January 2, 2013

What Search Committees Wish You Knew

Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

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By Allison M. Vaillancourt

Search committees are often assembled to ensure procedural fairness, to provide different stakeholders with an opportunity to express their views, and to give a nod to shared governance, which calls for collective decision making on certain appointments. While faculty search committees tend to be fairly homogenous, made up of academics in the same field as the new hire, administrative search committees are often an odd amalgam of people with varied expertise and often-competing views.

Understanding the dynamics at play within search committees and the constraints under which they exist can help candidates navigate the hiring process more effectively. Having served on my fair share of committees inside and outside of academe, I thought I would let you in on their inner workings and share a few things that search committees wish you knew, but will never actually reveal:

Search committees have less power than people think. Committees are typically assembled to offer guidance to the ultimate hiring authority—the administrator to whom the lucky finalist will report. The committee is often asked to forward three to five names to the dean, provost, or president who will make the final decision.

To give themselves wiggle room, reduce embarrassment in the event the top candidate declines the job, and ensure that search committees do not come to believe that they have true decision-making power, hiring administrators tend to request an unranked list that includes each candidate's strengths and weaknesses. That means that impressing the search committee is important, but it's not enough to secure you the job.

We often have no idea what we want. A position announcement may contain detailed information about responsibilities and qualifications, but members of the search committee may not understand what the hiring authority wants, and we may even disagree among ourselves about what we are looking for in the position.

That's especially true when the committee includes a mix of people from different departments as well as alumni or members of the community. Strong and confident candidates can use this confusion to their advantage by creating a vision of what the job and the successful candidate should look like. If you sense confusion, take control and share your bold ideas.

We resent being used as a facade for fairness. Sadly, there are times when committees are used to make it appear that a search is truly fair and open. In those cases, the hiring authority has someone in mind and forms a committee only because it is an expectation or institutional requirement.

Search committees tend to figure that out quickly and will often demonstrate a sense of apathy when communicating with you. Remember, it's them, not you, so don't take it personally. If you have a sense you aren't a serious contender, you can bow out of the process or use an interview or a campus visit as a learning experience or opportunity to meet new people.

Search committees want you to at least pretend this process is a not a hassle. Because we want to ensure that you are successful here, we have scheduled you to meet with a wide range of people who want to weigh in on your candidacy. That means: meeting after meeting, presentation after presentation.

In addition to showing you around, we are testing your stamina and ability to remain polite after the 17th person has asked you to explain your views on community engagement. Eye rolling; saying that you have answered this same question nine times so far today; responding with, "As I explained to the last three groups," or heavy sighing will not be good for you. Act like every question is shiny and new—and answer it accordingly.

You are a reflection of us. You are certainly being judged when we bring you to the campus for interviews, but how you are perceived will be a reflection of our competence as a search committee. If you are brilliant, we will look brilliant. If you turn out to be a dud, we will look stupid. We want you to wow everyone so that we can take credit for discovering you.

We skimmed your résumé several weeks ago and can't remember the details about your background. Candidates put incredible effort into their résumés and CV's and often believe that search committees have perused them carefully. Some committee members certainly do, but not all of them. Even those who gave your documents a careful read during the screening process have since forgotten the details. While we probably recall where you are now and what you are currently doing, it's likely we've forgotten your past roles, awards, and accomplishments.

Given that, remember to artfully review your history as you answer our questions. Say: "I encountered a similar situation during my tenure as interim director of the libraries when I led the merger of two library teams." Or, "While I've been in financial services for many years, I spent the first part of my career coordinating the logistics of clinical research projects, so I understand the dynamics of a health-sciences campus."

We want you to like us. It's normal for candidates to feel uncomfortable or insecure during a search process, but committee members are nervous as well. Will the candidate express concerns about the quality of our students? Did the candidate uncover that embarrassing little episode that brought press attention to our campus last year? Will the candidate think we are yahoos when she discovers there are no restaurants in town that serve Thai food or gelato?

Candidates who put us at ease by expressing admiration for the institution and interest in the community will have an edge in the evaluation process.

We may need to be "fixed," but we don't want to hear that from you. Every organization can do better, and search committees are well aware of their institutions' gaps and areas of vulnerability—but we don't want you to embarrass us by talking about how you can save us.

One of my colleagues, a woman known for her directness, recently spent two days at what she perceived to be a "lower-tier" institution offering her myriad recommendations for improving rankings, streamlining operations, and enhancing the curriculum. She had done her research and proposed a brilliant five-year plan for achieving the college's aspirations.

There was just one problem: This made people resent her. Had she engaged in conversation about the institution's aspirations, asked questions about the trouble spots, and expressed excitement about working together to achieve a better future, she would have been their top choice. Instead, she issued a manifesto and positioned herself as a bossy, know-it-all, institutional savior.

We know all about you, but we don't want you to know all about us. We have scoured the Web and our respective social and professional networks trying to understand who you truly are. We know that you lettered in soccer in high school, were criticized in an open forum for proposing to centralize information-technology services, and that despite your claims that it would be hard to leave your community, your house is actually up for sale. We think we have figured you out.

If you appear to have Googled us too extensively, however, we will be extraordinarily offended. If you dare to mention the names of our spouses or note that our brothers were in the same fraternity, we may judge you to be a creepy stalker.

You would be smart to do deep research on us—and then smarter still to keep your mouth shut during your interview about the trivia you uncover.

Keeping the employment needs of your spouse or partner a secret until the very end can wreck the whole process. The need to secure employment for a significant other before accepting a new position is a common challenge in academe. Regardless of whether your partner would do better in an academic environment or in the larger community, it can be uncomfortable to reveal that your potential relocation hinges upon your partner's ability to find a suitable job. It can be tempting to keep that a secret until the very end of the process and then spring it on the hiring official as a condition for accepting the offer. That rarely turns out well.

The earlier a search committee knows that it is important to identify career prospects for your partner, the easier things will go for everyone. Noting that your partner is excited about the potential move and would be interested in exploring career options in (choose one: museum management, pharmacy, plant sciences, or some other field) will provide the search committee with the time and space to start talking to people who might be able to put something together.

We want to understand your possible reservations. An African-American colleague of mine was considering a position in a very white community. While that made him a little uncomfortable for himself, he was especially worried about what life would be like for his young children. "I couldn't exactly ask the committee to round up some black people for me after the interview," he said, "but it would have been nice to know if there actually were any around."

Because he couldn't get a sense of what life would be like in that community, he eventually turned down the offer. I urged him not to be so reticent the next time about asking for what he needs. "If the response to the request is not positive," I explained, "you'll learn something important." I am regularly asked to connect candidates to people in my community who can describe what it is like to live here, so I maintain a diverse list of friends and colleagues who are happy to share their perspectives and life experiences with candidates.

We sometimes wish candidates would put us both out of our misery. I once served on a search committee that was very excited about a particular candidate, but within his first hour with us, he and we realized that we had made a terrible mistake in coming together. His vision didn't align with ours, and we didn't "click" during the opening conversation.

As search-committee members, we longed to call a timeout and suggest that our candidate find an earlier flight home, but good manners stopped us from doing that. Instead, we took him from interview to interview and collected a huge amount of feedback to confirm what we suspected within the first 30 minutes.

He grew more despondent as the day wore on, and we felt badly for him. Mercifully, the day came to a close, but we still had a group dinner to attend. I have never witnessed a candidate claiming to have a family emergency or a migraine to get out of the search process early, but I'd like to recommend it. There are times when it makes sense to set each party free.

You were truly our first choice, but the hiring administrator liked someone better. Feel like you clicked with the search committee? Looking forward to using them as your brain trust when you land your new gig? Not so fast.

As noted earlier, search committees typically serve in advisory rather than decision-making roles. Given that, they don't have the power to slot you into the position in question. Search committees often bond with candidates and feel genuine remorse when we are unsuccessful in making a case for their hiring.

If you sensed that we really liked you, we really did. And we want you to know that we are as disappointed as you are.

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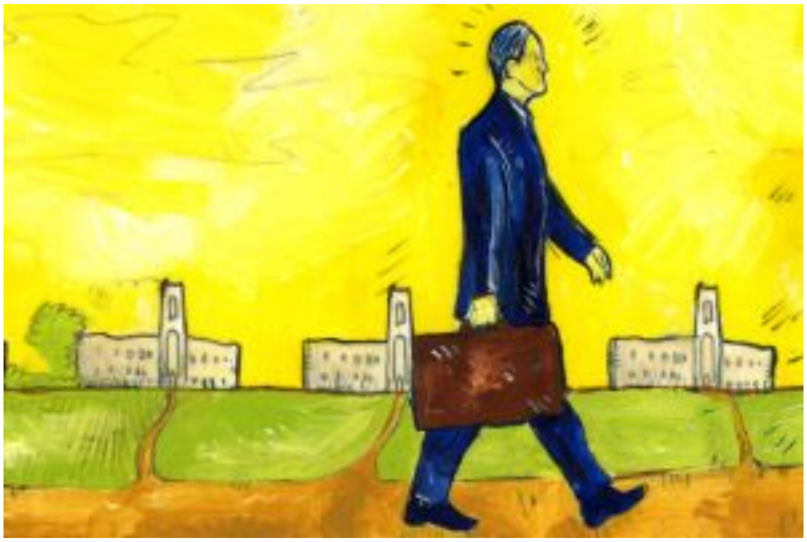
April 4, 2012

The Rhetoric of the CV



Brian Taylor

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By Joshua R. Eyler

When you send in your job-application materials, you're not just assembling separate documents to fulfill the requirements of an ad. Those documents are part of a larger rhetorical whole, and together they form an argument for the viability of your candidacy for a particular job.

