

Academic Job Search

The system of higher education in the US is extremely complex. Therefore, the academic job search can vary depending on several factors:

- 1. Your Field** - The appropriate job search strategies differ depending on your field and subfield. It is important to research the job market for your field to know what strategies are best.
- 2. Type of Institution** - Job search strategies will also vary depending on the type of institution you are targeting, whether it is a large research university, small research university, four-year college, two-year college, or community college.
- 3. Prestige** - In general, universities with a national reputation put the most emphasis on research as a criterion of success for faculty members. Although faculty members at four-year colleges with a national reputation may be required to do substantial research, teaching is most often emphasized at local and regional universities and four-year colleges.

Once you've considered these factors, there are many questions you need to ask yourself:

- What are your short and long term goals?
- Considering the job market for your field, are temporary positions a common pathway or does that option run the risk of keeping you at that level?
- Who is your competition?
- Is it necessary to have your dissertation finished before applying? What are the risks of planning to finish it after you get the job?
- Is a post-doctorate position common or necessary for your field?
- What are the common hiring practices for your field? Are phone calls from advisors typical? Are they necessary?

Understanding the unique nature of the academic job search, the following sections include general guidelines that apply to the process:

I.	How do I prepare for the academic job search?	2
	A. Understand the general structure of academia.	
	B. Research the job market for your field.	
II.	When do I apply?	3
III.	Where do I apply?	5
	A. Evaluate relevant characteristics and considerations.	
	B. Learn about the resources you can use to identify openings.	
IV.	What do I need to have prepared?	6
	A. Prepare the necessary written materials.	
	B. Learn about and practice interviewing skills.	

Revised 2/10/04

I. How do I prepare for the academic job search?

A. Understand the general structure of academia.

Permanent Structure (“tenure-track route”)

The structure of academia has been dominated by the tenure system. In most institutions, the system leads from assistant professor, to associate professor (with tenure), to full professor. Obtaining tenure generally translates as status as a standing member of the faculty with full rights of participation in institutional decision-making. Also, tenure is close to a lifetime commitment to the faculty member, assuming there is no economic disaster or conviction of a criminal activity.

Temporary Structure (outside the school’s structure of permanent employment)

Tenure-track positions in many institutions have been replaced by a variety of “temporary” positions such as instructorships, lectureships, visiting and research assistant/associate professorships. These positions exist to teach introductory courses, replace faculty members who are on sabbatical, or to allow individuals capable of securing research funds to be associated with the university.

Usually temporary positions do not result in a “foot-in-the-door” for permanent positions. When tenure-track positions do become available, national searches are typically conducted.

Academic Administration

Those interested in academic administration usually start by taking on more administrative and committee duties than their normal share within the department. The movement toward academic administration typically begins after obtaining tenure, and more often after becoming a full professor. However, at times this track is possible without a prior teaching position. A typical pattern might lead from department chair, to dean, to provost, usually the chief academic officer. This pattern may lead to the position of president in some schools; others choose a president with considerable experience in a profession, business, or government.

B. Research the job market for your field.

The following resources can be helpful for finding information:

- ERIC – the education database found at most libraries
- Articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*
- Scholarly associations and journals
- Alumni information found at Career Center or graduate dean’s office
- Department chair, advisor, faculty members, other students
- Conferences

□ When do I apply?

General Guidelines

Most academic jobs are advertised approximately one year before they will begin. Most likely, you will begin your job search while finishing your dissertation. Discuss with your advisor when you should begin your search, specifically the pros and cons of being an applicant with a completed degree versus one with an unfinished dissertation. International students should investigate visa issues that can affect the timetable.

Timetable for Applying for Jobs That Begin in September

Two Years Before

- Make sure all members of your dissertation committee are selected. Consider getting a December degree that enables you to apply with “degree in hand.” (Foreign nationals, however, should consider the visa implications of this timing.) Learn about conference dates and locations. Plan to attend and if feasible, to give a presentation. Learn deadlines for submitting papers.
- Learn about all the important sources of job listings in your field.
- Give thought to your long-range goals and consider the kinds of jobs you will wish to apply for. If your plans will have an impact on a spouse or partner, begin to talk with that person about acceptable geographic considerations.

Summer, Fifteen Months Before

- Make sure your dissertation will be finished no later than the summer before the job begins, and preferably earlier. In some fields many institutions will not consider you without a Ph.D. in hand.
- Discuss your plans with your advisor and any others in the department who may be interested. If they don’t think you will be ready to go on the market until the following year, consider their point of view very seriously. If you begin a new position and have not yet completed your dissertation, you will start off behind schedule in terms of the “tenure clock.”
- Renew contacts with faculty members whom you may know at other institutions.
- Consider setting up a credentials file at the Career Center. Get letters of recommendation from those with whom you will have no further significant contact.
- Prepare your vita.
- Consider giving a paper at a major conference in your field or submitting an article or articles to major journals in your field. Find out deadlines and calls for papers.

