

Applying for an Assistant Professorship: Advice from Members of a Search Committee

by

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Many graduate students finishing their dissertations are anxious to get hired as assistant professors. These students face the oftentimes new and unfamiliar situation of having to apply for a job for the first time. This column was written to provide a basic understanding of the hiring process and to give readers the opportunity to learn from the experiences of several members of various search committees.

The Hiring Process

The hiring process differs slightly from one department to another, but most follow a similar pattern. The process typically begins in the fall, when departments announce their interest in hiring a new faculty member, and continues into the spring, when the selected applicant is hired. In late fall, departments put their job advertisements in publications, such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, or organization newsletters, such as the *APA Monitor*. Ads are also placed on the web. For example, the chronicle of higher education (<http://chronicle.merit.edu/ads.links.html>), the Academic Position Network (<gopher://wcn.cis.umn.edu.1111/>), The Riley Guide (<http://www.jobtrac.com/jobguide/>) and the American Colleges and Universities Listing (<http://clas.uf.edu/CLAS/american-universities.html>). Or flyers are sent out to other departments. Ads typically ask interested applicants to send their vita, copies of publications, official graduate transcripts, and several letters of recommendation by a certain date (Price, 1998).

Once the application materials have arrived, the search committee reads the application materials and systematically narrows the list of potential candidates until it arrives at a small number of top candidates. These candidates are then contacted and invited to visit the department. During this visit, the candidate has the opportunity to meet the members of the search committee, other faculty, administrative staff, and students, and learn about the department and university. The candidate will be interviewed by faculty and the department head and is often asked to give a research presentation or teach a class. Based on the department's perception of each candidate, one person is finally selected as the top choice and offered the position.

The DOs and DON'Ts

Application Materials

Whether or not a person will be a promising candidate depends not only on the candidate's qualifications but also on the ability to present oneself favorably. Often, the *cover letter* is the first document members of the search committee review. The basic purpose of the cover letter is to (a) inform the search committee that you wish to be considered as a candidate for the position they offer; (b) convey your interest in this particular position to the members of

the search committee; and (c) convince the members of the search committee that you are a potential candidate for the position due to your research and teaching experience (Price, 1998). In many cases, however, a short glance at the cover letter is enough for a person to be quickly dismissed as a potential candidate for the position. Why is this so? The two most serious mistakes you can make in writing your cover letter are (a) failure to get to the important information quickly and briefly, and (b) failure to demonstrate why you are an excellent fit for this particular position. When you write your cover letter, you need to put yourself in the readers' position. They have to read a lot of material within a short period of time. Make sure you limit your cover letter to a maximum of two pages and come to the point quickly. If you cannot catch their interest right away, then they will be less likely to finish reading the rest of your application materials.

Letters of recommendation also carry great weight in who gets chosen and who does not. A letter of recommendation has a good chance of being excellent if the person recommending you is well known in your area of research, very familiar with your research and teaching experience, and has great respect for you and your work. The letter of recommendation should also be tailored toward the position you are applying for. If you are applying for a research position, the letter of recommendation should emphasize your research skills rather than your teaching experience. You can take an active part in the writing of your letters of recommendation by selecting a person who knows you well, is willing to write a positive letter about you, and is a good communicator. Furthermore, many professors appreciate it if you can provide them with a list of issues you would like them to emphasize in the letter.

The *vita* is another important part of the application material that needs to be considered carefully. A good *vita* is well organized, easy to read, and contains all the necessary information in the appropriate places. For example, the *vita* of a candidate applying for a research position should include information regarding educational background, employment history (in case of former professional positions), awards and fellowships, publications, presentations, research, grants, teaching experience, clinical experience (if relevant), professional memberships, service activities, editorial experience, and references (Price, 1998). As with the cover letter and the letters of recommendation, the *vita* also needs to be tailored to the position you are seeking. If you are interested in a research position, you should put your research qualifications first. If you are applying for a teaching position, you should lead your reader's attention to your teaching experiences. It is very tempting for graduate students without many publications to make their *vita* appear more impressive than it really is by listing such things as coding manuals under the heading of publications. This does not make a good impression and will hurt you more than being honest about the work you have done so far. Finally, you are well advised to proofread your *vita* many times and to seek feedback from your advisor, other faculty, or colleagues.