In a fall seminar at George Mason University, "Preparing for Careers in the Academy," I worked with advanced doctoral students to help them think about the larger message they were sending in their application materials. We all know that the tenure-track market in many fields is tough, and that the odds of success are long. But rather than just rant about the state of academe, or belittle candidates for seemingly tilting at windmills, it's important that we help those who want to pursue a tenure-track job.

I wanted students in the seminar to understand that each of their documents should be crafted meticulously, paying close attention to the rhetorical choices they are making. Other elements—lthe organization of their documents, the inclusion or omission of certain kinds of information, the use of white space—were equally important in building a case for themselves.

It is perhaps easiest to think about issues of rhetoric when considering a candidate's cover letter or statement of teaching philosophy. But I would like to focus on the unsung hero of the job application: the curriculum vitae.

The CV has a reputation for being purely utilitarian in nature and, as such, has less glamour than other application materials. I don't think I am going too far, though, when I say that the CV may be the most frequently and closely read of all the documents that candidates send. For search-committee members who often must assess 100 applications in a short time, the CV offers the kind of holistic picture that few other documents can match. And it is always among those materials made available to other members of the department or to attendees at a job talk. In some cases, it may be the only part of the application available to those groups.

Because of the frequency with which the CV will be read, then, it is important to note with care not simply the kinds of information that go into it, but also the order of information, the organization of facts, the section headings, and all the other seemingly minor details.

In each section, and in the document as a whole, candidates must make an argument that moves from the most important evidence to the least important. All of that together makes up the rhetoric of the CV.

"It's always best to start at the beginning." Glinda's advice to Dorothy as the young Kansan begins her voyage through Oz is equally applicable to writers of CV's. Of course you will need to have your name, e-mail address, and other contact information up front, but I am more interested in the first real section of the CV, which is usually called "Education" or "Educational Background."

Here is information that search committees will definitely want to see: your degrees, in descending order; the dates on which they were conferred: and the title of your dissertation or final project. If you have not yet defended your dissertation or finalized your creative thesis project (for M.F.A. students), you should include a specific defense date.

If you are not yet at the point where you can set such a date, you should probably rethink your entry into the academic job market. It requires an investment of so much intellectual and emotional energy that, honestly, you would be doing yourself a disservice by applying for jobs before you are realistically ready to do so.

Never include your graduate school GPA or the scores you received on your comprehensive examinations. Doing so amounts to a significant rhetorical blunder, because you are emphasizing your role as a student rather than as a future colleague. Don't worry: The rest of your materials will demonstrate your intellectual prowess. There is no need to undermine your candidacy by overtly calling attention to your grades.

The importance of section headings and white space. Typically, the next two sections on a CV should be "Research" and "Teaching," because they contain the strongest evidence of your qualifications for the position. For a variety of reasons, including the conventions of the genre and the importance of establishing your credentials, I recommend that the research section come first. If you feel strongly that your teaching section is more important, it is certainly possible to make a case for that, but a lot depends on the type of college to which you are applying.

The research section is the place to list your publications, your creative work, and/or your grant activity. Strive for clarity. It is best to have separate subsections with clearly labeled headings for each kind of publication that you have: books, peer-reviewed journal articles, peer-reviewed book chapters, other kinds of peer-reviewed writing, book reviews, encyclopedia articles, other types of academic writing, and so on.

If you are in a discipline in which grant writing is common, you will want to add subsections addressing grants you have been awarded, or on which you have worked with someone else. If you are in the arts, you should provide subsections for different types of shows or performances (for example, solo shows versus group shows in the visual arts), but you will also want to include any curating, jurying, or directing you have done, as well as any written work you have published, if applicable.

The purpose of dividing everything into subsections rather than lumping all of your information together is to allow the white space to speak for you. This is true of the CV as a whole.

The white space assists your argument by separating your credentials into discrete, precise units that, in turn, contribute holistically to the rhetoric of the document. It helps those who are reading your CV quickly to take in all of the information and to put the pieces together to form a picture of your candidacy.

Section breaks perform another important rhetorical function: They show the search committee that you understand the landscape of your field and can distinguish among different kinds of publications or creative work. Too often, candidates provide only one section for their publications and list everything under the sun there.

Doing so implicitly argues that you believe a peer-reviewed article has the same scholarly impact as a book review. That, of course, is not true, and I am sure that you do not actually believe it, but the rhetoric of your CV is suggesting that you do.

Another mistake candidates make is to indiscriminately include work that is under submission or in progress in the same section as their published work—or worse, as the only entries in the publications section. I have seen otherwise promising applicants hurt their candidacies by doing that. Such work should be clearly labeled and placed in a subsection called "Under Submission" or "Work in Progress."

Search committees will very likely view any attempt to label such drafts as publications to be a disingenuous attempt to pad your CV. At the very least, such a move suggests that you do not understand important scholarly distinctions. Once an essay has been accepted by a journal, or a book by a press, you can list it as a publication with a forthcoming date. If it has not been accepted, it needs to be clearly categorized that way.

Much the same can be said for the teaching section. It will enhance the rhetorical power of your CV to have individual subsections highlighting courses for which you were the instructor of record, for which you were a graduate assistant, or for which you gave guest presentations (if applicable).

Combining all of those teaching experiences into a single category is as problematic as combining unpublished work with publications. For teaching-oriented institutions, in fact, it may even be worse.

What to do with everything else. At this point, you will need to provide sections for your other information, and the order now becomes more variable. In general, you should have details about conference presentations, academic service, honors and awards, professional societies, teaching interests, research interests, and references.

Organize those according to your strengths. For example, if you have a large number of relevant awards or a very prestigious honor, move your "Honors and Awards" section to a prominent position. If, on the other hand, you only have one award, perhaps you should place that section near the end of your CV.

I would suggest privileging sections on presentations and on service (both to your university and to your profession), but—again—it depends on the candidate and the institution to which you are applying. You should be thinking about how you can present yourself in the strongest way possible.

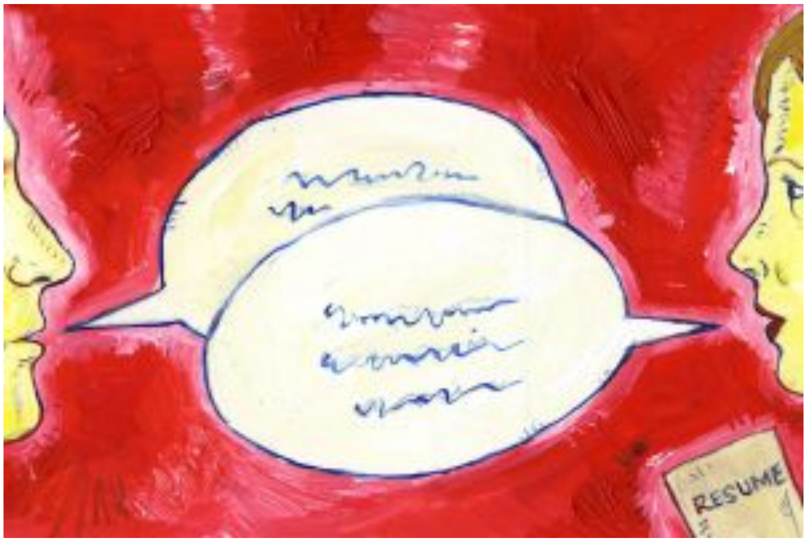
Some final thoughts. I am aware that an essay like this might seem fruitless to the many people who have—within these very pages—issued diatribes about the state of the academic job market and invectives about the supposed pointlessness of attending graduate school, particularly in the humanities and the arts. I cannot, on my own, open more tenure-track jobs in universities across the country. But I can help graduate students to have a detailed and nuanced understanding of the job market and to prepare their applications in a way that gives them the best chance for success.

Indeed, that is something we all can do for the future professoriate, and I believe we are obligated to do so.

Joshua R. Eyler is associate director of the Center for Teaching Excellence and an affiliate associate professor of English at George Mason University.

