# Academic Job Search - The Hiring Process From The Other Side



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## Introduction

Once you have seen in it from the inside, any illusions that the academic job search is a wholly rational process designed to yield the best candidate for the position are burst asunder. This can be a good thing or a bad thing for your own chances, but you should not allow the results of your job search to dictate your sense of self-worth. Better candidates will do better on average than those with less to

offer; but as any statistician will tell you, averages tell you nothing about the specific dynamics of a single instance.

This section describes the job search process from the other side of the table, and is designed to give you some ability to view it through the eyes of those you are trying to entice. It is intended as a prelude to the specifics of compiling your placement file and the other steps you take towards getting a job which are covered in **The Academic Job Search** - Social Sciences & Humanities and Sciences & Engineering, as well as the other links in the **Academic Job Search** section.

Though it varies at the margins by discipline and institution, the life cycle of the typical hiring process for tenure-track jobs runs as follows. In the fall before the actual search, the department seeks formal authorization from the administration to hire at a given rank and usually in a particular sub-field. If successful, the department is given authorization early in the spring, and a job announcement is approved by the department and the administration before the end of the academic year. Tenure-track announcements begin to appear in the early fall, but continue to occur into the new year. Interviews at annual professional meetings may or may not be a pre-requisite for getting an on-campus interview depending on the timing of the meetings and the tradition within the field. On-campus interviews of 2-4 candidates generally occur after Christmas break and can stretch on through March. In recent years, it has become more popular for schools to complete the process and make offers before Christmas, but only a small minority are sufficiently well organized to pull it off. The job season does not end with the offer and acceptance of positions in early spring. Every year, a few people withdraw after accepting positions or new sources of funding are found. In addition, many departments don't turn their attention to visiting and other fixed-term appointments until

after they've finished with tenure-track searches.

## The Job Announcement

Your first exposure to your potential future employer is the job announcement. Most likely, it will appear to be very specific about what the department is looking for in terms of teaching fields, areas of research, and/or the level of experience expected. Don't be fooled. Don't assume that the job ad reflects either an unambiguous description of what "the department" knows it wants or a fixed set of criteria that will determine who will get hired.

Departments need formal authorization from the administration to launch a search, especially for tenure-track slots, and that approval is usually given in the spring before the search is set to begin. It is not unusual for meetings called to discuss the anticipated role of the new hire and the exact wording of the job announcement to be sidetracked by the press of final exams, end of the year minutiae, and the desire for faculty to head out for the summer. The default decision is often to simply put out an ad, and defer making contentious choices until the department reconvenes in the fall.

You will spend many hours staring at the job ads, especially the more attractive ones, trying to divine their true meaning and how to decode the hidden messages that will allow you to uncover exactly what they really want. Oftentimes, however, the published job description is more a reflection of expedient political compromises necessary to get it out the door or past the administration than an accurate description of what the department "really" wants. Sometimes the job announcement represents a strong consensus about how the new hire should fit within the department. Sometimes it is designed to placate the soon to be *emeritus* colleague who is still in the department when the job description is crafted in the spring, but will not have a vote or play an active role in the selection process the following fall.

Even small departments can be riven by factions, and the initial job description may be nothing more than the opening round of an ongoing debate/battle over what the department needs or what the administration thinks it needs.

In disciplines where the number of candidates from top programs can be overwhelming, there is the temptation to back away from jobs whose descriptions don't fit you like a glove. It's easy to assume that with so many top candidates they can find someone who matches the description exactly. The problem with this otherwise logical inference is that a department's desires are rarely either uniformly held or etched in stone.

Is there a chance that your letter will be pitched because you don't fit the ad's profile? - certainly. However, it is difficult if not impossible to know beforehand which departments are married to their ad and which have a much broader interpretation. Applying for jobs is *ohne zweifel* repetitious, time-consuming, and emotionally draining. However, good quality paper only costs $6.99 per hundred at Office Depot and computers and the **Letter Service Online** have greatly reduced the marginal cost of pumping out a couple extra applications for schools that interest you. The only positions you have no shot at are the ones for which you never apply. It's not your job to make theirs easier. For more information on how to find job announcements access **Academic Job Listings**.

## The Search Committee

You have sent your applications off into the great void where it lands amidst a great pile of similar creatures. Here it sits until, at some point after the submission deadline, the committee rouses itself and sets to work.

