

## LANDING AN ACADEMIC JOB AND KEEPING IT: WORKING STRATEGIES

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### **Abstract**

*With combined experience of close to 45+ years in academic institutions, we have participated in many hiring committees as members or as chairs. We have also been members or chairs of personnel committees that make decisions on tenure and retention as well as discretionary salary increments. During this time, we have observed a changing field in which landing an academic job has become stiffer, given the dwindling faculty position openings as a result of the shrinking economic power in many universities. Needless to say, there are many applicants for the few open faculty positions making the competition almost cut throat. This has made hiring committees to be picky so that small mistakes that have previously been overlooked make promising candidates to be eliminated. Those who are lucky to secure that elusive job realize very quickly that keeping that job is even a bigger challenge. It takes years to secure tenure and the stress associated with this process is overwhelming especially for women and foreign-born academics. In this paper, we would like to start a conversation with graduate students about to embark on their first job search as a way of understanding the search process and thus have a fair chance of success. Other people who could join in the conversation are students in their early stages so they can know what they need to do while still in school to increase their competitiveness. We also target those early in their academic careers who are in the process of*

*obtaining retention and tenure. People who hold academic positions are most welcome in the conversation as resources and potential mentors.*

**Key words: Academic job, Interview, Negotiation, Retention**

## **Introduction**

Searching for an academic positions starts way before that hood is placed on your head and some university president/ chancellor gives you the authority to go out and serve. Indeed, it should start the minute you step into your Ph.D. program by being very deliberate with the choices you make to maximize your chances of getting your first academic position. To start, you will need to understand what the job you will be seeking entails so that you can begin to painstakingly develop and tailor your resume. The most important job of a professor is to teach undergraduate and graduate students. The expectation is that you will have the ability to teach well and ensure a high level of satisfaction no matter how dull your subject is. You will be rated by students for every course you teach and those ratings are valued when your end of year evaluation is done by your department chair. Professors are expected to conduct research and disseminate their findings at conferences and through publications. Professors who work with students in their research are valued more especially if they are able to obtain grants that support students. Institutions value those who bring more dollars through grants because those grants increase the overall revenue stream of the university as well as increase the stature of the institution. Thirdly, professors are expected to serve in committees. You will be expected to attend all your department committees and participate actively in the decisions that are made. Departments usually have sub committees and you can choose to be in any of those sub-committees

depending on where you feel your expertise will be utilized. In short, the work of the professor is to teach, research and serve.

### **Initial Application**

Now that you have scoured through the job bulletin boards and found that perfect job, it is time to develop that winning dossier. Typically, the job advertisement will clearly state the required credentials for the position which include that a candidate is required to have a Ph.D. and ABD might be considered. In addition, the candidate must show evidence of teaching, research and service, in addition to being an expert in the field in which they are seeking employment.

Depending on your field or the prestige of the institution where you are applying, one position will typically attract 50-100 applicants. In some fields, even 100+. All the applicants have at least the basic credentials of a Ph.D. To gain a competitive edge, you must distinguish your application from the others as follows:

- a) **Cover letter:** Make your cover letter brief and concise. Your first paragraph should identify the position you are applying for as some committees especially in small institutions could be working for multiple search committees. The second paragraph should be the key highlights of your qualification for this position. The third paragraph is another statement of how qualified you are for this position and how this institution is the perfect place for your career growth.
- b) **Curriculum Vitae:** The search committee is interested in your education background starting with institution that has granted you the Ph.D. Include your teaching experience if you are a teaching assistant (TA) or research assistant (RA). Include all your

publications if you have some. Include your conference presentations, any invited talks, seminars and workshops you may have conducted. Document clearly the service you have provided.

- c) **References:** Most job advertisements will require you to provide a list of referees and their contact information. Make sure to approach professors who know you well because you actively participated in the class they taught and you showed a lot of initiative in your assignments. Professors have written ten of hundreds of these letters so they know what needs to be done to secure a job. Give them advance notice that they will be receiving a digital request from the institution and provide them with a copy of your CV and cover letter.
- d) **Teaching Philosophy/ Research Statement:** Some job advertisements will explicitly ask for a teaching philosophy or some statement of your teaching and research goals. This again should be short and concise.
- e) **Transcripts:** Some job advertisements will require you to upload your transcripts right from undergraduate. At this point, you will just upload the unofficial transcripts. Since official transcripts can only be accepted from the granting institution and cost money, you will be asked to supply those when you become a finalist for the position or you are about to be offered the position.
- f) **Writing sample:** Some job adverts will ask you to provide a writing sample. If you are already published, this is the place to submit what has already been published in a peer reviewed journal.