May 16, 2012

This Can't Be Happening



Brian Taylor

Enlarge Image

By Heather Trepal

Back in 2004, I was a newly minted Ph.D. I was also eight months pregnant with my second child and interviewing for tenure-track positions in my field. What I am about to reveal, dear reader, is the very true story of a job candidate's worst nightmare. And it happened to me.

When I began applying for positions in the fall of 2003, I was surprised to find out that I was pregnant again. I defended my Ph.D. dissertation in counseling and human development that October. Honestly, one of my biggest worries about my defense was that my suit pants would no longer fit. While I was practicing, I had to keep repinning them to prevent my burgeoning belly from popping out. Thankfully the defense went well, with no wardrobe malfunctions. After the celebrations, I was left to ponder what was next.

My husband, and various friends and colleagues, encouraged me to wait a year and let life settle before going on the job market. Ha!, I thought. Why not throw caution to the wind and send in my applications? My husband and I took out a map of the United States, crossed off our no-go states, and applied to any and all openings in the states that remained.

When December rolled around, I was in my third trimester and happy to attend my graduation ceremony (although it was damn hot underneath the regalia). Soon after, I began to receive invitations for telephone and campus interviews. The most exciting was a campus interview for one of my "dream jobs"—a department in the South that wanted to start a new doctoral program in my field.

The location was too far away for my husband to come with me (he stayed home to care for our 18-month-old). So I boarded the plane to Texas alone, wearing my newly purchased maternity interview suit. I was met at the airport by a faculty member in the department. It also happened to be Superbowl Sunday. Given that we were in Texas, I did as the Texans do and attended a Superbowl party at that faculty member's house rather than a traditional interview dinner. All in all, it was an interesting experience; and one that felt more familiar and familial than professional.

The next morning, I had breakfast with the search-committee chair. From there, we proceeded to the formal interview and my job talk about my research.

Now, let me set the scene for you: There I was, in my fancy $200 Pea in the Pod maternity suit, about to start a presentation on my dissertation research (the topic of which was the maternal-identity development of pregnant teenagers). I was feeling calm, cool, and collected.

Midway through my PowerPoint presentation, however, I began to feel a warm sensation creeping up from my stomach into my throat. Yes, I was familiar with that sensation. It was nausea. Not only was I nauseous, I was hot—really hot, all of a sudden.

The chair of the search committee, who was seated across the table from me, had begun looking at me curiously, as if to say, "Is everything all right?" Everyone else stayed the course and feigned interest in my presentation. But it became apparent to me that I was going to vomit, and soon. And not just a little bit but the full, belly-wrenching projectile type.

Before I could do or say anything, I leaned over the table and threw up—directly on the department chair.

Talk about mortified. I ran from the conference room, hand at my mouth, continuing to regurgitate. The search chair, remembering that I had no idea where I was or how to get to a bathroom, followed me out. She yelled "to the right" and "turn left" until I found the women's restroom. Once inside, she held my hair as I emptied the contents of my stomach into the nearest garbage can.

During that time, she was also introducing me to other college faculty members who were entering the restroom. It went something like this: "Dr. Reybold [on her way to use the toilet], this is Dr. Trepal [head in the garbage can] who is interviewing with us today."

After I was finished, the chair left me to recover, and I went into a bathroom stall and made a decision: I was never coming out.

I was embarrassed as hell. But then sanity returned. I had come all this way across the country and had the opportunity to interview for what sounded like a dream job, and I was not about to give up. I mean, it couldn't get any worse, right? So I took off my stained suit jacket, splashed some water on my face, and marched back into the conference room to finish my presentation. When I was through, I asked, "Are there any questions?" Mercifully, there weren't.

For the rest of that day on the campus, everyone I met seemed to have heard the tale. I was forced to relive it again and again for the next six hours. However, the whole calamity seemed to lighten the mood. Mostly, I began to laugh about it.

Friends have been urging me to tell my interview horror story for years because it has a happy ending. I was eventually offered the position, and I accepted, which shows job candidates that you can survive a major mishap on the market. Eight years later, I have tenure and am now chairing faculty search committees. Trust me when I tell you that I have "been there, done that" when it comes to interview nightmares.

What I want to emphasize to job candidates is that the experience, while dreadful, also proved insightful. Afterward, I was struck by the way in which the department's faculty members responded to me with empathy and kindness. They responded as human beings. Throughout the interview, they continued to check on my well-being; they understood when my feet were too swollen for my interview heels and I had to take them off. They brought water and called the next day to make sure that I had made it home safely.

I left there mortified. But I also left with a profound respect for the faculty as people and for the institution. It was a collegial climate where I could actually see myself working. And it has been that same spirit of camaraderie and collegiality that has gotten me through the tenure process.

In today's academic market, sometimes you just need a job, any job. But if you have options, listen to your gut. The place where you will feel most at home is the place where you are accepted and treated like family, even at your worst.

Heather Trepal is an associate professor of counseling in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

March 27, 2012

Graduate School Is a Means to a Job

Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

Enlarge Image

By Karen Kelsky

One of the most common questions I hear from graduate students, whether they are in their first or their final year, is what they can do *now* to prepare for the academic job market.

Excellent question. As a graduate student, your fate is in your own hands, and every decision you make—including whether to go to graduate school at all, which program to go to, which adviser to choose, and how to conduct yourself while there—can and should be made with an eye to the job you wish to have at the end.

To do otherwise is pure madness. I have no patience whatsoever with the "love" narrative (we do what we do because we love it and money/jobs play no role) that prevails among some advisers, departments, and profoundly mystified graduate students. But for those graduate students and Ph.D.'s who actually want a paying tenure-track job and the things that go with it—health insurance, benefits, and financial security—here is my list of graduate-school rules, forged after years of working in academe as a former tenured professor and now running my own career-advising business for doctoral students.

Before Graduate School

Ask yourself what job you want and whether an advanced degree is actually necessary for it.

Choose your graduate program based both on its focus on your scholarly interests and its tenure-track placement rate. If it doesn't keep careful records of its placement rate, or does not have an impressive record of placing its Ph.D.'s in tenure-track positions, do not consider attending that program.

Choose your adviser the same way. Before committing to an adviser, find out how many Ph.D.'s that potential mentor has placed in tenure-track positions in recent years.

Go to the highest-ranked graduate department you can get into—so long as it funds you fully. That is not actually because of the "snob factor" of the name itself, but rather because of the ethos of the best departments. They typically are the best financed, which means they have more scholars with national reputations to serve as your mentors and letter writers, and they maintain lively brown-bag and seminar series that bring in major visiting scholars with whom you can network. The placement history of a top program tends to produce its own momentum, so that departments around the country with faculty members from that program will then look kindly on new applications from its latest Ph.D.'s. That, my friends, is how privilege reproduces itself. It may be distasteful, but you deny or ignore it at your peril.

Never assume that the elite, Ivy League departments are the highest-ranked or have the best placement rates. Some of the worst-prepared job candidates with whom I've worked have been from humanities departments at Yale, Harvard, and Princeton. Do not be dazzled by abstract institutional reputations. Ask steely-eyed questions about individual advisers and their actual (not illusory) placement rates in recent years.

Meet, or at least correspond, with your potential adviser ahead of time so that you understand whether he or she has a hands-on approach to professionalization training and will be personally invested in your success.

Do not attend graduate school unless you are fully supported by—at minimum—a multiyear teaching assistantship that provides a tuition waiver, a stipend, and health insurance that covers most of the years of your program. The stipend needs to be generous enough to support your actual living expenses for the location. Do not take out new debt to attend graduate school. Because the tenure-track job market is so bleak, graduate school in the humanities and social sciences is, in most cases, not worth going into debt for.

Apply to 6 to 10 graduate programs. If you are admitted with funding to more than one, negotiate to get the best possible package at your top choice.

Be entrepreneurial before even entering graduate school to locate and apply for multiple sources of financial support. Do not forget the law of increasing returns: Success breeds success and large follows small. A $500 book scholarship makes you more competitive for a $1,000 conference grant, which situates you for a $3,000 summer-research fellowship, which puts you in the running for a $10,000 fieldwork grant, which then makes you competitive for a $30,000 dissertation writing grant.

Early in Graduate School

Never forget this primary rule: Graduate school is not your job; graduate school is a means to the job you want. Do not settle in to your graduate department like a little hamster burrowing in the wood shavings. Stay alert with your eye always on a national stage, poised for the next opportunity, whatever it is: to present a paper, attend a conference, meet a scholar in your field, forge a connection, gain a professional skill.

In year one and every year thereafter, read the job ads in your field, and track the predominant and emerging emphases of the listed jobs. Ask yourself how you can incorporate those into your own project, directly or indirectly. You don't have to slavishly follow trends, but you have to be familiar with them and be prepared to relate your own work to them in some way.