The first hurdle you must surmount is the search committee. A search committee typically consists of

four to six members who have been given the task of winnowing the pile down to a more manageable number, usually between ten and twenty. The files of those who make this short list are presented to the whole department which then decides who will be invited for an on-campus interview. Most of the members will be drawn from the targeted sub-field, but usually not all. For a small department, members may be appointed from outside the discipline (e.g., a Japanese historian for a Japanese literature search). Although hiring decisions are among the most consequential activities a faculty member must undertake, everyone always feels overburdened and they are rarely a priority or, more accurately, rarely an equal priority for all members of the search committee.

For the search committee, the process begins with anywhere from three to ten boxes of files consisting of you and the other 99 to 299 fools who had the temerity to apply for your job. At this stage of the game, few are looking for attractive candidates. Rather the focus is on reducing the stack to a more manageable size as quickly and easily as possible. The primary criteria at this point are whether a candidate's fields match their interpretation of the job description (see above) and the prestige of their graduate pedigree (institution and dissertation committee members). Should someone start to sneeze as they pick up your file (my mistake, someone else's file), or should the phone ring, that poor soul may be history, at least as far as one committee member is concerned.

However, because of your keen foresight in selecting UC Berkeley, you are more than likely to surmount this first hurdle unless the committee member is unable to make a plausible connection between your letter/vitae, and their interpretation of the department's needs. For more information on how to construct an effective vitae, access the **CV** section.

## Conference Interviews

The timing of this winnowing varies widely depending on the calendar of institutional/departmental demands and the role played by interviews at national scholarly association meetings. In fields where annual meetings are held in the summer or early fall (before completed placement files have been vetted), interviews can provide an excellent opportunity to gain experience and possibly impress the department but are usually not a critical screening tool. For disciplines with meetings in the late fall and winter, such as the MLA, the conference interview is an integral part of the search process and a virtual pre-requisite for an on-campus interview.

The relative importance and the format of conference interviews vary so widely that there is little that can be written that is of broad utility. Don't believe all the horror stories you've heard. Some may enjoy the prospect of making a grad student squirm, but most do not. At this point in the process, most interviewers are looking more at how you handle yourself than for any specific substantive expertise. Generally, they are looking for answers to the following types of questions:

- Are you more than a narrow specialist; can you place your work within the broader, theoretical trends of your field?
- Can you articulate a teaching philosophy that demonstrates some familiarity with the pedagogical problems that arise in a given college/university setting?
- Are you able to defend your research in a way that demonstrates your readiness to make the transition from graduate student to professional?

Keep in mind, the people who interview you may not be among the more influential in the department, but are simply those who were going to the meetings anyway or wanted an excuse to go. Don't stress

over an awkward sentence, or an answer that you could have framed in a more effective manner. Faculty who are interviewing dozens of candidates over a very short time frame are very unlikely to remember more than a general impression of your performance. Don't assume that the pained expression on your interviewer's face represents his/her assessment of the theoretical approach you just described; more than likely it's just back pain or an undigested tamale.

Now the more serious winnowing begins, and, over a series of meetings, the search committee has to create a short-list of candidates to present to the full department. As they read through the remaining dossiers, material is read more fully and more carefully, but it is still oriented around reasons to discard as well as reasons to keep you in the pool. For more information on how to write effective cover letters and other supporting materials, access the **Cover Letter** and **Teaching Portfolio** links.

Working for the most part alone, committee members compile a list of perhaps ten favored candidates. How do they make their choices? By this point, virtually all of the active candidates are from similarly strong programs. Having to read through cover letter after cover letter is like grading a stack of single-question essay exams (anything you can do to make yourself stand out in a positive, if possibly unconventional, way should be seriously considered).

Another dynamic at work is fear. Will this person actually complete the work necessary to be a viable candidate for tenure? Will he/she make us (the department) look foolish in the eyes of the administration down the road? Most candidates at this point represent strong potential, but little in the way of actual performance (publications, independent teaching, the ability to sustain an active research agenda beyond the dissertation). Hiring on the basis of potential increases the risk that the person will be

unable to do the job or, even worse, will be able to teach, become popular with students, but not meet the other requirements for tenure (I think we can all figure out what that means). A nasty or even merely problematic tenure case can leave wounds that scar a department for years. Tenure review may seem a lifetime away to you, but committee members may well look at candidates from the perspective of whether they raise potential problems especially based on past experience (e.g., the popular ABD who never finished). When you get to the interview stage, part of your job is to ferret out any idiosyncratic issues or concerns and find a way to address them.

