

Landing Your First Teaching Job: Tips From Two Recent Hires

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If you're reading this, you've likely completed the first important step of being on the job market — conceptualization. You can envision yourself being out of school and having a real, academic job. The problem is: How do you get there? Being on the job market for the first time can be intimidating. Actually, scratch that. How about terrifying? Fortunately, there is a wealth of resources available to help guide you through the process; the information contained in this article is intended to be just one of the many tools at your disposal.

With that in mind, it may be helpful to start by giving a framework for the perspective of this article. It is not a step-by-step guide for every aspect of the job search process or for every type of position. Rather, it contains a series of personal experiences that illustrate things to do (and not do) as you progress through the various stages of the job search process. It is written by two early career, tenure-track faculty at a primarily teaching university who have gone through the process and came out clean on the other side. It is also worth noting that the authors applied for distinctly different positions (one cognitive, one clinical), which we believe will allow our shared experiences to cover a broad range of situations. In the end, we hope that by hearing about other people's successes and (often humorous) mistakes, you will gain insight into the application process and find some levity in what can be a highly stressful situation. For the sake of clarity, accounts will be presented using the singular "I," and may reflect the experiences of one or both of the authors.

Getting the Job Offer: Phone Calls and "Flashbulb" Memories. Sort of.

To begin, let's start at the end. The experience seems permanently etched in my memory — a "flashbulb memory," so to speak (Brown & Kulik, 1977). It was overcast and cold. I was sitting at the airport waiting to board a flight for another interview. I was anxious and had just finished mentally reciting the brief "5-minute version" of my research spiel for about the 500th time, when my cell phone began to ring. I recognized the area code — it was from the state where I had recently completed a campus interview. My heart sank to my feet. I remember thinking, "Awesome. A rejection — just the confidence boost I need right now." I answered the phone and immediately recognized the voice as that of the Dean, but he wasn't calling to reject me, he was calling to offer me the position! My first offer.

Okay, maybe that description is a bit overdramatic, and maybe "flashbulb memories" aren't any more or less memorable than common, everyday memories (see, Talarico & Rubin, 2007 and Hirst et al., 2009 for recent discussions on the topic), and maybe I wasn't even at the airport. But in a lot of ways, it *felt* that dramatic. After 25 straight years in school, months of preparation, and endless amounts of stress, I finally had a job offer, and hopefully others would follow. Ultimately, the point of these recollections is to illustrate that there *is* an end to this process, and when you reach that goal, it *is* an amazing feeling, one that helps wash away all of the doubt and fear that built up since the start of the application process. So, with the idea of success in mind, let's go back to the beginning.

Pre-Application Preparation: Understanding How the Game Is Played

Rewind to the year or so prior. The dissertation is still at the bottom of the “to-do” list, and the thought of being on the job market seems like a far off dream. However, at this point, there are things that can be done that will help position you to become a better candidate. Beyond the more obvious tasks (e.g., building a strong research program, teaching a diversity of courses), it pays to become acquainted with the search process itself. For example, one great opportunity could be to serve as a graduate student representative for a faculty search being held in your department. One of the most beneficial parts of being on a faculty search committee is sitting down with current faculty and discussing what *they* find important in applicant files (and unfortunately, no, clear plastic binders don’t score brownie points, cf., Watterson, 1991).

Pre-application preparation can also include attending job talks. Early in my graduate career, this usually meant sitting toward the back, casually laying a “had-to-be-read” journal article to the side of the desk, and hoping in vain that no one noticed my woeful lack of attention to the speaker. However, later in my graduate career, I approached the task differently. I started focusing on the most critical part of the research talk, what the candidate said, and how the faculty reacted. I remember one talk in particular: We were nearly 30 minutes in, and the candidate still hadn’t gotten past the introduction. I made eye contact with a certain faculty member, who then proceeded to smack his palm to his forehead, slowly shook his head in disapproval, and then went back to his own article.

It didn’t always play out that way, but throughout the course of that job search, I saw a number of mistakes (see Sheehan, McDevitt, & Ross, 1998, for common errors), and the faculty members’ resulting disinterest (e.g., looking at watches, fiddling with iphones). I quickly learned that there are rules to follow, and that nothing comes across worse than an unprepared, poorly organized talk (see Huang-Pollock & Mikami, 2007 for suggestions on how to organize research/teaching talks). This is especially true in situations where applicants are not asked to provide a separate teaching demonstration, as faculty will often use the research talk as a barometer for whether or not the candidate would be a capable teacher.

Application Materials: “Am I applying for this job or are you?”