Have a beautifully organized and professional CV starting in your first year and in every subsequent year. When I was a young assistant professor, a senior colleague told me that her philosophy was to add one line a month to her CV. Set that same goal for yourself. As a junior graduate student, you may or may not be able to maintain that pace, but keep it in the back of your mind, and keep your eye out for opportunities that add lines to your CV at a brisk pace.

Make strong connections with your adviser and other faculty members in your department, and in affiliated departments. Interact with them as a young professional, respectfully but confidently. Eschew excessive humility; it inspires contempt. Do not forget the letters of recommendation that you will one day need them to write.

Minimize your work as a TA. Your first year will be grueling, but learn the efficiency techniques of teaching as fast as you can, and make absolutely, categorically, sure that you do not volunteer your labor beyond the hours paid. Believe me, resisting will take vigilance. But do it. You are not a volunteer and the university is not a charity. You are paid for hours of work; do not exceed them. Teach well, but do not make teaching the core of your identity.

Be aware that faculty members in a variety of departments will be able to direct you to different grant sources, which, over time, will help you to continue paying for your studies without accruing crushing debt. Not all faculty members are familiar with the same grant sources, so breadth is important.

Strategize your writing projects in your courses, theses, and dissertation, to form the basis of potentially publishable papers. If offered the option of writing a master's thesis, seriously consider taking it, as it can form the core of your first refereed journal article. Plan out a publishing trajectory to ensure that you have at least one sole-authored refereed journal article before you defend your dissertation.

Attend every job talk in your department and affiliated departments religiously. It matters not if those talks are in your field or subfield. Go to them all. Job talks and other job-search opportunities such as attending a lunch with a candidate, serving on a search committee, or simply examining an applicant's CV and file are the single best training you can provide yourself on the real requirements of the tenure-track job market (as opposed to your private and often delusional perceptions).

Attend national conferences annually. It's fine to also go to local and regional conferences, but they must never take the place of your national conference, which provides irreplaceable insight into trends in your field, the ethos and habitus of your discipline, and the behavioral norms of professional scholars. It also presents the opportunity to network and to attend seminars dedicated to professional skills such as writing grant proposals or journal articles.

Strategize how to travel to conferences, and work with your cohort to make it a habit of driving together to major national conferences, and lodging together.

Apply indiscriminately for money, and master the fine art of tailoring to meet the grant agency's mission. You'll be surprised by how much the act of transforming your project to meet a new mission reveals to you hitherto unrecognized potentialities and insights into the work itself. Applying for a wide range of grants is one of the best intellectual exercises in which you can engage.

Take every opportunity available to present your work publicly. While I emphasized the importance of national conferences for reputation purposes, actively pursue every possible local and regional opportunity for experience purposes. Public speaking is one of the core skills of an academic career. Make your mistakes in graduate school, where the stakes are low, so that you are a master of the podium when the stakes are high.

In Your Final Years of Graduate School

Avoid like the plague offers of publication in edited collections, which is where good publications go to die. If you have a piece of work that can pass muster as a publication, make sure that it goes into a refereed journal, the best one you can reasonably manage. Don't ever throw it away on conference proceedings, or the like. (That applies to the humanities and most social sciences; some conference proceedings in the sciences are legitimate publication venues. Know your field.) So do not be seduced by expressions of interest from editors of collections or third-tier journals following your conference presentations. The opportunity may seem easy but you will pay the price later when the collection is delayed for years or the publication is deemed too low status to help you on the market.

By your third year or so, apply annually to present a paper at your national conference. If you are in the humanities, do not waste time participating in poster sessions. If you are in the hard sciences or experimental social sciences, check with a trusted adviser about the value of posters. Near the end of your program, begin to organize panels for a conference. Your first foray in that direction can be with other graduate students, but don't organize more than one graduate-student panel in your career.

In the year before you go on the job market, organize and propose a high-profile panel for your national conference that is made up of young, up-and-coming assistant professors. Ask a well-known scholar to serve as discussant. Make efforts to have the panel respond to, or engage with, a trending topic in your field and/or one that is identified as the primary theme of that year's national meetings. This panel is your "coming out" party, and makes you visible on a national stage, framed and contextualized by the more senior scholars who already have reputations on the panel's topic. At the conference, do not forget to organize a lunch (or dinner or coffee) for the panelists to get to know them better and lay the groundwork for future collaborations and possibly letters of recommendation.

Cultivate a letter writer who is not from your Ph.D.-granting institution. Having all your recommendation letters come from your own committee or department is the sign of a relatively immature candidate. It is not a death knell in your first or second years on the market, but be aware that the strongest and most successful candidates will have a recommendation from an influential senior scholar from outside their home department who can speak to their standing in the field (and not simply to their performance as a graduate student in the department).

Write your dissertation with an eye to the publications that it will become. Be aware that in most fields, at least one refereed journal article while you are still A.B.D. is now necessary to get shortlisted for tenure-track jobs. At the same time, be aware that publications that date from before you accept your tenure-track job sometimes do not count toward tenure. So the balance is delicate indeed. You must publish enough to get a job without prematurely exhausting your supply of material you will need for tenure. (That is why I recommend writing a master's thesis, which will give you material for a publication without cutting into your dissertation material.)

If you are in a book field, be aware that presses will not look kindly at a book proposal in which more than half of the material has already been published in articles. Therefore, in a typical five-chapter dissertation, you want no more than two chapters to be put out as refereed journal articles. While writing the dissertation, have a publishing plan in place. You may write one chapter, for example, with an eye to fast publication while you are A.B.D. Set aside other material for refereed journal articles while you're on the tenure track. Meanwhile, write the dissertation itself as much like a book as your committee will allow. If your committee insists on methodology and theory chapters, write them with the full knowledge that they will most likely be removed from the ultimate book manuscript.

Remember that the best dissertation is a finished dissertation. Your dissertation must satisfy a committee, while your book must satisfy a set of reviewers and an editor who operate nationally and internationally. Do what it takes to satisfy your committee and finish. Leave the *Sturm und Drang* for when you are revising the manuscript into the book that will become the real mark of your scholarly reputation.

Be the sole instructor of at least one course but not more than three (if you can help it). After about three, the benefit of additional teaching experience diminishes, and becomes a distraction from the real capital-producing work necessary for the tenure-track job market, which (unless you're applying to community colleges) is publication and conference activity. If your department does not offer A.B.D.'s the opportunity to teach your own courses, then carefully seek an opportunity from another college in the area. Do a good job, but do not allow your teaching to derail you from the writing, publishing, grant writing, and conferences that are the core elements of the tenure-track search. TA experience is not an adequate substitute for teaching a course of your own.

Go on the market while A.B.D. because you want to make your worst mistakes while you still have a year of financial support from your home department. Most people who prevail on the market need at least two years to do so.

Cultivate a professional persona as a young scholar. That persona is separate from your previous identity as a graduate student and is, instead, confident, assertive, sophisticated, and outspoken. Devote as much time as it takes to writing out brief—and I do mean brief—summaries of your dissertation research, teaching techniques and philosophy, and your future publication plans. Practice delivering those brief summaries until they become second nature.

Make your application materials absolutely flawless. Take your ego out of the process and ask everyone you know to ruthlessly critique your CV, letter, teaching statement, and research statement. Prioritize the advice you receive from young faculty members who have recently been on the market, and from senior professors who have recently chaired a search committee.

Some graduate students will rush to follow these rules, some will panic and view the task as impossible, and others will indignantly deny the validity of these steps. The choice is entirely yours. But be aware that the best and most competitive candidates—the ones whom I have watched and assisted as they sailed through the job market—had every one of these elements of their record locked and loaded.

Karen Kelsky is a former professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Oregon who left academe in 2010. She now runs a consulting business and a blog called The Professor Is In.

October 9, 2012

Going Rogue

Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

Enlarge Image

By Eunice Williams

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of columns about a Ph.D. candidate in history who is going on the tenure-track market for the first time. Her initial column can be read here.

I'd like to offer two vignettes.

In the first—a cool spring night during my fourth year of graduate school—I am sitting on the floor of a bar bathroom, not drunk, but devastated. I've just received a gut-wrenching e-mail from my potential adviser. After many long hours of thinking it through, he's decided to leave our department for a better opportunity at a new university. This is the second time I've lost an adviser in the space of a year.

In the second vignette, I've just done something bold. I've declared candidacy, put together a new committee, am finishing up my fifth year, and hope to complete my dissertation by the end of my sixth. There's been a fellowship announcement that, at first glance, doesn't exactly apply to my work, but I think I would gain and contribute a lot during a year at the granting organization. I've just sent off my application. In my cover letter, I've literally called myself a "rogue scholar." I've admitted that I am not the sort of academic that the institution traditionally gives money to, and I've explained why they should take me anyway. Two months later I will be shocked but pleased to receive an acceptance letter.