Letters play a major role in distinguishing between candidates with equally interesting research topics and equally distinguished academic pedigrees. To read that a candidate's chair, one of the leading scholars in the field, considers him/her to be one of the top three graduate students they have seen in their fifteen years at Berkeley or is the strongest young scholar on German politics on the market today, makes an impression. Remember, the search committee is for the most part composed of people who are only occasional visitors to your particular domain. Is your research cutting-edge or merely idiosyncratic? How are they to make sense of the relevance and importance of your scholarship? They want to be re-assured. They rely on letters to explain how someone's seemingly interesting work fits within the specialty, and is viewed by other, more established scholars who are in a better position than they to assess its value. This issue is more germane for smaller departments and institutions. Nonetheless, it is easy to forget how narrow specialties are today, and how difficult it is to keep up with trends even in closely related sub-fields.

A letter that demonstrates an intimate familiarity with the student's work also increases the credibility of the recommender, and their ability to alleviate some

of the search committee's concerns. Because members of your committee are presumed to have a maternal/paternal interest in your career, a letter from a recognized scholar in your field from outside your institution carries a lot of weight and can be very beneficial. For more information on how to obtain the strongest possible letters, check out the **Letters of Recommendation** section.

## The On-Campus Interview

The polls have closed and the returns are in. The search committee has completed its task. It has debated, voted, and compiled a rank-ordered list of the top eight to ten candidates. Interested members of the department will have a week or two to look at these files before they convene as a whole (often more than once), and decide whom to invite for an on-campus interview. By this time committee members usually have preferred candidates and will lobby on their behalf, but they still have only one vote. Politics may intervene as individuals seek to promote or exclude candidates who they believe will strengthen or threaten their position within the department.

At this point, department members may raise new issues that differ from the criteria used by the search committee. In addition, the administration and/or the affirmative action officer often must vet the files of the candidates selected for interviews. Questions about whether certain candidates are likely to finish their dissertation on time will arise, and calls may be made to references seeking to clarify this and other issues. Some colleges and universities may conduct phone interviews or solicit additional information before making their final decisions.

By this time, winter has come, the bloom is off the rose, and most of the department feels like the search has been going on forever. Time must be found amidst busy schedules for a series of dog-and-pony shows (that's you) most of which include

pretty dreadful presentations. At this point in the process, most members are sick of the arguments, debates, and files. They want someone to come in, grab the job by the throat, and make their decision easy if not automatic.

The on-campus visit typically lasts one-two days. The days begin early, usually with a breakfast meeting, and then a series of appointments with members of the department and faculty in related fields. Some will be very interested in you and what you may to offer as a colleague. Others are merely going through the motions, but with a little polite prompting will be happy to talk about what really interests them - their own work, the internal politics of the place, or why the faculty is annoyed with the administration at this particular moment (the faculty is always annoyed with the administration).

At institutions that are not among the research elite, faculty may be somewhat intimidated by your credentials. Having made it to the interview stage and coming from Berkeley, your scholarly ability is no longer a major issue. A more important part of your task is to demonstrate that you would be an interesting and congenial colleague, and a productive, functioning member of the department and campus community.

Other meetings include a stop at human resources where you will learn all about the accoutrements of the grown-up world like dental and pension plans that have heretofore been denied you; a session with a student committee or two; the library; and finally, usually at about 4:00pm (when the collective adrenaline and caffeine jolts have begun to subside), the dreaded job talk.

Dreaded by you because, after all, only your entire professional future and perhaps sole opportunity to actually acquire those grown-up goodies hangs in the balance. Dreaded by them because, after all,

they've sat through reams of them - most of which were perfectly dreadful. Your audience would be thrilled to hear a brilliant performance. They will be more than happy with a clear, well-structured presentation that is engaging, credible, and comprehensible. If you are at a school that emphasizes teaching undergraduates, they will ask themselves, can we put this person in front of our students without having to worry?

Because of the pivotal role played by the Job Talk, the Career Center offers a workshop titled ***Nailing the Job Talk or Erudition Ain't Enough*** periodically throughout the year. Consult the **PhD Workshops** section for this semester's times and locations.

If you're one of the first candidates through, some real, live people may actually attend. Some faculty will have told you earlier in the day that unfortunately some other responsibility precludes their attendance (they still get a vote though of course). Depending on where your visit falls in the semester, the week, the basketball season, you may find yourself giving the most important talk of your life or teaching a simulated class in front of four people. It doesn't matter, and you forge successfully ahead.

You can now relax and take a couple of deep breaths. The day is not yet over, not by a long shot, but you are now the object rather than the subject. It is time to meet the dean. The dean of the faculty (or some other prestigious-laden administrative title) works for the president or chancellor and has administrative oversight over the faculty hiring and promotion process. After getting the faculty perspective all day on the state of the department and college/university as a whole, this is the administration's chance to influence your perspective on the institution and your possible future role in it.