Unfortunately, just attending job talks won’t land you a faculty position. Time will pass (each day painfully slowly, each month painfully quickly), and you will have to begin the search process yourself. After narrowing down the positions you would like to apply for (see Huang-Pollock & Mikami, 2007 and links below for position listings), you are left with the arduous task of constructing your application materials. These typically include a cover letter, teaching and research statements, and a curriculum vitae (see Huang-Pollock & Mikami, 2007, Montell, 2003, O’Neal, Meizlish, & Kaplan, 2007, and Perlman, McFadden, & McCann, 1994, for pointers on constructing application materials). As had been suggested to me, I asked a number of mentors and peers to look over my application materials. Two mentors gave me the exact same (negative) feedback about my research statement: I still sounded like a student, overly humble and attributing most successes to my advisor. One sarcastically (and yet somehow tenderly) commented, “Am I applying for this job or are you?” My self-effacing response of, “Be my guest — at least you’d get the job,” generated only a wry smile. Ultimately, they noted that universities want to hire a professional, not a student. I worked hard to address these comments,

choosing less passive verbs, focusing on the future of various projects, and simultaneously crediting my advisor while claiming independence.

For a teaching position, the teaching philosophy is crucial. Such a statement demonstrates the courses you've taught, as well as the framework you used to teach them (see Irons & Buskist, 2008, for a description of valuable courses to teach while in graduate school). However, a teaching philosophy can be difficult to construct for graduate students. As a classmate said to me, "Is *just winging it* an acceptable philosophy?" By definition, doesn't a "philosophy" require years of experience with several different classes to develop? Fortunately, there are likely opportunities available at your institution that will allow you to increase your pedagogical knowledge, even if they are not made readily known to you. For example, participating in training related to instruction (e.g., through Centers for Teaching and Learning) will help you formalize your goals. For me, this also included workshops on incorporating writing into undergraduate courses, and a graduate seminar in teaching psychology, both of which are increasingly common in doctoral programs (Boysen, 2011). Such seminars will help familiarize you with the type of terms and ideas that strengthen a teaching statement (e.g., "retention," "inclusive excellence," and "high impact-practices") (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2008). Perhaps as important as your teaching philosophy is your ability to convey passion. A passionate teacher is one who can weather the ups and downs of a demanding teaching load and whose pedagogy continues to evolve.

Similarly, it is essential that all of your application materials are specifically tailored to describe how you will excel *given the opportunities afforded by that particular program* (Brems, Lampman, & Johnson, 1995; Sheehan et al., 1998). For example, don't apply to a small teaching school and propose an overly expensive research program or express an interest in teaching hyper-specialized graduate seminars (e.g., "Masculinities and Femininities in 1980's Country Music"). Ultimately, your application materials should be a summary of your experiences and abilities, while also reflecting your potential and interest in the specific position to which you are applying.

Phone Interview: Nibbles on the Line

After submitting application materials, the next step (hopefully) is a phone interview. I distinctly recall a phone interview with one of my top schools: I arrived at my office with a half an hour to review materials and calm myself before my 5:00 pm interview. I filled my desktop with information about the position, including faculty interests and course listings, and then I then opened my inbox and saw an email from the search chair. The email said that they (the search committee) were sorry that they missed me, and that they looked forward to hearing from me. My stomach jumped to my throat, "Wait! I still have a half hour, don't I!?" Through my quickly blurring eyes, I found the original email with the interview time. The email said 4:00 pm Central Standard Time. I was in Mountain Standard Time. That meant that my time zone was one hour later than theirs, right? Or was that one hour *before* theirs? My heart sank as I realized that I had missed my "5:00 pm" interview by 2 whole hours. Not surprisingly, several boxes of tissues and multiple shoulders were necessary to contain all of the tears. Graciously, the search chair allowed me to reschedule the phone interview for a few days later. However, I had learned a few invaluable lessons: First, and most obviously, remember your time zones and double check your interview times! More importantly, I learned that mistakes happen, life goes on, and even the most organized of us all are still human.

Assuming you manage the subtle intricacies of telling time, you will ultimately have to complete a phone interview. While doing so, remember that you are also interviewing the faculty to see if the position is a good fit for you. Come prepared to ask preliminary questions about topics such as teaching load, research expectations, and culture within the department. This latter question can be of critical importance. During one particular phone interview, I asked that seemingly innocuous question and received a somewhat surprising response: silence. About 30 seconds of it, followed by an even more disturbing response of “Um, it’s getting better.” As this example illustrates, such questions can provide you with valuable information that you might otherwise not receive.

Campus Interview: Bathroom Breaks and Granola Bars

So far, we have discussed the importance of preparation, as well as the consequences of poor preparation. For campus interviews, preparation includes practicing job talks in front of honest peers and mentors, reviewing the research of the faculty with whom you will meet, and familiarizing yourself with the mission and vision statements of the college. For me, preparation also included purchasing granola bars. My mother, a well-traveled businesswoman, once told me to never leave home without a box of granola bars. Little did she know that this tip would save me more than once during my job search. A well timed granola bar can be the perfect elixir for an anxious stomach at the start of a long day, or a growling stomach that might lead to an increasingly awkward one-on-one meeting with the Dean.

