The Role of Institutional Culture and Values: What Really to Look for in the Job Hunt

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Many years ago, when I was a young and foolish assistant professor, a student came to me for advice regarding which of two job offers I thought she should take. One of the two offers was from a more prestigious institution, the other from a somewhat less prestigious institution. Normally, the issue of which offer to take might seem straightforward, but in this case, it wasn't.

The less prestigious institution seemed to be a better match to what she valued, and that institution therefore probably would value her more. I gave her poor advice, advising her to accept the offer from the other, more prestigious, institution, reasoning that if she didn't, she would always wonder what would have happened if she had gone there.

Unfortunately, she took my advice. The fit was not, in fact, very good, and eventually she left to go to an institution that was a better match.

This experience made me aware that the most important criterion in seeking a job almost certainly is finding a good match – an institution that you will value and that will value you. As is the case when one seeks out a significant other, finding a match involves many factors. Some of them, such as expectations regarding time allocation (e.g., teaching versus research), size of institution (e.g., large versus small), and location of institution (e.g., beach versus middle of the inner city), are relatively straightforward. In this article, I discuss the issues that I have found to be key ones that are not always obvious when making a decision.

I believe these issues are key not only for satisfaction at an institution; they are also key for long-term professional success. Almost all new assistant professors look like they will be successful. Some turn out to be very successful, others less so. On the latter, those doing the hiring in any institution tend to commit the fundamental attribution error: they assume that faculty members who do not succeed simply are not very competent, or have somehow failed to live up to their promise. In essence, they are viewed as "hiring mistakes."

But here's an alternative interpretation: While the institution was correct in believing that almost all of its hires had great promise, some of the hires were a "good fit" with the institutional culture and value system, whereas others were not. Those who are a good fit thrive; those who are not such a good fit often follow a path to lesser professional success. In some cases, less-than-successful faculty members may be bitter that the institution they chose (often, from among a variety of possibilities) did not help them to thrive in the way both they and the institution hoped they would. Those faculty members are likely to blame the institution at the same time that the institution is likely to blame the new faculty members!

Thus, when all is said and done, there are few things more important in a career than finding a first job

that is a good fit to what you have to offer. The fundamental principle of interpersonal attraction, to the extent that there is one, is that similarity attracts. You therefore want to find an institution that is similar to you in what it values, and, ultimately, in what it rewards. What are some of the main things to look for in what an institution rewards?

Attitudes Toward Teaching vs. Research

A job-seeker may assume that the teaching load in an institution is a good proxy for determining the relative valuing of teaching and research in an institution. In my experience, teaching load is of variable quality as a proxy. Some institutions have relatively heavy teaching loads, yet nevertheless have very high expectations regarding research. Other institutions have relatively lower teaching loads, but expect the teaching of those courses to be superb.

When considering a job offer, it pays to ask faculty and students alike their perceptions of the relative valuing of teaching and of research in an institution, and regarding what the expectations are. One should be careful to distinguish the "official" story from the actual story. In making a judgment, go by how the institution has shown its values in past hires and promotions, not just by what the responsible parties say they value.

Kinds of Research

Many institutions have no particular preferences in terms of kinds of research. But some do. It is to your advantage to find out whether a given department strongly supports one kind of research in preference to another.

Applied vs. basic research – Whether they admit it or not, some institutions frown on applied research as being not pure or fundamental enough. Other institutions, however, may value applied research more than basic research, believing that it is applied research that really can make a difference to people and to the world. And some nonacademic institutions support only applied research. It is a question of values.

Applied research is not necessarily any less rigorous or important than basic research. Basic research is not necessarily any less useful, in the long run, than applied research. Sometimes it is more useful. Many important applied discoveries, such as penicillin, arose from basic research. If you enjoy doing one kind of research and your institution does not value it, you will be frustrated and so will your institution. It is important to get a sense of whether your institution values a particular kind of research so both you and the people who judge you do not feel frustrated with the match between what you do and what is important to the institution.

Theory-driven vs. empirically-based – In my own institution, giving an atheoretical job talk can be the kiss of death. The expectation is that the research will be theory-driven. But in other institutions, theory may be viewed as less important. People may be more interested in data, and even be suspicious of a theory that is overly complicated or elaborated or that seems to constrain the kind or amount of data one collects.

It is essential to know the extent to which theory is valued in a particular department. Some departments may have no orientation with regard to the relative merits of theory versus no theory, or strongly theory-guided research versus weakly theory-guided research. It helps to know whether your own orientation

fits that of the department you are considering.

Paradigm-supporting vs. paradigm-rejecting – Research can either move current paradigms forward or reject such paradigms. Some scientists prefer to work within existing paradigms, others work to repudiate those paradigms. If most people in a department tend to do the one kind of research or the other, they may look for others like themselves. Some departments, for example, put enormous value on trendy research, whereas others may view trendy research as a "flavor of the month" approach and reject it as having little durability. If you do out-of-paradigm research in a department that follows current trends, you may be viewed as out of sync. But the same token, you may be viewed as a leader and a star in a department that values working outside of the paradigm.

Kinds of Teaching

Like research, teaching comes in several varieties. Institutions may have similar requirements for teaching load, but very different expectations beyond that load. Understanding the differences in expectations can help you understand whether the department if a good fit for you.

Teaching inside vs. outside the classroom – Most faculty members teach inside the classroom. That's a given. But institutions have very different ideas for how accessible faculty are expected to be outside the classroom. In some institutions, faculty members are expected to be on call at almost any reasonable hour, including for calls to their homes. In other institutions, a call to a faculty member's home may be viewed as acceptable only under the rarest of circumstances, and otherwise be viewed as outrageous. Looking just at the number of classroom hours doesn't necessarily capture the expectations of the institution regarding time one should be available to students outside the classroom.

Classroom teaching vs. advising – Institutions also have very different expectations regarding various kinds of advising activities. Advising a dozen senior projects, for example, may be much more work than teaching a single course. Add another dozen masters theses, and you may be well on your way toward a very busy schedule. You need to know expectations regarding advising.

Teaching load alone may mask the actual amount of teaching you are expected to do. If you have a heavy advising load, you may have a tremendous amount of work to do, even if your teaching load is relatively light.

Grading – What does it mean to have 100 students in one of your classes? It means very different things if you are responsible for grading any tests or papers you assign rather than having a teaching assistant to do the grading. Grading may be more time-consuming than the teaching. You need to know who will be doing the grading for your assignments and tests.

Conclusion

Besides getting answers to the kinds of questions I'm raising here, a major part of finding the right job is formulating the right questions. The issues raised above suggest some of the questions you may wish to ask in determining whether a particular job is a good match for you. You need to resolve quantitative issues regarding teaching and research. How much of each are you expected to do? But qualitative issues, although more subtle, may ultimately be more important.

I have outlined what some of these qualitative issues are, and encourage anyone looking for a job to find

out where an institution stands on each issue. Doing so will improve your chances for happiness and success in your new position. The punch line is this: In selecting a job, go for compatibility rather than merely prestige. You will make your mark best if you go into the situation knowing that an institution values what you have to offer, and vice versa.