This meeting is rarely as probing or combative as might have been the case earlier in the day (unless

the dean comes from your field). It is more along the lines of seduction or the recruitment of a local asset by the CIA. You will be told how great you are. How coming from such a prestigious university, you and other junior faculty like you are the future of the institution. This praise may be paired with some references, thinly veiled or not at all, to the "deadwood" nature of some of your potential senior colleagues. They will remind you of the high standards they have put in place for tenure while expressing confidence that you, if hired, will exceed all expectations and bring greater glory to the institution and the administration with the wisdom to have hired you. Since the department chair, and not the dean, will be the one to call you if they choose to hire someone else, she/he has no reason to be anything but supremely positive.

Your meeting with the dean is usually the last formal event of the day, but you still have dinner with potential colleagues. The atmosphere for dinner is usually more casual, and, especially if largely made up of junior faculty, offers you the opportunity to ask questions and gain information that you can put to good use in a thank you letter (i.e., address an apparent concern or need that you were not previously aware of) or in subsequent negotiations.

## The Decision

Differences on paper now pale before actual performance. Most faculty are looking for someone who will act professional, handle their teaching responsibilities, and not make them look foolish, down the line, in the eyes of the administration and other departments. Most candidates disappoint, especially when it comes to their formal presentation (which is usually perceived as too obtuse and boring), and the department is left to project which of the candidates has the most potential and/or will mature the quickest. Even at this stage it often comes down to a process of elimination. Mind you, most of the department could never stand up to the

scrutiny and standards that they've applied to you, but that thought rarely crosses their mind.

However, actual qualifications are not always the sole or even the primary factors that determine the outcome. Factionalism can split departments such that the only acceptable candidate is the one found to be least objectionable to all. In a culture that prizes civility and the appearance of conflict avoidance above almost anything else, bullies can exert a disproportionate influence over colleagues who prefer appeasement over confrontation.

Even in the absence of conflict, covert or otherwise, other factors can be decisive. The chancellor may have been bugging the department for years to contribute a course to the interdisciplinary program of the month or a bored, associate professor may push to hire a candidate who will finally enable him/her to teach film or Edwardian hermeneutics. The best way to avoid having peripheral issues take over at this final, decisive stage is to nail the job talk.

Finally a consensus has been reached, and a choice made. Oh happy days - no more files, no more meetings. The department forwards its decision to the administration and eagerly awaits permission to extend an offer. Now that they have chosen you, you are now one of them. They will defend you to the death, and any slight on you is an attack on their honor, their competence, and the hallowed principle of departmental autonomy. They have been magically transformed from your inquisitors (think Spanish) to your advocates.

## Negotiating the Offer

In their minds, perceived flaws are now forgotten or forgiven and a more perfect union has been formed. The last thing they want is for you to spurn them at the altar. Not simply because your rejection of them would imply that they are not as good or desirable

as they'd like to think ("the horror, the horror"), but also because it would require them to once again labor towards a new consensus. However, they are now largely relegated to the sidelines. Once an offer is tendered, power is usually transferred to the department chair or a dean who conducts the negotiations.

An offer in hand also shifts your power position considerably. Now's the time to call any schools that have left you hanging but which you prefer over the bird in the hand. Word that others find you so appealing can lead others to wonder what they could have possibly missed in your apparently impressive portfolio.

While you decide (you are usually given up to two weeks), you may receive numerous phone calls from your potential future colleagues extolling the virtues of their department and institution, assuring you that you were their first choice all along, and commiserating about the travails of being on the market. Aside from the psychic benefits, such calls offer the opportunity to find out what aspects of the offer are and are not readily negotiable. This may include goodies that you are not even aware of. You will never have more leverage than you do at this moment. Once you accept, you become just another low-on-the-totem-pole, junior faculty member swimming upstream towards tenure. Now is not the time to be overly shy.

## Epilogue

The job season does not end, as most believe, in early spring. New sources of funding are found, people decide to retire or go on leave, and chairs have to find a replacement quickly or see they're summer plans put on hold. Keep checking the job newsletter, the **Chronicle (http://Chronicle.com/jobs)** , and with your placement advisor and department chair.

Forewarned is forearmed. As you gear up for the job search, check out the pertinent **Academic Job Search** links and think about attending the many **workshops** scheduled each semester for PhDs on the academic job market. These workshops specifically discuss the elements of the process over which you do have some control and show you how to maximize your opportunities. If you're interested in learning more about your options outside academia, go to the **Careers Beyond the Academy** section for the many resources the Career Center has to offer you in this very different realm.

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