

## **The View from the Hiring Side: What Academic Job Applicants Need to Know about the Faculty Search Process**

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My qualifications are, first, that I was once a candidate for an academic position just like you. As a faculty member, I have been a faculty search committee member at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center.

As department chair, I have headed faculty searches, and now serve as the head of the Dean of Ed search at Hunter College. I was also Acting Associate Provost at Hunter for two years, and saw faculty searches in all the disciplines from the senior administrative side.

The fact is, I enjoy searching immensely, though I know it to be difficult for the department and institution as well as hard on the candidate. The average search takes seven months, and takes the time of the dean, the chair, the search committee and the department or program. National searches cost many thousands of dollars, sometimes tens of thousands (one estimate has the annual cost of a single search roughly equivalent to one year's salary for an assistant professor), and result in hires that can cost millions, especially in the sciences. But, if searches are done well and are effective, they are also very rewarding all around. Searches are opportunities to revisit and redefine the department's goals. In fact, department goals may change every time you hire new faculty.

From the perspective of the department chair, no decision is as important as the selection of the department's faculty. Whom you hire has more to do with the future development of your department than anything else. Thus, hires are more often than not the basis for the evaluation of the chair, and the legacy that a chair leaves an institution. Those of us who are chairs feel this keenly.

Furthermore, most people hired in searches stay at the institution for decades to come. You are hiring people who will be your colleagues for most of your professional life.

We all want to believe that a process so important and costly is straightforward, and that there are generally agreed upon answers to the excellent questions you have raised. But things are not so simple. People disagree on virtually all the points I will raise. Different disciplines and departments and institutions have different norms and values. The composition and functioning of the search committee matters a great deal. Sometimes they work very hard and thoroughly vet the candidates; sometimes they are lazy and do

not even read the candidates' writing samples. Search committee members may differ among themselves about what they value, the importance they place on various criteria, and the direction that they would like the department to take. We all value quality and think we can detect it. But if there is one thing rarer than ability, it is the ability to detect ability. Faculty search committees have their jobs cut out for them. And, as a faculty aspirant, so do you. Let's begin.

## The Job Ad

You responded to a job ad.

A good ad sets the candidate qualifications and responsibilities of the position. These are the selection criteria, and gives you a sense of how you stack up. Ideally, there needs to be a good fit between the department needs and your abilities.

In fact, job ads are often maddeningly vague, political statements designed to get by the dean or satisfy a curmudgeon, and they possibly irrelevant, but this is what you have to work with. A good committee often engages in retrospective meaning making, wherein the committee defines, after the fact, the criteria on which to base the selection of candidates to the next round.

- a) *qualifications* (type of degree, post-doctoral experience, area of specialization)
- b) *responsibilities* (supervising doctoral dissertations; serving as undergraduate advisor) of the position.

*Every ad calls for*

Cover letter  
Curriculum Vitae  
Names of at least three references

*Most ads call for*

Research and teaching statements  
Writing samples  
Letters of recommendation

*Some ads call for*

Teaching Dossiers  
Graduate Transcripts

In these consumer-oriented, increasingly corporate-influenced times in higher education, colleges and universities of all stripes are seeking to improve their academic profiles. Many research universities are self-consciously trying to improve their teaching. Many comprehensive, liberal arts and community colleges these days are striving to translate a

strong regional presence into national recognition and respect. All now routinely ask for research and teaching qualifications, even if their reputations seem to rest squarely on one or the other.

A serious applicant pays great attention to the ad and tries to be responsive to its statements of qualifications and responsibilities in the cover letter, research and teaching statements, and in giving instructions to recommenders. An applicant who had studied the department and knows something about its identity, needs, and strengths beyond what is said in the ad has a distinct advantage.

### The Search Process

Once you submit an application, many search committees will make a first pass through the applications.. I believe that every applicant deserves a discussion, however brief, though committees vary on this dimension. To narrow the list of candidates, the committee may look to disqualifying characteristics, and may devise elimination codes. Many have three basic categories: \Yes/No/Maybe

You don't want to be an easy no for the search committee. People eliminated off the bat are often those who do not have completed applications by the due date, or do not respond to requests for additional information. They may lack the quality of experience (say, postdoctoral), or specialization that was identified. In a research 1 university, you may be eliminated because you have no publications and/or no record of funding whatsoever. In a small liberal arts college, you may not have the teaching experience, etc. You may too closely resemble a current faculty member so that you are not seen as adding value and breadth, or you may be so far afield that they do not see you as fitting in with their mission and identity.

