**The Job Market: Where Should You Apply?**



By Manya Whitaker September 11, 2017

In my three years on the tenure track, I’ve already served on five faculty search committees and two for staff positions (across four divisions and four departments). That’s life at a small college. If I’ve learned anything from being on this side of the hiring table, it’s that applicants need to think beyond the position when deciding where to apply.

We all know the faculty job market isn’t pretty. And plenty of Ph.D.s don’t feel as if they have any choice in pursuing teaching positions: They go where the job is. But as a new hiring season gets underway in academe, I will take a somewhat contrarian position here and urge Ph.D.s to be as choosy as they can in the interest of their own professional longevity.

**Can you build a life there?** Before you accept a position, I strongly encourage you to consider whether it aligns with your personal life. Most notably: Is the job located in a place you actually want to live? The answer to that question is complex, and should consider a wide variety of factors — cost of living, proximity to friends and family, access to desirable nonwork-related activities, and affordability of local housing. For single people, the viability of the dating scene is a serious consideration, just as the quality of the school system should be of supreme importance to applicants with children.

Racial and ethnic minority applicants have a few extra considerations when determining if a city is a good fit. Will you be "the only" everywhere you go? Can you get your hair done or find haircare products without driving for an hour? Are there churches or faith-based organizations at which you could become a member? How accessible are cooking ingredients that fit your cultural needs?

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While those may seem like minor concerns compared with unemployment, if you aren’t happy outside of work, you will be miserable at work. What’s more, search committees *do* consider the likelihood of a new hire being a good fit for the city, not just the institution. If committee members think you won’t be happy in a rural area because you’ve only ever lived in vibrant cities, they are disinclined to risk hiring someone who may leave within two to three years. So if you are applying to positions in new geographical areas, make it clear in your cover letter why the position and the location are a good fit.

**Next, think about the institution.** Once you’re certain you can make a life for yourself that extends beyond the campus, focus your attention on the job itself. Institutional policies and practices dictate the parameters of any position. While it’s tempting to jump right to compensation, you should first look at the overall mission of the institution. It is essential that you do some research — before you apply — on the college’s student population, academic calendar, pedagogical models (does it have online classes?), campus centers, community partners, and pretty much anything else you can find out about the place.

You’d be surprised how many people apply for jobs at faith-based colleges and yet never mention religion in their application package. I’ve read cover letters that passionately express how much the applicant loves working with graduate students … which is great except that my institution is undergraduate only. If you don’t take the time to do a little research and put together a thoughtful and relevant application, the search-committee members have little incentive to use their time to review your file.

**Money matters.** If the institutional mission aligns with your professional priorities, now you can review salary and benefits. Find out the schedule and average amount of salary raises (has the college had a recent salary freeze?). Compare the figures with salaries at peer institutions to make sure your potential employer is offering a competitive compensation package.

Do a little online sleuthing about basic benefits at the college, such as retirement contributions (does the college contribute toward your retirement, and if so, does it match or put more than that in?) and healthcare (does it offer medical, dental, and vision?). Check the extent of the coverage to ensure that civil unions, domestic partnerships, and adoptions are included. Also look for "bonus" benefits such as life insurance, mental-health support, legal assistance, continuing-education reimbursement, tuition discounts for children, and even free memberships at local museums and gyms. Finally, check its parental and family medical leave policies.

In this hypercompetitive job market you may not turn down a tenure-track offer just because of weak benefits, but you should at least give some thought to what you can expect.

Beyond that, you also want to know if the institution supports its faculty and staff through continued professional development. That could look like national memberships in professional organizations, established mentoring programs, internal grant opportunities, a grants office, a well-staffed [institutional review board](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Does-This-Have-to-Go/237476), and workshops on writing, teaching, and research. More specifically related to the position, ask about tenure-and-promotion processes, sabbatical schedules, course-release time, summer teaching opportunities, research support, lab space, and stipends for conference attendance.

Some of those things can be negotiated if and when you get an offer, but it is wise to do research ahead of time to ascertain if there is even room for negotiation. That said, search committees keep an eye out for "affordable" applicants who won’t demand much in the way of lab space, research assistants, teaching assistants, expensive lab equipment, and funds for three annual conferences. Be aware of your professional needs so that you don’t mistakenly apply to an institution that simply cannot afford you.

**Finally, think about the position.** As you study a job ad, the most important thing to ask yourself is: Am I qualified for the position as advertised? Search committees receive hundreds of applicants for a single position, so they are looking for reasons to eliminate candidates. The first, and easiest way to get the numbers down is to check an applicant’s CV for the required degrees in the specified field. If the ad requires a Ph.D., a master’s won’t do. If the position requires expertise in 19th-century American history, the 18th century doesn’t qualify. The job should sound like it was written for some realistic version of you — or else it is probably a waste of your time to apply.

If you meet the broad requirements, look at the specifics of the position. What courses will you be expected to teach? What is the teaching load? Will you have undergraduate and graduate students? How much advising is expected?

The job you accept is the job you will be expected to do. Do not think that once you arrive you will easily be able to switch departments, change courses, or get out of being on committees. Before you apply, make sure the job that is being advertised is the one you want (and are able) to do. One or two factors you don’t quite like shouldn’t dissuade you from applying — no job is perfect. Just be realistic about the amount of energy it will take to get established in a new place and learn how to do a new job.

Try to keep everything in perspective. Everyone wants the best job they can get, but in this market, that’s not always possible. Academic job applications take a lot of time, and despite what some people say, it is not a numbers game. Your chances of getting a job are not necessarily higher if you are applying for dozens of jobs that aren’t a good fit for you. So much of the market is dictated by chance. The ebbs and flows of disciplinary needs mean that one year, there could be eight positions for which you are perfectly qualified, and the next year, there is only one.

My advice for candidates: Rank what you need in a job and stick to that ranking when searching. If location is most important to you, limit your search to cities in which you’d like to live — but accept that you will limit your options by that decision. If a good salary is what matters most, make sure you’re looking at private institutions with large endowments. If a healthy work-life balance makes your soul sing, a less-competitive college may be a good fit.

When in doubt about a position, call and ask the questions you need answered to make an informed decision. I promise you that search committees would rather answer dozens of questions ahead of time than review hundreds of applications that miss the mark.

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