## **Job Interview**

In a job interview, keep in mind what Brosy, Bangerter and Mayor (2016) points out as the main purposes of it. They say it is about (a) information exchange and (b) self-presentation. As part of the exchange of information, you will respond to questions targeting your qualification, mastery of subject matter, specialization, teaching experience, research work, conference presentations, publications, service, community work, collegiality, professional associations, your vision for future work or growth and development. Regarding self-presentation, communication is key. Communicate clearly given this is a formal conversation regardless of whether it is on the phone or face-to-face.

Preparedness for a job interview is needed and can be done in several ways. Study the University's or the institution's website, their mission statement and expectations. Research about requirements and issues highlighted in this job advertisement by considering your own achievement as well as. You can also prepare by reflecting and digging up your personal involvements aligned with the requirements, in advance.

Clement (2008) shares two strategies with examples to use in responding to a question. These are PAR, which is an acronym for *problem*, then *action* and *result* and STAR for Situation-Task-Action-Result. Thus, in answering questions posed, exemplify using an experience you had by pointing out the role you played in this scenario and the outcome of your actions. The PAR and STAR strategies work for both telephone interview as well as onsite interview.

### *Telephone interview*

In most cases the top 5 to 7 job seekers are contacted for over a phone interview. This is a screening process with the goal of ranking this small group and picking out the top three candidates for the next step of the job search. If you are picked, the Search Chair will email an

itinerary of possible dates and times for a telephone interview. You are given a list of times when the committee members are available to hold this meeting. Choose an option when you can have a quiet place with no noise interruptions in the background. Be prepared by going over the requirements in the job advertisement, the application letter you mailed, the institution and the department website, a list of questions you may have regarding this job position.

### *Onsite interview*

This is your chance to shine as well as weigh the institution if it is a good match for you. Once you negotiate a date to visit, you will have an interview itinerary for about two days, sent to you before arrival. There is going to be several one-on-one, small group and large group face-to-face interviews that go on. You will meet with:

- Administrators e.g. the Chair, the Dean, the Provost and their administrative assistants
- Students, staff, faculty during your public presentation that is evaluated
- Teach a class of students
- Meet graduate students to discuss research
- Meet with the search committee
- Meet with persons or social groups of interest

### **Negotiating the Offer**

Once you have been on the campus visit, the next step will be a call from the Dean or the department chair making the job offer. In general, someone such as an administrative staff will call you to let you know that the Dean/Chair will be calling you to extend the offer. You should pick a time when you can speak without interruption. Remember that when the Dean/Chair calls

that you should be ready to negotiate. In general, many people fail to negotiate during the recruitment process since they fail to see the role of negotiation in a successful outcome for all concerned parties.

The first thing that you should consider is that the institution expects you to negotiate and everything is negotiable. A general rule of thumb is that administrators are very amenable to negotiating anything that is a one-time expense (such as a moving expense) but are not as amenable to negotiating recurring expenses such as (salary) but you should still negotiate.

### *Potential areas of negotiation*

- 1) **Salary:** Every institution expects you to negotiate. Typically, the person negotiating will have a salary range that they have been authorized to offer. Therefore, they might be willing to up the offer within this given range. When negotiating, it is typical to ask for a ten percent raise, and you should be aware that they will come back with something lower than ten percent. Regardless of the percentage increase that they offer, bear in mind that even a small raise will affect your overall pay, since future raises are usually based on the initial offer.
- 2) **Length of the contract:** You should find out the length of the contract which is typically 9 months paid over 12 months.
- 3) **Tenure versus non-tenure track position issues :** Is this a tenure track position? This is very important. If it is not tenure track, is there a process of converting the position to a tenure track position?
- 4) **Research:** You should ask questions pertaining to research support such as:
  - i. Availability of a Research Assistant or Teaching Assistant

ii. Research supplies and equipment such as laptops and software, purchase of datasets etc.

iii. Availability of internal research grants.

**5) Travel:** Is travel to scholarly meetings, research trips and pedagogical conferences supported?

**6) Teaching:** All of the following are potential negotiation points:

- a. Reduced teaching load for the first year
- b. How many preps (depends on the institution)
- c. You can negotiate to teach only one course or same prep for the academic year
- d. How many graduate/undergraduate courses will you be expected to teach?
- e. Ask about teaching of night classes and at off-campus sites (depending on your preference).
- f. Summer teaching opportunities and overloads

**7) Moving Expenses:** The University may pay for a second visit for you to find housing and will often reimburse your moving expenses as part of the relocation expenses.