In this buyer's market for Ph.D.'s, graduate students are used to hearing about the slim chances of getting a job. What I naively failed to realize was that my professors, too, were constantly on the job market to improve their current positions. The truth is that I was able to handle these changes with relative calm because I'd learned how to go rogue. Being a rogue scholar has served me well in my dissertation writing and fellowship applications. Now, I hope it will also help me in my academic job search.

At some point, all graduate students must go rogue. By that, I mean I had to figure out how to make decisions about my research and writing without relying on my advisers for direction. I do not mean that I refused to seek them out when I got stuck, or that I ignored their advice when they offered it. Happily, both professors who left for new positions elsewhere stayed on as members of my dissertation committee. Indeed, I was lucky because they continued to check in with me to see how my work was progressing.

By going rogue, I also mean that I had to forge ahead on my own without waiting to hear back from them, since they were not always easy to reach. I had to choose which sources to look at, when to start writing, and when to begin asking other people to read the words I put on paper. I submitted abstracts to conferences, applied for grants, and got in touch with scholars outside my university. Obviously, I adjusted my course if one committee member or another suggested that I submit to a certain conference or apply for a specific grant. For the most part, though, I made those sorts of decisions on my own.

The point of doing a Ph.D. is to become an expert in your field. The crucial assumption is that although your adviser and committee may be able to offer guidance, you will become the more learned scholar of your topic. I'm not suggesting that advisers should withhold moral support and maybe, if necessary, an occasional cheerleading talk, but I don't think they should be responsible for hounding you to apply for grants, present your work, write your dissertation, or publish.

If you can't go through the process without learning how to plan your own scholarship, you'll never go rogue—and you need to go rogue to finish.

The loss of two advisers made me reach that point sooner than I might have otherwise, precisely because they were farther away, and I had to take action on my dissertation before waiting to meet with them. I could no longer pop my head in their offices when I had a question. Even if they had been around, I was often traveling for my research.

Being absent from my university was less of an issue because I didn't feel too geographically tied to my advisers. Going rogue entailed leaving the comforts of my university, my apartment, and my friends to pursue the research I needed to undertake, and the fellowships that would look better on my CV than departmental money from my own university. Going off on my own was, in a word, lonely; but it has made my work better.

More generally, I think that self-identifying as a rogue scholar has been liberating with respect to my academic persona. It's inspired me to:

- Avoid "academese," the jargon that plagues the pages of certain books and journals. I would probably have avoided it anyway because I think it's more effective to write in a straightforward way than to get mired in jargon.
- Eschew the three-part questions that so many academics are fond of asking at conferences and meetings. A colleague taught me the virtues of admitting in plain terms that you don't know the answer to, or explanation for, a portion of someone's talk.
- Attend lectures beyond the purview of my own academic interests, not to avoid working on my dissertation, but because I know that seeing other people present their work will be useful on the job market.

Going rogue has taught me that it's acceptable to open the academic rule book and choose the rules that serve me best.

I can't take all the credit for my rogue state of mind. I've also noticed the ways in which one of my committee members has encouraged my behavior. Early on in graduate school she would return my papers with tracked changes and comments on every page. Now she still diligently reads my work, but she's more likely to give me a big-picture evaluation and leave the line edits to me. She also expects me to work without her direction during the interim period when she's reading over a chapter or a dissertation draft.

With the exception of my job materials—which she helps with because they involve learning so many new genres of writing in such a short space of time—my adviser doesn't offer very many alternative ideas anymore. Instead, she simply tells me what doesn't work. It's been a difficult transition, but I recognize the need for it as I dive head first into the academic market. If I have to rely on my adviser to articulate why my project is important, then I'm not ready to complete my training.

A rogue state will be useful in a market where hundreds of candidates write cover letters proclaiming that they are the perfect fit for a position. In my applications, I go ahead and call myself a rogue scholar. I explain that I've held conventional fellowships, and an unconventional one. I try to be clear about my qualifications. Then I demonstrate how my interdisciplinary track record will serve a particular institution and its students.

I suppose I'll have to wait to see how well that aspect of my job search pans out.

As a first-time applicant, I picture two ways of thinking about the academic market. One involves the feeling that I can't control any aspect of my own job search, and ends in a pool of self-pity on some bathroom floor. I don't really want to venture back down that particular rabbit hole.

The other allows me to feel as if I have a choice about how I sell myself and my work to a skeptical search committee. I can't say with certainty whether the distinction really matters, but the mind-set has worked well enough for my research and writing—and I know at least one fellowship committee that seemed to like it.

I interpret my ability to separate the pliable rules of academe from the rigid ones as a virtue of going rogue. Versatility seems like the key for a tough job market. I have to hope so; once you've gone rogue, there's no going back.

Eunice Williams is the pseudonym of a Ph.D. candidate in history at a Southern university. She is working as a writing fellow while she searches for her first tenure-track job.

November 20, 2012

From Advisee to Peer

Mark Shaver for The Chronicle

Enlarge Image

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong

Editor's Note: Have a career question for our columnists? Send in your queries to careertalk@chronicle.com, or post your question in the comments section below. It will be considered for future columns.

Question: A friend of mine and I were talking today about what it's like to be newly minted Ph.D.'s, working on our first jobs. We became more independent of our Ph.D. advisers throughout graduate school and the postdoc period, but we're curious about what comes next. We're both still involved with them in co-authored projects. However it feels a little odd since we're more like peers with our advisers now than we were as graduate students.

What does it mean to be more equal? Do we play different roles? What's the norm, and how big is the range? It used to be that we had "a right" to demand our advisers' time since we were paying students. Do we have those same privileges now?

Jenny: How you interact with your adviser after graduation will depend largely on how the two of you interacted during your training. For some Ph.D.'s, the professional and personal ties they developed with their advisers continue throughout their careers. Others are relieved to be rid of a relationship that may have been fraught with anxiety. And many people's feelings lie somewhere in between. Once you've secured your first academic position, your professional success is now dependent on the new relationships you develop at your new institution and in your field—whether or not you continue to have a warm relationship with your former adviser.

Julie: The adviser-advisee relationship begins to change for many graduate students and postdocs when they are first on the job market. That's often when both parties start to voice divergent opinions about the advisee's career goals. Perhaps you would like to apply to only a few institutions, while your adviser wants you to apply widely. Or it may be that you have unrealistic expectations of how much your adviser should support your job search. Such problems are not uncommon, yet students and postdocs who are in conflict with their advisers often feel isolated.

Jenny: Some departments have strong professional-development programs for Ph.D.'s, offering advice on the job market and having a placement chair who oversees the application process of each job candidate. On some campuses, the career-services office sponsors programs in which professors talk about the academic job search. Be sure to attend those talks. As you listen to professors speak about working with their advisees, note the topics you want to discuss with your own adviser.

Julie: Ideally, and in most cases, your adviser wants you to be successful on the job market. It's a good idea to sit down with your adviser and set some realistic expectations in advance of your search. An adviser may have specific ideas about the kinds of jobs or institutions for which you are best suited. For instance, your adviser may think you would be a strong candidate for openings at teaching-focused colleges but not as strong at top research universities. Or maybe you are an excellent researcher but have decided that a research career is not what you want. Be clear with your adviser about your goals. Knowing your own mind and acting on it is part of being a scholar and being your own person.

Jenny: The most stressful part of the job market is the profound uncertainty of securing a tenure-track position at all. That often puts an additional strain on the adviser-advisee relationship, particularly if you are interested in pursuing a nonacademic career and your adviser is either unable to help or uninterested in helping.

It's a challenging transition to make when your career plans begin to diverge radically from what your adviser might have hoped. Many Ph.D.'s who move out of the tenure-track path find that they need to develop new mentoring relationships with professionals outside of academe in order to change careers successfully.

Julie: If you've had a productive working relationship with your adviser, you may well be able to continue that collaboration once you've started your career. We know of several scientists who landed at teaching-focused colleges near their graduate or postdoc institution. They have continued to work with their advisers, spending some time in the summer in the adviser's lab or encouraging their current students to do research internships there. We know of social scientists who've worked with their advisers to co-write studies based on research that began while they were still graduate students.

Jenny: However—and we'd like to stress this—it's crucial for you as a junior scholar to establish yourself as an independent researcher and thinker early on in your career. That is particularly important if you are in a job where success in research is essential for getting tenure. That means developing projects that are distinct from the work you did as a graduate student or postdoc, and that show that you've moved beyond the work you did as someone's advisee.

Indeed, many job candidates will be asked during the hiring process for concrete evidence that they have projects in the pipeline that will distinguish their work from their advisers'.

Julie: To collect some practical examples, we interviewed a faculty member in the humanities to ask about his relationships with his former advisees.

Initially, he said, most of his former students went off on their own for a while—which is what you might expect from junior scholars establishing themselves as independent researchers. Those students who remained in the discipline and are professionally active are now his professional acquaintances.