If you don't have the requisite qualifications and experience, but you are still interested in the position, you should at least question whether you should still apply. Call the chair (some insider information is wrong, but the chair of the search should know good information). If you do apply, deal with your lack of qualifications or experience head on—do not assume that the search committee will not notice that you don't fit the qualifications.

Maybes are truly a mixed bag. There may be as many as 15. Some people call this the long "short list." These folks provoke most of the scrutiny and discussion, and might be asked for further information or materials, and might be phone interviewed. Letters of recommendation are often critical with this group—you look to distinguish true raves from perfunctory praise. Sometimes referees are called at this stage. Concerns for a diverse pool with respect to race, gender, geographic location and other characteristics may affect the size and composition of this group.

*If you make the long "short list"*

Request for more information/materials

Phone screens (of the candidate or a refereee)

Off campus interviews (sometimes at a convention or conference)

You get a sense of interest level, motives and oral communication skills from these telephone interviews.

*If you make the short list (3-5)*

Campus Interviews

Job Talks

Everyone wants to know what are the most important criteria. That's simple. Before the interview, it's the cv, and during the interview/job talk phase it's the interview/job talk. With other criteria, it depends very much on the institution, discipline, department, and vagaries of the particular search committees, and search processes.

### The Cover Letter

There is real disagreement about the importance of the cover letter. These are *de riguer* in certain disciplines like English, where they can run to seven single spaced pages, and practically unknown in others, like philosophy, where the cover letter reads: Here's my application, sincerely." They are of increasing importance generally, however, certainly in psychology. And the bar for cover letters is higher than ever before.

*I suggest that you treat cover letters as opportunities.*

Your vita is all about your past; the cover letter is where you get to talk about your future, the kind of research you will want to pursue, how you can involve students in your research, what opportunities for research collaboration and teaching and mentor that you see as being available to you at the institution. How you talk about your research and teaching is illuminating. It gives a sense of the type of scholar and colleague you will be in the years to come.

Obviously, one puts in the cover letter the features that one thinks will stand one in best stead with a prospective employer.

I suggest that you tailor each cover letter for the institution to which you will apply. Tailoring applications, especially cover letters, is the advice you get from everyone, but this is easier said than done. Many departments and ads are shockingly uncommunicative about their needs and interests, their vision for their future development and educational mission. Advertisements are spare, standardized, uninformative. Websites often give no hint as to future development, department culture, etc.

You cannot become in a cover letter what you have not become in 6 years in graduate school. You cannot be in your cover letter what you are not in the vita that accompanies it. It is self-defeating to pretend otherwise. Your task is to present your scholarly identities in, in the words of Bennett and Lindsay in the Chronicle (1/2/05) "in such an

attractive way that some department will open the envelop and see, not just your past accomplishments, but its own promising future.”

But to repeat: *I suggest that you treat cover letters as opportunities.*

Use it to highlight important things about you—telling points about your abilities and experiences— that are relevant to the current position. Use it to convey your knowledge and excitement about your program of research, and your sense of its significance—theoretically, methodologically, and clinically/socially—in the larger discipline. Using the job ad and other info you can glean from websites, catalogues, and informants, explain briefly in the cover letter why your teaching and research experience and aspirations are a good fit for the institution and the department.

The cover letter is a chance to explain why the fact that you do not have the relevant qualifications or experiences should not be held against you. You may have the right degree but the wrong area of specialization or vice versa. If there is a gap in your vita—two years not accounted for, the cover letter can explain this, and should. Do not assume that the committee will not notice your weaknesses. Deal with the difficulties raised by your candidacy early on. If there are other gaps, shortcomings, irregularities, the cover letter can provide some context for interpreting this.

The cover letter provides an opportunity to showcase your writing skills, professional socialization and savvy, your vision and passion for your field, unusual if relevant experiences.

Science and engineering departments tend to be conservative. Black print in standard font choice and size (12 points) are right. A paper application is still expected.

The cover letter is an opportunity, but it has its minefields.

Many are generic and nonresponsive to the ad or the department’s needs.

Do not simply restate your vita in narrative form, or attempt to make too much of the fact that you perused the website.

