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Perspectives on the Academic Job Search

When we talk with friends outside academia, they are often taken aback by the academic job search process in the United States. “You apply for a job in October, and you find out whether you have the job in March?” they ask with some amazement. They are also often struck by how consuming the process can become, particularly for graduate students on the market for the first time, as they sometimes end up neglecting their research and dissertation writing to apply for jobs. “But,” these professionals say, “it’s just a job search.” They may be perplexed further by the arcane process, which can seem from the outside like a pretty complicated hazing ritual. “I wouldn’t put up with that kind of treatment. Why not just look for a different kind of job?” they exclaim.

We start with this particular anecdote as a reminder that it is important to keep a healthy perspective on the academic job market while one is going through the process, which can often be stressful and easily cause one to lose any such perspective. At the same time, traversing the academic job market is one of the first markers of the transition from being a graduate student to being a professional academic. As academics who have both been through the job search process within the reasonably recent past (both as graduate students and as assistant professors) and who have served on multiple job search committees, we hope (1) to share some hard-earned wisdom about how to maintain some perspective on the process and navigate it successfully and (2) to explain the rationale behind the materials one is asked to proffer. We focus primarily on the initial application for academic jobs because we believe that many applicants make mistakes at this step that hinder their chances of achieving the goal of any academic job application: talking to the search committee in more detail in the form of an interview. Although our focus here is narrow, we believe that there are three principles to bear in mind throughout the process.

First, when you apply for an academic job, you are applying to become a colleague. This means that you should prepare your dossier as if you already are a colleague and keep in mind that you want your dossier to excite the imaginations of the members of the search committee. As members of a search committee and, later, as members of a full department listening to your job talk or talking to you over a meal, faculty are looking for people they think will be strong scholars in the broader field, respected and innovative teachers, and good colleagues who will work down the hall from them, join them on committees, share teaching strategies, read their work, and more for many years to come. As a graduate student, you may not yet feel like a full-fledged colleague, but this is your moment to try on that hat and present that persona.

Second, you are applying for your job. You do not have to apply for a job that you do not want, nor do you have to forego applying for jobs that someone else thinks you should not have. Your advisors are there to advise, and you should certainly listen to their guidance about how to navigate the job market, but in the end, it is your job search and your decision to make. That said, we strongly encourage anyone on the job market to consider schools and academic positions that may not previously have been on the radar.

Third, you are searching for a job, not for a life. While it is often, if even usually, the case that academic jobs become an integral part of our lives, it's important to remember that a job is simply one component of all that makes us who we are. Some job candidates find it helpful to explore—or at least consider—career options outside of academia while they're on the academic job market, as a way to feel like they have a range of options. Both of us found this a useful strategy that provided an important means of keeping perspective.

At the pragmatic level, virtually all advertisements for open faculty positions require a letter of application, a curriculum vitae (CV), and three or four letters of recommendation (or the names of people who can be contacted to provide such letters). In addition to these components, many job ads request a writing sample, a research statement, a transcript, a statement of teaching philosophy, and/or a full teaching portfolio. Looking at example materials from peers or faculty advisors, in department resource files, or online (see, e.g., the sample CVs at the *Chronicle of Higher Education* Web site: <http://chronicle.com/jobs/tools/cvdoctor/2006/>) can be the easiest way to model your own in terms of form. Here we will focus more on content in terms of how you are presenting yourself and your work as well as the rationale for doing so.

Search committees narrow the pool of applicants by reading through the application dossiers and selecting those that will move to the next level of the hiring process (e.g., a request for more materials or an interview). Thus you want your dossier to pique the search committee's interest and to suggest to the committee that you could be a valuable and exciting colleague. It is important to remember that the search committee will likely include scholars outside your specific subfield; it is therefore your task to make your work as interesting and accessible as possible to a potentially nonspecialist audience, while also providing sufficient detail for the specialists on the committee to see your promise within your specific subfield.

The application letter is your chance to explain yourself in ways that the CV, with its list of your professional accomplishments and qualifications, does not allow. The letter enables you to provide readers with a narrative to complement the CV and to flag experiences, accomplishments, or skills that you think make you especially distinctive and qualified for the job—and that the committee might miss (or miss their significance) as they read the CV.

