issues are less political if you're searching for a departmental faculty person than, for example, a department head, where politics is actually part of the job.

Hired Guns

Because of the added subtleties of administrative positions, hiring department chairs, deans, and center and institute heads can require extra help. "In recent times, for some of the searches with which I've been involved, committee members haven't been able to come up with a list of people that our dean, who ultimately makes the final decision, was happy with," recalls David Goodman, a professor of pathology and laboratory medicine at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. "So on a couple of occasions we have employed search firms to gather names for the committee, which has been successful."

Why is a search firm more effective than those who are intimately involved in a certain field? "The search firm is effective because [the staff] can really be more anonymous and probing with candidates," asserts Goodman. Researchers agree that a potential candidate is more likely to speak honestly with an outside, independent body such as a search firm. Goodman doesn't think that using private companies is "a first-line approach" at many institutions, but surmises that they're used more frequently and have become more acceptable--at least in life and medical sciences--in the past 10 years.

To many researchers, the whittling process is the most onerous. But, counters John Alderete, a professor of microbiology at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio, "Narrowing isn't so hard if the chairperson has precise ideas as to what part of the program he wants to strengthen and how much he can offer in the start-up package."

To Burgess, the difficult task is to not clone himself. "I think it's a challenge to give equal weight to a candidate who went to a lesser undergraduate school, but attended a decent Ph.D. program and was very productive, and then went on to an outstanding postdoc versus someone who is less productive but has a better lineage."

To others, the bureaucracy in academic hiring that's developed in the past, 20 years is bothersome, particularly dealing with affirmative action offices. It's their responsibility to review each step in the hiring process. "Affirmative action offices on a lot of campuses have done a lot of good, particularly when there might have been more overt efforts to avoid following laws against discrimination," says James Richardson, president of the Washington, D.C.-based American Association of University Professors and a professor of sociology and judicial studies at the University of Nevada at Reno. "Now a lot of people view it as a bureaucracy."

Richardson says the affirmative action process can affect a department's competitiveness: "If you're trying to hire a minority and three other places are too, getting an offer to them quickly and getting them off the job market is the best thing you can do. So sitting around waiting for the affirmative action form to come back in three to four days may actually cost you the hire you want to make."

Plug-Ups in the Pipeline

Richardson cites another sticky area in the hiring process; he calls it the pipeline problem. "We're supposed to search out and hire people who represent our society in terms of gender and race, but they don't exist in the pipeline in the numbers that make that possible."

One effort to correct this is the six-year-old Compact for Faculty Diversity--a partnership of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), the New England Board of Higher Education, and the Southern Regional Education Board. The Compact addresses the long-standing issue of the underrepresentation of minorities in faculty positions, explains Ken Pepion, senior project director for the WICHE Doctoral

Scholars Program. The Compact provides financial and mentoring assistance to help increase the number of minorities entering doctoral programs and completing degrees.

"I think it's important to understand that one of the primary motivating factors guiding the behavior of search committees is prestige," says Pepion. "They're more likely to look at institutions that are at least the equivalent to the institution in which they now work."

This is especially true in the sciences. These institutions are looking for highly specialized people, which narrows the pool even further. "If you look at the entire pipeline, it's most likely that minority students will go to community colleges, then on to four-year institutions, but not likely research institutions," says Pepion.

Advice to Job Seekers

Dantzig's handbook covers his observations and opinions about the faculty hiring process, including words of wisdom for dealing with search committees. "The reason I wrote the handbook was because I encountered some people that I thought were pretty smart who didn't make it through the process because they just didn't understand what was expected of them," says Dantzig.

Both search-committee members and scientists who've recently completed a search stress that candidates should do their homework to learn as much as they can about the department and its faculty. Then they can have a scientific conversation with the people on their interview schedule, which includes the committee members.

"I received an itinerary of my meetings from most places ahead of time, so I could do a literature search and pull a paper from this person or that person," says JoAnn Trejo, now an assistant research professor at the Cardiovascular Research Institute at the University of California, San Francisco. Trejo, who started her search a year ago, interviewed at nine universities and was offered a job at all nine. This winter she starts as an assistant professor of pharmacology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She adds that although daily schedules make it impossible to read many papers, "What's important is that you should be able to converse about their work. Also, they need to feel like you're communicative and open to new ideas."

Linda Castillo, an assistant professor of counseling in the department of psychology at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, who received her Ph.D. from the University of Utah and did her psychology internship at the University of Texas at Austin, concurs with Trejo. She adds that candidates should not only know about the interviewers' research, but also try to ascertain what the people of the department are like interpersonally. For example, Goodman advises candidates to carefully evaluate whom they'll be working with most closely--for example, heads of departments, centers, and programs. "Ask yourself: 'Can I trust these people?'" he suggests. "It has to be a visceral feeling."

Castillo interviewed at teaching universities, so many of the questions asked of her centered on her shift from a research to a smaller teaching university. "Have answers to questions like this prepared: 'What would you have to offer an institution like ours?'" she advises.

Trejo also mentions that another common question that came up in her search was: "What are you going to write for your first grant?" You have to have a response to that, some knowledge as to what direction you want to head in." Others also asked, "What do you think you will be doing in five to ten years?" "It's also good to have a long-term perspective on your career," she advises. "The wrong answer is 'I don't know.'"

Above all, says Burgess, "Faculty are looking for colleagues, not only exceptional scientists. Don't come in cold and cocky."