Jenny: Don't forget that faculty members grow as mentors; they develop their mentoring expertise over time. The professor we interviewed said he had stayed in much closer touch with his recent Ph.D.'s than with those he'd worked with early in his career, and had been a more active mentor: "I think the reason for this is that, with the first group, I myself just wasn't that experienced, and didn't have too much perspective to offer them. I started directing dissertations pretty much as soon as I started as an assistant professor in the mid-1980s, and some of those students aren't much younger than I and by now they have done most of the things I've done, like chairing their department, serving as dean, and so on. But, come to think of it, as some of them now contemplate those sorts of experiences, I have had requests for advice from former students who never had asked for it before, or hadn't in years."

Julie: He also noted that recent Ph.D.'s seem to seek his advice much more often than students in the past. "With more recent students, I sometimes feel as though they hadn't really left, except that they are in most cases physically located somewhere else," he said. "But especially in the first few years, most of them don't want to take a step without consulting me. I don't think I'm the only one they ask for advice, by any means. Maybe this is more of a networking generation. But I have tended to put it down to the fact that I actually have now been around the block a few times.

"Also, I should add that with recent students I have shared some very close research interests, so the intellectual relationship tends to be somewhat more intense than in the past. But I also put that down to the fact that, just with the passage of time, I have a better idea of what I am doing and of how it fits into the field as a whole.

"Finally, we had a very good job market there for a while, and students had much less anxiety about launching their careers than is now the case. I think this also causes them to rely more on their advisers."

Jenny: We also spoke with a recent Ph.D. in engineering who did a postdoc for about a year before starting as an assistant professor last fall. "My relationship with my adviser remains strong after starting my first faculty position," he said. "I actually just finished submitting a large NIH proposal with him. We continue to collaborate on the research that I started when I joined his lab. Students in my research group have already started to collaborate with students from his lab. There is a natural division of projects which are mainly running in my lab and mainly in his, though things are quite fluid. My adviser has also made a point that there are projects and new collaborations at my university that he won't be a part of, so that I can establish my independence."

He added, "I still contact my adviser for career-advancement questions, and his advice remains invaluable. I believe we will continue to have a strong relationship in the future."

Julie: Before we close I'd like to comment on the reader's statement: "It used to be that we had 'a right' to demand our adviser's time since we were paying students." Most doctoral students are not actually "paying" students. To some extent doctoral students do have an unspoken "right" to demand their adviser's time, but it's not because they are "paying" for it. Most doctoral students are fully or partially supported by financial aid. The enterprise of earning a doctorate is not a situation in which you pay to earn a professional credential in a very structured program.

Unlike students getting law, medical, or business degrees, doctoral students are regarded as almost-peers or emerging scholars right from the start. Just as they develop research projects on their own, albeit with guidance from an adviser, so they negotiate the relationship with the adviser over time.

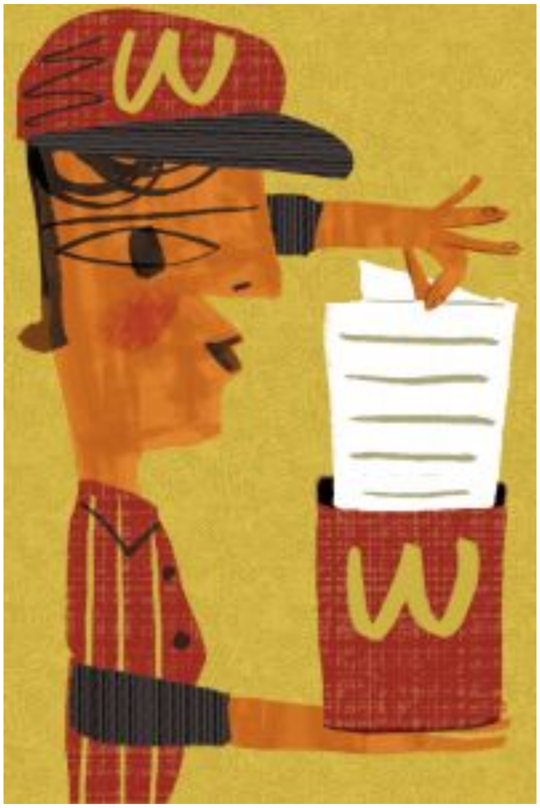
Jenny: As you finish your degree or come to the end of your postdoc, you'll find that your relationship with your adviser naturally changes. After all, you are moving from a time when the professor has a certain power over you to a time when the two of you will be more like peers. And, in that sense, just as you can't compel other professional colleagues to collaborate with you or provide feedback on your work, you cannot expect more from your former adviser than you might from another professional colleague.

Many scholars, however, continue to have warm relationships with their former advisers. It's not a requisite for professional success, but it does help. The onus is on you to keep your adviser abreast of your work, to network with him or her at conferences, or to seek his or her advice as you move forward.

Julie Miller Vick is senior associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jennifer S. Furlong is associate director of New York University's Office of Faculty Resources. They are the authors of "The Academic Job Search Handbook" (University of Pennsylvania Press). Send in your career questions to careertalk@chronicle.com, or post your question in the comments section below.

November 7, 2012

Eating an Elite Education at McDonald's



Mark Shaver for The Chronicle

Enlarge Image

By Jerry Dickens

I'm at a McDonald's, having just received two Big Macs and a large fries. The cardboard boxes plug "Another Golden Opportunity" for me to play McDonald's Monopoly. Each item also has a sticky tab on the front: "1 in 4 Wins." Better yet, the large fries comes with a second tab, emphasizing "Play Again."

For better or worse, I have always been prone to observations, numbers, nonlinear thought, and random escapades. It's been that way since before I remember, so this commentary comes with an apology to leafy, erudite, and politically minded colleagues for my indulgence into blatantly commercial Americana.

My three children and I are sitting down with our burgers for our weekly splurge on a family dinner out. I also have two crumpled letters from the university in my pocket—one praising its ability to maintain faculty salaries, the other asking me to donate to the institution.

I pull the first sticky tab on my burger and obtain "Pennsylvania Avenue." Intrigued, I lift the next three but get"North Carolina Avenue," "Illinois Avenue," and "Baltic Avenue."

And this is where my personality begins to show. I start to wonder, What are the real odds of winning? The odds are clearly stated in fine print, but are they true? I look around. The restaurant is empty of customers except for my three children and me. Leftovers from other customers lie scattered about. Some trays even have remains with unpulled sticky tabs. There are also the garbage bins, wiped clean on the outside. It seems an acceptable repository to go in search of more tabs, as long as our mining doesn't go too deep.

We collect 36. All but three come with messages urging us to "stay in the game." We eventually have a whole neighborhood of avenues, as well as a "Place," if I am reading through smeared ketchup correctly. Alas, and unsurprisingly, we are not winners.

Short of directly contacting McDonald's headquarters—and probably not even then—I have no way of learning the actual odds. It's all a game, one with bold statements, flashy packaging, and a series of quips, some coming with predictable and extraneous exclamation points. And that is how I ended up in McDonald's in the first place, with my crumpled letters full of similarly bold pronouncements.

I'm a professor of earth sciences at an elite private research university—one in the top 15, if you believe the oft-touted rankings pumped into my e-mail from the administration every month.

Now, I am the first to admit that I could save money by cutting costs in my family budget. We didn't need that vacation at a lake last summer, I don't really need to build a hummingbird garden, and my daughter definitely doesn't need advanced dancing classes. We also could scrap our weekly adventures through an array of fine fast-food dining establishments, although an evening at Taco Bell gets close to breaking even, if you swap water for sodas and convince your kids that they really like bean burritos. I also fully appreciate that most people, in the United States and definitely in places abroad, are worse off than we are. I should be grateful, and I am.

As I bite into my first Big Mac, all of that resonates along with some intriguing and basic facts. I can readily obtain the average salaries for academics at public universities across America. I can categorize the salaries by field and university profile. I can understand the metrics for pay in many cases. I can imagine why different academics receive different salaries. I also can read my university's extraordinary goals, lofty visions, and glossy brochures, filled with crisply manufactured blurbs espousing greatness, several with exclamation points. I can pull all the sticky tabs within this framework. I can even dig deep into the garbage for more data.

However, no matter how one minces the patties, my salary is significantly below average compared with those of commensurate positions across public research universities, including in my state. Other than a few good colleagues, who have assured me that they make slightly less or slightly more than me, I have no direct information on how my salary compares with other faculty members' pay at my university or other private universities. What several of us know, however, is that we, at least in earth science, make about 10 to 12 percent less than what's reported for similar positions in our field at public universities.

So, as I begin my second Big Mac, I ask myself: Are we having family night at McDonald's instead of sushi at Miyako's because I haven't published enough highly cited papers, I haven't pulled in sufficient external grants, I haven't taught effectively, I haven't dressed appropriately? Or some combination of those and myriad other reasons? Maybe I am just way below an average full professor. I can accept any of those possibilities, if outlined and explained.