Some are full of errors—simple typographical errors, but they accumulate to give a shockingly negative portrait of the writer. Some contain more serious errors in the name of the search committee or department members, the name of the institution, etc.

Some are incoherent or amateurish. Others can reveal attitudes and values that are not consonant with the institution. These are bad news.

### Curriculum Vita

No one doubts the importance of the vita. This is the most important single piece, and of this piece, publications are the most important component. Everything you do in graduate

school and as a postdoc should have as its goal developing the vita. Academics live for them. Like it or not, *You are your vita*. writes Charles Lord of *The Compleat Academic*. *We tell new graduate students to start on their professional vitas immediately—put stuff on the computer immediately, and once you have it going, reread it and update it regularly.*

You may think that vitas are straightforward. They are not. There are many questions:

What do you list?

How many categories should there be?

In what order should things go?

How often should you update?

How many vitas should you have?

My advice: A picture is worth a thousand words: Ask to see the vitas of people in your area whom you respect—at all levels, including advanced grad students, post-docs, asst. professors, advisers who have achieved status or position that you aspire to. Think of these cv as a guide for self-promotion. Look at the choices they make and use them as reference points.

What suggestions do these cvs have for you? Are there particular professional activities that you should be engaging in, like organizing conference panels or running for an elected position in your professional society? Are there agencies or organizations that you should be seeking grant money from? What concrete ideas for your own self-promotion can you gather from comparing your cv to your colleagues' cvs?

Personal information:

Affiliation, address, contact information

Professional experiences (positions held).

Some people put birthdate; others do not. People often want to know your age, but you do not have to indulge them. But you do have to provide other dates, and many people do not!

Do not put a lot of other personal info that used to be common: spouse, children and their birthdays, SSN, etc.

Put your educational and occupational history together in a complete a way that does not leave gaps. Include dates. If you worked in industry for four years, list your work experience along with other experiences in chronological order. Do not let the reader guess as to what you were doing during down times. They will assume the worst—were those the drug rehab years?

Many people list their dissertation title and adviser right on the front page, some with defense date.

Honors and Awards often come next. Be selective here. Honorable mention for NSF Fellowship is probably ok when right out of grad school, not ok for full professor.

Organizations and Societies to which you belong is an important category. This is revealing. Nice to have a mix of general and specialized societies—this provides information about your professional identity and commitments, suggests that you are well-trained and socialized into the profession, and, because society membership often implies journal subscriptions, that you keep up.

Editorial Activity. Obviously, you list journals for which you are editor, associate editor, or consulting editor (which means that your name is listed on the editorial board). For junior scholars, it is fine to list journals and book publishers for which you are occasional or ad hoc reviewer.

Other professional activity:

Have you organized symposia? Did you organize this event? List it. Have you served on committees as graduate students, committees that accomplished things? List your accomplishments. If you have a lot of these, you might organize according to national, university, department/program.

Grants and Contracts:

Have you achieved external or internal funding for your research? List the names of grants/contracts, your role (PI/coPI/consultant). List the amount (total costs). If your part of a huge grant is small, indicate what part of the effort is yours.

Teaching Interests and Courses Taught:

List the titles of courses you feel qualified to teach and note the courses you have actually taught.

Research Interests

Some people list their research interests in either bulleted or short narrative form—3 or 4 well-chosen sentences.

Patents

Publications is the most important part!!! If this section stays blank, you will not even be considered at some colleges and universities no matter what else you have going for you. This is your scholarly activity—books, chapters, refereed journal articles, non-refereed journal articles, invited articles, book reviews, articles in magazines or newsletters and other minor pieces (technical reports for granting agencies).

Seems to be straightforward, but is not. How you list these depends in part on what you have to highlight. If you have several publications, including RJA (the coin of the realm, the motherlode of academic publishing), you may want to use subcategories to highlight this, if you have one publication, the categories seem silly. Some folks use asterisks to indicate RJA; some bold their names so that you see where they are in multiply authored works.

Do you list conference proceedings that are published? Sometimes these are refereed; sometimes not. Many authors list them separately, if at all. Junior scholars may wish to list them.

Technical reports—if you are in industry now these may be problematic.

Chronological or reverse chronological order. I prefer the latter as it lets you know right away what the person has done lately.

Addresses, conference presentations and posters

As you become senior, this list is very long and few bother to read them; but for junior scholars, this can be an important category. Addresses at major conferences—invited addresses, keynotes, etc. should always be included.