**8) Summer Support:** Are there any summer teaching opportunities?

- a. Are there any summer research grants that you could apply for especially early in your career?

**9) Other Benefits:** Healthcare benefits

- a. Relocation help for spouse/significant others
- b. Tuition support for children and significant others
- c. Retirement benefits

**10) Service:** What are the advising expectations and how many advisees per faculty member?

- a. Can student advising be deferred for a year or two?
- b. What are the service expectations for junior faculty? Most universities try to protect junior faculty (especially tenure-track faculty) from service. However, when going up for tenure bear in mind that you will need to show some service to the department, college, university and/or community.

### *Get it in Writing*

Do not be in a hurry to sign the contract until all that you have negotiated is in writing. Return the signed contract in a timely manner. Do not forget to be gracious to the people that you turn down because you will meet them many times in your career.

### **Keeping Your Academic Job**

Most appointments in U.S institutions are either tenure-track or contractual instructor or lecturer positions. In either case, new faculty operate on a five to six year clock (depending on institution) during which they must convince their peers that they are effective in teaching, research and service (Roberts, 2008; Seldin and Miller, 2008). Most early career faculty commonly deal with the question, “how will I demonstrate my effectiveness as a faculty member to win the vote of each of my tenured colleagues, the department chair and the dean?”

Developing a professional portfolio is a good place to start (Roberts, 2008). A professional portfolio is a personalized collection of documents and materials which suggest the scope and

quality of a faculty member's performance in teaching, research and service (Dawson, 2008; Seldin, et al., 2010).

The teaching section of the portfolio can contain such things as a teaching philosophy - where the faculty member can define what good teaching means to them and what they seek to accomplish through teaching. Analysis and graphic presentation of data from teaching evaluations can also be included. It helps to document information collected from students, colleagues, department head, central administrators, and collaborators (Dawson, 2008). As Graham (2003) puts it, "save everything." Many international faculty are not native English speakers and as such, their teaching evaluations may raise questions regarding their communication skills. Such matters can be addressed in the teaching portfolio especially if you have taken deliberate measures to improve and you can show evidence for it. Your colleagues and also administrators will respect you and rate you favorably for such efforts. If available, participate in all professional development opportunities applicable to your area offered through the university. These can be technology related training, grant writing, distance learning, or other discipline-specific aspects.

Demonstrating research productivity is a straight forward process. While expectations vary from institution to institution, the conventional matrix for measuring scholarship is common knowledge – peer-reviewed publications, grants, conference presentations, research collaborations, and other creative activities. Service expectations for faculty include: service to the department, service to the college especially in large institutions, service to the university, service to the profession, and service to the local community. While there are no numbers to measure service, faculty are expected to demonstrate that they are engaged broadly beyond teaching and research activities.

It helps a great deal to be familiar with the formal review process in your university. This includes: expectations for tenure and promotion at all levels in the university, the timeline, and the appeal process as documented in the Faculty Handbook (Graham, 2003; Roberts, 2008). What no one ever tells early career faculty is the unwritten rules. What journal outlets do your colleagues despise, what committees matter in the university, what conferences do your colleagues think are not scholarly enough? Even though not spelled in the Faculty Handbook, these are important cues early career faculty must pay attention to (Dawson, 2008, Graham, 2003; Seldin and Miller, 2008).

One of the most underestimated aspects in winning the confidence of colleagues and administrators is building strong professional relationships. This is even more critical for foreign-born faculty who may be seen as outsiders. Stop by your colleagues' offices when they are available and chat over professional matters, talk to your department chair, dean, and others you may even not think matter like support staff. Your department head is perhaps your single most important resource in the tenure process. Maintaining a healthy relationship with your department head will pay dividends at the end. It is the relationships you build that will dominate conversations at the review table when you come up for tenure and promotion.

In a nutshell, keeping an academic job is a job in and of itself. It involves careful preparation, research, data collection, data preparation, organization, presentation, and dissemination. It is a purposive and intentional process through which a faculty member must use evidence-based documentation to demonstrate to their colleagues and administrators that they are worth keeping at the institution. Understanding both the written and unwritten rules can be a crucial piece in the puzzle. While not specified in the Faculty Handbook, relationships you build on and off campus can turn out to be your single biggest investment in keeping your

academic job. Foreign-born early career faculty must insure that the tenure and promotion clock is carefully coordinated with their immigration clock.

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