Eventually, though, a basic problem arises: Being at an elite private university, I have no idea why I am paid what I am paid, and whether it is reasonable. I can arrive at a Fermi solution as to what I should receive, but the assumptions involve average salaries at public institutions, generic criteria for merit, and as best as I can figure, some pickles, onions, and sesame-seed buns.

In the end, I have no means to deduce the answer without directly contacting headquarters, upon which I receive, from the president, an emphatic message: "I can say unequivocally that it is not true that as a general matter that we pay faculty much less than other institutions," followed by "of course individual compensation decisions are made by departments and schools." And, from the chair and dean, vanilla-laced responses basically thanking me for expressing my concerns and saying they will look into this issue further.

I have, however, been told multiple times, and at all levels, that if I receive a firm and better offer from somewhere else, then I should bring it to everyone's attention. Wonderfully encouraging advice when you have three kids in school and you actually want to put roots into the ground and make a difference at your university.

I then pull out the crumpled letters and reread. The first, my annual letter of evaluation: "Our success is only made possible by the hard work, high ambitions, and accomplishments of our faculty. While many universities and businesses have been driven to layoffs, furloughs, and pay reductions, we are pleased that our university has been able to maintain salaries." The second letter, from a university committee: "It is time to reflect with pride on all that we have accomplished so far, and look ahead to all that we still hope to achieve. It is a time to pause and focus on this celebration and want to reach out to you once again to ask for your support with a pledge."

I wish, on some level, that I was discriminated against at my university. Forget about lawsuits against McDonald's for coffee that is too hot—there's money ripe for the taking at private universities with enormous endowments and no metrics for how people get paid. No matter how I twist things to search for an adequate explanation, though, I find that the problem is not me, but just a flat-out fail in Management 101. It's a failure that occurs in an academic environment where all becomes business and all revolves around money and image.

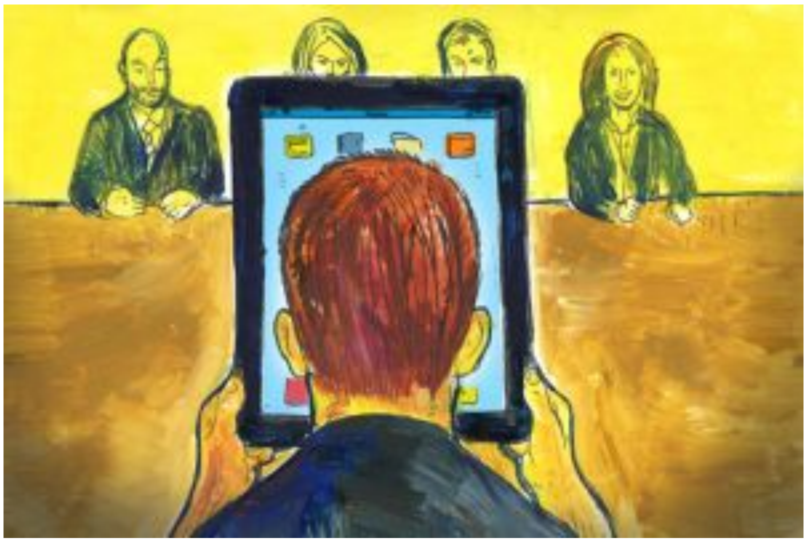
Putting down the letters, I glance at the empty Big Mac boxes. I realize that I just ate two, plus a large fries. One side of the box, in small print, kindly lists all the calories, protein, fat, carbohydrates, and sodium I have consumed from a corporation. On the other side, however, lies the iconic Monopoly guy, in a top hat, smiling "Greetings from Anywhere." It would be fantastic to be at a place, avenue, or even boardwalk on the Monopoly board that really wants to chase nutrition and substance.

So, would anyone in the administration at my elite university even comprehend the meaning of two empty Big Mac boxes arriving in the mail as a pledge, each box covered in hyperactive slogans and coated with special-sauce residue? I could even sign my pledge in ketchup. After all, a top goal at my institution is "to make a distinctive impact."

Jerry Dickens is a professor of earth sciences at Rice University.

June 20, 2012

iPads and Interviews: Why the Two Don't Mix



Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

Enlarge Image

By Shelly Weiss Storbeck

Search consultants in higher education are big users of technology. In fact, my firm prides itself on taking a "green" route to hiring. When we work with search committees, we encourage them to do all of their reading and preparation for the hire online, and they often come to meetings with their computers and iPads—as do we.

However, I may have witnessed a "we've gone too far" moment. I recently watched as a candidate tapped away on an iPad and a keyboard throughout a preliminary interview for a senior-level position. And I have to say, it just did not work.

I think I knew trouble lay ahead right when I greeted the candidate at the door of the interview room. I asked if I could help with the candidate's things, since it's easier to circulate around a room meeting people if your hands are not loaded down with stuff. The candidate promptly handed me the following items: iPad, iPad case, keyboard, paper notebook, and even a warm cup of Starbucks coffee. We encourage candidates to appear before search committees much like the president of the United States does for an interview with the press—with nothing in hand. (Watch President Obama sometime and notice how all of his stuff is carried by other people.) But the candidate who stood before me looked a successful shopper after a big office-supply sale.

After handing off all of those props, our candidate shook hands with the committee members and then sat in the "hot seat," took out the iPad (with stand) and keyboard, turned it on, and proceeded to take notes through the entire interview. The candidate also scrolled up and down the screen as various topics came up. Fifteen minutes into the interview, and I knew this person had lost the entire committee.

So what's wrong with a candidate using new technologies and gadgets while answering questions during a preliminary interview with a search committee?

First, if you're busily typing on a keyboard, you are unable to make meaningful eye contact with the committee members. Most of our candidate's focus—and thus, the committee's—was on the machinery, not on the candidate. A personal connection was never made. Next, with your face in your iPad, you look more like a college sophomore, not like someone who could run an organization. The need to "take notes" completely disguised our candidate's mastery of various topics. Finally, the candidate's whole setup was cumbersome, and even noisy. It took up four square feet at the end of the table; I even watched the chair of the search committee readjust his own interview notebook and glass of water to give the candidate more space.

The typing on the keyboard, the fiddling with the equipment, proved so distracting that most of the committee was not listening to the candidate's very thoughtful remarks but was completely lost in the sideshow going on in front of them.

All of which raises an obvious question for candidates: If an iPad is verboten, how are you supposed to keep track of questions from the search committee and remember what you learned during the interview?

This is one instance where the old-fashioned way is best. As search consultants, we always place a pad of paper and pen in front of candidates. But bring paper and pen with you, just in case. When you enter the interview room, interact with committee members, warmly shaking hands with each person and getting a visual of where people are sitting. If there is no paper and pen waiting for you at the interview table, once you've finished greeting people, quickly grab a small notepad and pen from your briefcase. Take notes here and there as the interview progresses. When it's over, and you are making your exit, take the notepad you've been provided (or brought) with you.

Afterward if you have questions about something that was said, you can easily gain access to the e-mail addresses of search-committee members and follow up with them. Better yet, work through the search consultant to recover the information you may need. The best way to take notes is immediately after the interview—on your way to catch a plane or train. Write down what you learned and what questions you might have if you are asked to move to the next step.

Remember, the most important part of the interview is not what details you retain from it, but rather the impression you leave with the search committee.

Did you show you knew something about each of them, particularly the students, if any served on the committee? Did you answer the committee members' questions succinctly and directly? Did you admit what you did not know? Did you dress the part, showing that you already think of yourself as a leader of the organization? Did you do extensive homework, showing that you have a network and that you cared enough about the committee's time to read everything you could find about the organization? Did you show that you have a sense of humor?

The purpose of the interview is to help the committee get of sense of you as an individual in a short period of time—to see if there is a fit between you and the organization. You won't be quizzed and tested at the end of it, I promise.

So iPads are great. I recently watched a group of conference presenters use them, and they were terrific tools which might be invaluable if a candidate is actually asked to make a presentation to a search committee for a second or final interview. As consultants, we use them all the time for site visits, since we are gathering so much data, and many of us (old-school types, who were given typing lessons in high school, thank goodness) actually type faster than we write. But if you are the candidate at the end of the interview table, doing a preliminary interview with a search committee that has not met you before, my advice is: Dazzle them with your preparation, intellect, presence, knowledge of the field, vision for the future of the organization, clarity of expression, interpersonal skills, and sense of humor. Leave the iPad in your briefcase.

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August 19, 2012

On Leaving Academe

Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

Enlarge Image

By Terran Lane

Earlier this year, I resigned from my position as an associate professor of computer science at the University of New Mexico; in July, I started as a software engineer at Google. Countless people, from my friends to my (former) dean, have asked, Why? Why give up an excellent—some say "cushy"—tenured faculty position for the grind of corporate life?

It's a good question. Tenure represents the ultimate in intellectual freedom; my colleagues in my department were talented, friendly, and incredibly innovative; and I was privileged to work with some excellent students, a number of whom would have fit in just fine at powerhouse institutions like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or Purdue University.