One solution to the problems presented by the vita is to have several versions—with one quite inclusive, with practically everything listed. A second would strip off the minor talks and publications and teaching and research interests and would have more intellectual oomph. You might have one for academia; one for industry, etc.

Treat your vita with the same care that you would a major a publication.

NO typos!!!!

List your publications correctly, in the best professional style of your discipline,. That means list co-authors in the way that they appear on the publication—do not alter that, or list publications without info as to authorship, as when people list titles and journals and list coauthors after With.....

Always include page numbers, dates, etc.

Be internally consistent throughout.

Be careful and conservative and scrupulously correct in how you list your papers. If a manuscript has been submitted, list it as under review and name the journal to which it has been submitted, but not the date, which suggests the paper has been published. *In press* means that the paper has been unconditionally accepted. If your paper is a revise and resubmit, do not assume list it in press. Avoid ambiguous terms like *forthcoming*. Does that mean in press, or merely in preparation. If you are still working on the paper and it does not have a definite home, it is merely in preparation. It is ok to have manuscripts in preparation, but not a million of them.

Do not misrepresent or pad, no matter what the temptation. It is more obvious than you think, and it casts into question all of your accomplishments and compromises your integrity.

Charles Lord in *The Compleat Academic* ends his excellent article with his wonderful advice from his mentor:

10 Golden Words to tape to staple to your forehead:

**“Get it out the door with your name on it.”**

Don not settle for good grades in graduate courses. Do not settle for conference presentations. Do not settle for papers that are endlessly in preparation. This suggests that you are not an independent scholar, cannot bring work to completion.

*If you do not have a strong vita, a post-doc can be the way to catch fire. More and more disciplines are coming to the conclusion that post-doctoral experience is desirable if not necessary. The truth is, most researchers do not emerge from graduate school completely prepared to be fully independent researchers. The ideal faculty member can write empirical papers, initiate and lead large research projects, develop collaborations, build an integrated and programmatic line of research, write successful grants, give effective oral presentations, motivate and supervise students, manage the daily affairs of a lab, keep account of a research operating budget, navigate IRB, and be an effective teacher. Your chances of emerging from grad school with all or most of these skills are not great.*

### Letters of recommendation

You will have to provide a list of people who can recommend you, you may even have to provide the reference letters. After the vita, this is regarded as most central by lots of search committees.

If you are early in your career, you will need a letter from your major adviser and eyebrows will be raised if you don't have it (though there are ways around this, too.)

If you have a postdoc, a mix of letters from your doctoral-granting institution and your postdoc institution will be expected.

It is advisable to have one letter from someone who was not a direct supervisor, and from someone who knows something about the institution to which you are applying. Letters from eminent others who do not have a direct stake in your success are very important. Bear in mind that people whose names you do not provide may still be asked about you. There are matters best addressed by recommenders. They can often address awkward or problematic areas more convincingly than you can.

Sometimes your recommender has been asked to write a letter for someone else for the same position. Keep in mind that this recommender might consciously or unconsciously rank the two (or more) of you, and might be asked to do so if he/she does not do so without prompting.

Sometimes your recommenders will be contacted by phone. Research shows that people are more likely to be negative on the phone than in writing. Sometimes others will be contacted about you. As a courtesy, you should be told this, but sometimes people are not so courteous.....

### Writing Samples

Not always asked for, but often are.

How do you choose to showcase your talent? Big picture synthesis that offers overview of big topic? Lively polemic that shows off textual and argumentative skills? Provocative new take on a familiar issue? Scholarship that represents the best of your past, all

polished and published, or one that provides a taste of the future, more exciting and more risky? Do not send papers that are in draft form, no matter how brilliant you think an idea may be. Early drafts are often full of errors, and sometimes go through major revisions before they see the light of day.

### *Should you send things that are not asked for?*

People differ on this one. You do not want to annoy and overburden the committee. On the other hand, if you have solid accomplishments that are not evident from the vita, you may wish to consider sending certain generally valued indicators:

Writing samples, often 3-4.

Graduate transcripts are not highly valued by many search committees. At that point, they don't care about your grades, which are almost certainly ok; they care about your potential as an independent scholar.

If you have teaching experience, you may be able to put together a *teaching dossier*: this may include your teaching outlook or philosophy of teaching, student and/or peer evaluations, comments from students, syllabi and assignments.