The importance of *publications* in your *vita* cannot be emphasized enough if you intend to apply for a research position at a major university. It is not only the quantity that counts, but, perhaps even more importantly, the quality of your publications. Members of the search committee will pay special attention to the quality of your work and to the journals in which you have published your work. Publishing in highly respected journal in your area of research, such as the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, and *Personal Relationships*, carries more weight than publishing in a journal that is not as highly respected. Being a single author or a first author of an article will also be more impressive than being the fifth author.

The importance of *teaching experience* varies from one university to another and from one department to another. Generally speaking, major research institutions do not require as much teaching experience as smaller universities and colleges. However, some departments may focus more on teaching skills than others. For example, the department of educational psychology of a major university might have great interest in finding a candidate with outstanding teaching skills. If you apply to an institution that values teaching skills, it might be to your advantage to create a teaching portfolio that reflects your experience and skills.

It may come as a surprise to many graduate students that your *GPA* is not of great importance when it comes to applying for an academic position. What is important is that the classes you took reflect your area of interest and your knowledge and skill in that particular area. For example, if you apply for a research position that emphasizes statistical knowledge and the ability to teach statistics classes, your transcript should reflect the fact that you have taken a fair amount of statistics classes and that you have gotten good grades in them.

The Interview

Once you have made it into the group of top candidates, your interview becomes very important. It is therefore of utmost importance that you be prepared for your visit with the faculty, students, and administrative staff. Three aspects of this visit are especially important: (a) your opportunity to ask questions about the department, (b) the department's opportunity to ask you questions about yourself, and (c) the opportunity for you to demonstrate your skills and personality to the department.

When you are invited to visit a department, you should make sure that you are prepared to use the time effectively by meeting individually or in groups with the search committee, faculty, students, and administrative staff in order to *ask important questions* about the department, the university, the city, etc. This is your opportunity to learn as much as you can from everybody about everything. For example, where would your office be located in relation to the offices of other faculty? How much office and lab space would be available to you? Will you have secretarial support? What expectations do the department and the university have regarding teaching and research productivity? What equipment and supplies will be available (computer, printer, etc.)? (Price, 1998). In order to be able to ask useful questions, it is very helpful to have done extensive research about the place in advance. It is also advisable to have an understanding of the group and power dynamics in the department.

You should also *be prepared to answer the questions presented to you*, such as "What are your research interests/teaching interests/career goals?", "What is your teaching philosophy?", "Why are you interested in this position?", "What do you have to offer to this program?" Think about potential questions ahead of time and practice your replies (Price, 1998).

You should also *be prepared to demonstrate your skills and knowledge* by teaching a class, giving a guest presentation, discussing your dissertation, etc. Most often, candidates are asked to give a presentation of their research. It is often of vital importance that you (a) select a topic for your presentation that is tailored to the interests of the department, and (b) that you are able to present your material in an interesting way, and tailored to the needs of the audience. For example, if your audience consists of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, administrative staff, and researchers from related areas of research, you should make sure that your presentation will address the level of experience and expertise of each of them. The undergraduate student should be able to benefit from your presentation just as much as the faculty. Your presentation will reflect how well you can deal with individuals with differing levels of understanding, how well you can answer questions, how skilled you are in presenting

your research, etc. It is very helpful, and highly recommended, that you become familiar with the room in which you will give your presentation and with the equipment you will have available for your presentation (Darley & Zanna, 1987). You should ask in advance what kind of equipment the department will be able to provide you with. Otherwise you might be in the situation where you need a VCR for your presentation but the department does not have a VCR or TV available to you.

Conclusions

Whether or not you get the position you have applied for depends on many factors, some of them have been described here. You should try to keep in mind, however, that a rejection from an institution does not reflect on you as a person. Often, it is other factors, such as the power dynamics in a department, that are the decisive factor in the selection of the final candidate. Because of this, it is important that you apply not only for one position but for many, and not only for positions at major universities but also for those in smaller institutions. Also, I would like to remind you that the department is not only judging you, but you are also judging the department. Keep in mind what *you* want in a position.

Finally, one aspect that I would like to stress here is that students need to begin establishing their record early. You need to make sure that you develop relationships with people who would be good candidates for writing letters of recommendation for you. Also, it is important to seek out research and teaching opportunities wherever they present themselves.

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