Honestly, the reasons are myriad and complex, and some of them are purely personal. But I wanted to lay out the ones that speak to larger trends at the university, in New Mexico, in academe, and in the United States in general. I haven't made this move lightly, and I think it's an important cautionary note to sound: The factors that have made academe less appealing to me will also affect other professors. I'm concerned that the United States—one of the innovation powerhouses of the world—will hurt its own future considerably if we continue to make educational professions unappealing.

Making a difference. Ultimately, I got into academic science to make a positive contribution in the world. My goal hasn't changed, but, for some of the reasons I outline below, it has become harder to achieve over time. Google is a strong example of an organization that actually is using advanced computer science to make a real, positive difference in the world. While it's also difficult to make an impact working at an immense company like Google, in the current climate it seems I have a better chance here than in academe.

Work-life imbalance. Immense amounts have been written about the imbalance issue, and I won't try to reprise the arguments here. Suffice it to say that the professorial life can be grueling, if you try to do the job well, and being posttenure doesn't make it easier. This is a widespread problem in academe, and my university was no different. As of my departure, the University of New Mexico had still not approved a unified parental or family-leave policy for faculty, let alone established consistent policies and support for work-life balance.

Centralization of authority and decrease of autonomy. In my time at the university, I served under four presidents, three provosts, and two deans. The consistent pattern of management changes was centralization of control and resources, and increased pressure on departments and faculty members. Those trends gradually, but quite noticeably, produced implicit and explicit attacks on faculty autonomy (less money under faculty control and more uncertainty). In turn, I (and many others) feel that those attacks subvert both teaching and research missions of the university.

Budget climate. A near-decade of two simultaneous foreign wars, topped off by the most brutal recession in two generations, has left federal and state budgets reeling. A poisonous political climate and a Congressional meltdown has destroyed any chance of coherent, reasoned budget planning.

In the face of such pressures, we have seen at least seven years of flat or declining support for federal science programs while state legislatures have slashed educational spending across the country. Together, those forces are crunching universities, which has led to additional pressure on faculty members. Professors are being pushed ever harder to win ever higher levels of federal research money precisely at a time when that money is ever tougher to come by.

Such trends hurt the university by putting the teaching mission at odds with the research mission and subjugating both to the quest for the elusive dollar. A recent policy change in my old university's engineering school, for example, uses teaching load as a punishment to goad professors into chasing grant money. (Indeed, the policy measures research success *only* as a function of dollars brought in. Strangely, research productivity doesn't enter the picture, let alone creativity.)

Hyperspecialization, insularity, and narrowness of vision. The economic pressures have also turned into intellectual pressures. When humans feel panicked, we tend to become more conservative and risk-averse—we go with the sure thing, rather than the gamble.

The problem is that creativity is all about exploratory risk. The goal is to find new things—to go beyond state-of-the-art and to discover or create things that the world has never seen. It's a contradiction to simultaneously forge into the unknown and to insist on a sure bet. Traditionally, U.S. universities have provided a safe home for that kind of exploration, and federal, state, and corporate dollars have supported it (incidentally, buying advanced research far cheaper than it would be cost in either industry or government, and insulating those entities from the risk). The combination has yielded amazing dividends, paying off at many, many times the level of investment.

In the current climate, however, all of those entities, as well as scientists themselves, are leaning away from exploratory research and insisting on sure bets. Most of the money goes to ideas and techniques (and researchers) that have proven profitable in the past, while it's harder and harder to get ideas outside of the mainstream to be accepted by peer review, supported by the university, or financed by grant agencies. The result is increasingly narrow vision in a variety of scientific fields and an intolerance of creative exploration. (My colleague Kiri Wagstaff, of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, has written an excellent analysis of one facet of this problem within our own field of machine learning.)

Poor incentives. The "publish or perish" and "procure funding or perish" pressures discourage exploration outside one's own specialty. It's hard to do exploratory or interdisciplinary research when it is unlikely to yield either novel publications or new grant money (let alone, say, help students complete their degrees) in your own field.

But many things that are socially important to do don't necessarily require novel research in all of the participating fields, so there's a strong disincentive to work on those projects. As just one example from my own experience: My research team was asked to help on a medical-school project that would actually help save babies' lives. But the statistical techniques needed for the project were already established, so there was nothing precisely publishable for my graduate students working on it and no good basis for new grant proposals from the work. Any time spent on it would delay students' progress toward their Ph.D. with nothing to show for it on their CV's. When you can't get credit for helping to save babies' lives, then you know there's something seriously wrong in the incentive system.

Mass production of education. There's been a lot of excitement in the media about Stanford University's 100,000-student courses in computer science, MIT's open-sourced classes, and other efforts at mass distance education. In some ways, those efforts really are thrilling—they offer the first truly deep structural change in how we do education in perhaps a thousand years. They offer democratization—opening up access to world-class education to people from all over the globe of diverse economic and social backgrounds. How many Srinivasa Ramanujans might we enable, if only we could get high-quality education to more people? But I have to sound three notes of caution.

First, I worry that mass production in this case will have the same effect that it has had on manufacturing for over two centuries: Administrators and regents, eager to save money, will push for ever larger remote classes and fewer faculty members to teach them. Are we approaching a day in which there is only one professor of computer science for the whole country?

Second, I suspect that the "winners win" cycle will distort academe the same way that it has industry and society. When freed of constraints of distance and tuition, why wouldn't every student choose a Stanford or MIT education over, say, the University of New Mexico? How long before we see the AT&T, Microsoft, or Google of academe? How long before 1 percent of the universities and professors garner 99 percent of the students and money?

Third, and finally, this trend threatens to kill some of what is most valuable about the academic experience—to both students and teachers. At the most fundamental level, education happens between individuals—a personal connection, however long or short, between mentor and student.

Whether it's answering a question raised in class, taking 20 minutes to work through a tricky idea during office hours, or spending years of close collaboration in a Ph.D.-mentorship relationship, the human connection matters to both sides. It resonates at levels far deeper than the mere conveyance of information—it teaches us how to be social together and sets role models of what it is to perform in a field, to think rigorously, to be professional, and to be intellectually mature. I am terribly afraid that our efforts to democratize the process will kill the human connection and sterilize one of the most joyful facets of this thousand-year-old institution.

Salaries. It has always been the case that academics are paid less—substantially so—than their comparable colleagues in industry. (That is especially true in highly competitive fields, such as science, technology, engineering, and math as well as various health fields, law, and certain other disciplines.)

Traditionally, universities compensate for the disparity with broad intellectual freedom, a flexible schedule, and the joy of mentoring new generations of students. But all of the trends I have outlined above have cut into those compensations, leaving faculty members underpaid, but with little to show for it. As one of my colleagues remarked when I announced my departure, "We're being paid partly in cool. If you take away the cool parts of the job, you might as well go make more money elsewhere."

Anti-intellectualism, anti-education, and attacks on science and academe. There is a terrifying trend in this country right now of attacking academe, specifically, and free thought and intellectualism, generally. Free thought is painted as subversive, dangerous, elitist, and (strangely) conspiratorial. ("That word. I do not think it means what you think it means.")

Universities are accused of inefficiency and professors of becoming deadwood after tenure or of somehow "subverting the youth." (Socrates's accusers made a similar claim before they poisoned one of the great thinkers of the human race.) Politicians attack science to score points with angry voters, religious fundamentalists, and corporate sponsors. Some elements of those feelings have always floated through the United States psyche, but in recent years they have risen to the level of a festering wound in the zeitgeist of the country.

Perhaps those who sling accusations at education have forgotten that the United States helped reshape millennia of social and economic inequity by spreading public education in the 19th century? Or that education has underlaid the majority of the things that have made this country great—fields in which we have led the world? Art, music, literature, political philosophy, architecture, engineering, science, mathematics, medicine, and many others? That the largest economy in the world rests on (educated) innovation, and that the most powerful military in human history is enabled by technological and engineering fruits of the educational system? That the very bones of the United States—the Constitution we claim to hold so dear—were crafted by highly educated political idealists of the Enlightenment, who firmly believed that freedom and a more just society are possible only through the actions of an enlightened and educated population of voters?

Frankly, it's sickening, not to mention dangerous. If the haters, fearers, and political opportunists have their way, they will gut one of the greatest institutions in human history and, in the process, will cut the throat of this country, draining its lifeblood of future creativity. Other countries will be happy to fill the gap, I'm sure.

There are other factors behind my decision, of course. Any life change is too complex to express in a short essay. Those are the major ones, though.

Nor am I necessarily done with academe forever. I'm going to give the industry track a try for a while, but I could well find myself back in higher education in the future. There are certainly many things I still find beautiful and joyful about faculty work. In the interim, I will look for other ways to contribute to society, other ways to help educate the future, and other ways to change the world.

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