### *The Campus Interview and Job Talk*

In a competitive (buyer's) market, getting an interview is itself a feat, and can make you believe that you might get the job. Before you were one of 150, now you are 1 in 5. The odds are much better, but they are still not in your favor. Still, rejection at this stage is often viewed in personal terms, because what determines your fate is how you present yourself and how you perform during a campus visit. Once you get to the short list and interview phase, it is hard to argue that the interview is not the most important thing. Your scholarly ability is no longer the issue. *Erudition ain't enough*. You need to demonstrate that you will be an interesting and congenial colleague who will be a functioning and productive member of the department and campus community.

Standard Interview protocols include a full day of meetings with constituent groups from administrators to faculty to students, giving a job talk, and perhaps teaching in a class. People often come in the night before, and leave the night of the interview or the next day. It is very demanding and time consuming.

Common questions that arise in interviews:

Does the candidate look much better on paper than in person? This is not uncommon. The truth is, many academic are completely unaware that their interview/job talk style is poor.

Be prepared for the interview and job talk. Check the website and other materials to get a sense of your audience. Research the members of the search committee, the department

chair, people in or near your area. This will help ensure that your talk is pitched right, and can be understood by all interested parties. Follow the advice of those who have written about this topic—there is an arc to good talks. You need to tell an intriguing story about your research. Everyone in the audience has to understand it at some level.

Content	Time	Target	Detail/Purpose
Background	15 minutes	everyone present	--your parents would understand it
Your method	10 minutes	people in related fields	Show you know the field
Your results	10 minutes	people who work in your field	Show you are world expert on something
Summary	10 minutes		relate results to big picture

Make sure you have a strong opening, that you have spelled out the research objectives, you are clear about your methods and the results address the objectives. Acknowledge the work of others where appropriate. Practice your job talk in front of others, and pay attention to timing, examples. Make sure that you are backed up and familiar with technology if you will require this. Finish in 50 minutes without interruptions, and do not allow yourself to lose track of time when answering questions. Avoid jargon, patronizing the audience, overproduced ppt., saying anything negative about your lab, labmates, mentor, or other scientists. Acknowledge grant support (suggests you are fundable). It is appropriate to be clear about your contributions in coauthored works. End with directions for future research.

In planning your presentation and interview, talk to your adviser, fellow applicants to other positions, recently hired assistant professors, those who know the institution or department.

People are looking at energy/engagement level.

Body stance: are you nervous, relaxed, unsure, confused, rigid?

Do you try to overcompensate for shyness by trying too hard to be funny or seem friendly?

Concerning the job talk: Are you more than a narrow specialist? Can you place your work within the broader theoretical trends of your field? . Is it old hat, or too daring?

Broad and deep both?

Are you able to defend your research in a way that demonstrates your readiness to make the transition from graduate student to professional?

How did candidate field questions? Open? Arrogant? Knowledgeable? Professional?

Engaged? Does the candidate show potential for intellectual growth? Is the area vital? Is the approach valid and valued?

Content is key, but pacing and style are important. Don't have people walking out after the scheduled hour for the talk without having seen your data yet...

Were expected weaknesses confirmed and new strengths revealed? Is there genuine research, teaching promise?

Are there unexpected problems? Candidate not available on starting date? Two body problems?

Good search committees avoid close-ended questions and will ask some questions not entirely predictable:

Why did you decide to pursue a teaching and research career?

What is your five year research plan? Where do you expect to get funding?

What motivated you to apply to XXX College?

In what ways have you demonstrated leadership in your professional career?

You might be asked to provide additional references, or if you mind if the committee contacts others.

Listen hard for personal and professional needs that arise. Ask questions. It is not only a good way to get information, but it is also an indicator of your interest in the position. I am always suspicious that people who ask no questions are not serious about Hunter. . Have a list of good questions handy. Show interest and be positive no matter how you are feeling.

### Factors to Consider

Thick skin: you have to have it, because rejection is more likely than success.

Talk to junior faculty. Ask them about the atmosphere in the department, the professional development of new hires, and how well the department lives up to its promises.

Location: How important is it? Be willing to rethink your geographic goals. Consider whether the perfect job in an imperfect location is better than the reverse.

Flexibility: Things do not always go the way you want, and opportunities crop up, but you have to be open to them.

Bridges: avoid burning them.

Planning: Many postdocs get hired for regular faculty positions and you may want to consider this when choosing a postdoc.