Preparation can only get you so far, however, and it is impossible to anticipate all of the potential issues you may face. Late flights, lost luggage, changing interview schedules, and search chairs inexplicably forgetting to schedule bathroom breaks are all possibilities that may happen. During one unforgettable teaching demonstration, the Powerpoint projector bulb burnt out. Somewhat embarrassed, the search chair quietly asked, “Are you going to be able to finish?” With an air of confidence and humility, I replied, “We’ll find out.” Was the demonstration perfect? No need to answer that. Was I terrified? Clearly. But, I managed. While stressful, such experiences also present an opportunity to show grace under pressure. Ultimately, these situations help to separate the “professional” from the “student.” Remember that the search committee is always watching; preparation, flexibility, and problem solving are essential skills for a successful professor.

Grumbling stomachs and unreliable technology aren’t the only pitfalls waiting, however. At some point, you actually have to talk with the faculty. In a campus interview early in my search process, I sat down to my first faculty meeting of the day. The faculty member smiled warmly and said, “So, what would you like to know about our program?” I smiled back, and delved into the list of questions I had prepared for just this situation. Thirty minutes later, in my second faculty interview, I was asked the exact same question. My stomach sunk; I had used all of my questions in the first meeting. Was it okay to ask the same questions again? (Answer: yes, as this will allow you to compare responses across faculty). I struggled through this second interview, desperately creating mediocre questions on the fly (e.g., “Is there really no men’s bathroom on this floor?”). Over time, however, I got better at directing the exhausting, day-long individual faculty interviews and running through my ever-lengthening list of questions (see Huang-Pollock & Mikami, 2007, Iacono, 1981, and Darley & Zanna, 1981 for examples of questions to ask on an interview).

Post-Interview: Surviving the Waiting Game

After returning from the campus interview, it's time to take a deep breath and wait, wait, wait. Be sure to follow up on any loose ends, such as faculty requests for additional application materials, travel reimbursement forms, or asking about the timeline of the search process. Finally, thank you emails are a nice touch. Trade the generic thank you for personalized notes referencing specific conversation points and additional questions.

While self-care (e.g., compassion and forgiveness of self, finding hobbies, and maintaining balance between your personal and professional life) is helpful throughout the job search process, it is especially important during the waiting period. As many of us know, however, there are few times in our lives when we are arguably less balanced than in graduate school, and being in the midst of job searching is no different. With varying success, I found soothing music, warm baths, and social activities to be particularly helpful. Playing sports also helped, as there is no better way to release your anxiety than with a towering rejection of a peer's weak layup, followed by the entertaining trash talk, "Not in my house!" In other words, make time to take care of yourself. Assuming you get an offer, the next several months of your life (e.g., finishing your dissertation, moving to a new location, starting a new job) will add new sources of stress. In the end, the goal is to survive the transition to academia, not to burn out before you get there.

Negotiating the Offer: How to Not Sell Yourself Short

Once the euphoria of getting an offer fades, it's time to consider it carefully. This includes weighing geography, family, and other "non-job-related" factors. Consideration must also be given to salary, equipment, and research space. To be honest, I was somewhat surprised when my advisor asked me, "Have you prepared for salary and start up negotiations?" Me... negotiate? I was just relieved to have the offer — which was considerably higher than my meager graduate assistantship! But, as my advisor reminded me, I *was* marketable, and this would be my best chance to obtain a salary that reflected my abilities. So, exactly how much *was* I worth? Fortunately, published APA guidelines provide average salaries of faculty in different types of positions and in different regions of the country (see APA, 2010 and Dittman, 2005 for more negotiation and salary information). This information proved invaluable in helping me get a salary that was in line with compensation at similar institutions. Remember, unless otherwise stated, department chairs and deans expect negotiation.

Conclusions: "Next Round's On Me..."

"*The next round's on me.*" I pronounced these words proudly to my former graduate student colleagues at the first conference I attended after starting my new faculty position. I was finally able to start paying back the karma that built up as a graduate student. I will never forget the free lunches and drinks my advisor graciously provided over the years, and now was my chance to, "pay it forward," so to speak. I suppose it was at that moment that I truly felt my transition from terrified graduate student to confident faculty member was complete, and that confidence is every bit necessary to survive the rigors and challenges that await during your first frantic year as a faculty member. ("Wait, how many undergraduates do I have to advise!?") But perhaps we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves. That's a story for another day.