To be maximally persuasive, the application letter should indicate, usually in the first paragraph, why you are a good fit for that particular job, and it should convey a sense of genuine enthusiasm for your research and for teaching. The former clearly suggests some tailoring of your letter to a given job, which we recommend as a good practice. While there will certainly be overlap across your job applications (especially in the summary of your research and teaching), tailoring each letter allows you to address any specific issues that have come up in the job ad. If the ad says specifically that the hiring department is looking for someone with research specialization in American dialects, be sure to address your interests and abilities in American dialects. If you don't have such interests and abilities, consider whether this is the right job for you; alternatively, figure out the way to make your research on Old English relevant to the study of American dialects or explain why you are still a viable—and, in fact, particularly good—candidate for this position. We have both seen instances where search committees were persuaded to move a dossier forward simply because they found the application intriguing, even though it didn't necessarily look like the perfect fit for the job. Sometimes the process of reading interesting dossiers convinces the search committee to shift their vision of the kind of colleague they want.

In terms of presenting your research, the greatest challenge often lies in articulating the argument and significance of your dissertation/research project concisely and in a way that is interesting, accessible, and seems significant to a fairly broad audience. When all of us are in the middle of an extended academic project, deep into the details of the research, it can be difficult to step back and summarize the project's larger argument and its overall importance within that area of the field, yet this ability is critical to the job search process. The key: be concise, yet compelling. The ability to make your work engaging and convincing to a fairly broad audience can also be read as an indication of good teaching skills; that is, it demonstrates the ability to help students become excited about and invested in course material.

In presenting your approach to and experience with teaching, it's a good idea to note explicitly the areas where you see yourself contributing to the hiring department's teaching roster; what courses you are ready to teach right now; what courses you would be able to teach with some preparation time; and where you see yourself fitting into the institution's teaching mission more generally. (When you reference courses you've been involved with, be sure to provide the titles of the courses, rather than just course numbers!) Even if just with a sentence or two, it can be persuasive to capture some distinctive element of your teaching persona and/or the strategies that you employ in teaching within your field. For example, do you have a particularly engaging way to teach students a difficult or highly technical concept? Do you integrate distinctive activities or technologies into your teaching? What are your learning goals for students, beyond the technical content of the course?

In addition to the general dos that we have presented here, we thought a few highly practical don'ts might also be useful, and potentially entertaining:

- Don't follow the more is better theory. It is not advisable to inundate committees with materials they did not request. Search committees are unlikely to read extra application materials and may be annoyed at having to go through them.
- Don't let your artistic side take over. Application strategies that might work well outside the academy will often fall flat with academic search committees. In general, don't use colored paper or similar material gimmicks such as colored ink; many changes in font face, style, or size; or graphics. Search committees may well assume that you are hiding something about your credentials or that you are not a serious academic.
- Don't make up future research projects if you don't know what you're talking about. You may well then be asked about these projects in an interview, which could leave you grasping at straws, or your description of the projects simply won't be persuasive. The key is to balance the presentation of where you are now with comments on where you are headed; it shows the committee that you see your dissertation as one step in your overall research program and that you have ideas beyond the dissertation itself.
- Don't dwell on potential red flags (to mix a metaphor). The application letter is not a confessional, and you can, in all fairness and good ethics, highlight the positive and minimize the less positive. If you've taken longer to finish your dissertation because of family circumstances or changing topics midstream, you can explain this briefly or allow your dissertation advisor or other committee members to address it in their letters. Similarly, if you've never taught before or if you've received negative teaching evaluations, you can frame your teaching in terms of your innovative (although as yet untried) ideas and strategies or your plans for enhancing your teaching.
- Don't surprise your recommenders with only a week to write letters. As you try to do with all your academic work, impress your committee members or other recommenders with your organization and thoroughness, providing them all the material they need well ahead of time. (Also, make sure everyone agrees, for example, on when you are defending your dissertation!)

Applying to academic jobs can be a lot of work, but it need not be all-consuming—of your time or your mental and emotional energy. You can think of this as another obligation you are learning to balance with your other academic commitments. And sometimes the very real pressure of meeting with search committees to discuss your research can motivate you to accelerate your progress and provide you a clear sense of audience for your project. It is useful and important work to be able to explain the significance of your research and the motivations for your teaching practices—in this case, for a job search committee, but in other years, for research funding agencies or for promotion or award committees. These processes ask us to step back from what we do and help others understand its contribution to the field and to any given institution. And if you are convinced and compelled by what you do, the case is all the easier to make.

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