Fall, Twelve Months Before

- Finalize and update your vita.
- Arrange for letters of recommendation to be written.
- Be prepared to provide an employer with a copy of the first chapter of your dissertation, a research paper, your vita, and a copy of your transcript.
- Keep working on your dissertation!
- Learn about and practice interviewing skills.
- Watch carefully for job listings and apply for everything that interests you. If you notice that advertisements request other written materials (e.g., dissertation abstract, statement of research interest), take time now to prepare them. The first cover letters you write may take longer to compose than subsequent ones.
- Continue to keep in close touch with your advisor.

- Consider making a few direct inquiries at departments that particularly interest you (what you are most likely to discover in this way are non-tenure track positions), if you can define reasonable criteria for selecting departments.
- Review the literature in your field and subfield in preparation for interviews.
- Check to see that letters of application have been received.

Eight Months Before

- Interviewers will ask you about your long-range research plans. Even if you are so immersed in your dissertation that you can't see beyond it at the moment, take time to give some thought to where your research will lead.
- Many conferences are held during this time. It is important to attend them and take advantage of the opportunity they provide for the exchange of information.
- Prepare carefully for each interview. If you give a presentation as part of an interview day on campus, practice it in advance. Remember to send thank you letters.
- Continue to look, apply, and interview for positions.
- This may be a stressful time. Plan to take some breaks for relaxation and renewal.

Six Months Before

- Continue to apply for and interview for positions, although most will have been announced by now.
- You may begin to get offers. If you need more time to make a decision about an offer, don't hesitate to ask for it. You will, however, have to abide by whatever time frame you and the employer agree on for your decision. You don't need to be totally open with everyone at this stage, but you must be completely honest. When you do accept a position, consider your acceptance a binding commitment.
- If the offers you want are not coming in, don't think that you must take absolutely any job that is offered to you, whether you want it or not. The job market will come around again next year. Talk with your advisor and others about the best way to position yourself for next year's market. You can also keep watching for one-year appointments, which are often announced later than tenure-track positions.
- After you have accepted a job, take time to thank everyone who has been helpful.

(Timetable was adapted from the *Academic Job Search Handbook* by Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick. Copyright © 1992 by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Reprinted with permission.)

III. Where do I apply?

A. Evaluate relevant characteristics and considerations.

When deciding where to apply, think about relevant factors such as the institutional characteristics, departmental characteristics, geographic considerations, personal considerations, and your competitiveness.

B. Learn about the resources you can use to identify openings.

1. Professional Associations

What they do:

- Associations produce one or more scholarly journals of refereed articles.
- They hold conferences which include research presentations.
- Many provide job-related services.

How to find them:

- Check with your advisor.
- Consult library resources such as the National Trade and Professional Associations Directory (NTPA) and the Encyclopedia of Associations.

2. National and Local Publications

- Please refer to the pages at the back of this handout for specific associations, web addresses, and other resources identified by the Career Center and the Carnegie Mellon community.
- Employment sections of local newspapers are most useful for finding part-time teaching jobs or positions in small two-year colleges.

3. Networking Contacts

- a. Advisors and mentors
- b. Other faculty members
- c. Peers in the department
- d. Professional associations
- e. People at other institutions whose work interests you
- f. Alumni from your department who have been appointed as faculty at other schools

IV. What do I need to have prepared?

A. Prepare the necessary written materials.

When applying to academic positions, you may be asked to submit numerous materials such as letters of recommendation, a resume, curriculum vita, credential or dossier, and/or cover letter.

Letters of Recommendation

- Three is the typical number of letters requested.
- Allow plenty of time for the letters to be written. The people you ask to write letters of recommendation for you may have received similar requests from others.

Whom to ask?

- It is common to ask your dissertation advisor and anyone with whom you've worked closely.
- It is acceptable to have letters from scholars outside your school, if they know your work well.
- It is generally not convincing to have letters from students you have taught unless applying to a school that emphasizes teaching.
- It is okay to have a faculty member quote a student about your teaching.
- For professional fields such as business and architecture, a letter from a former employer or client may be helpful.

How to ask?

- Ask potential references if they would feel comfortable writing you a strong recommendation.
- Discuss your plans with them.
- Provide them with helpful materials such as a vita, copy of a paper you wrote, a dissertation chapter, or statement of your research goals.
- Search committees will sometimes call a reference. It is very important to keep them informed about your job search.

Where to keep them?

Some choose to manage their own letters; you may also choose to keep your letters on file at the Career Center. At your request, the Career Center will send your file to specified schools. You may have more than three letters in the file but will want to choose the most supportive and relevant three or four letters to send, depending on the school. (For information on setting up a credential file, please contact the Career Center.)

Some Definitions

- *Resume*- a document that summarizes qualifications, education, experience, skills, and other items related to your objective. Suitable categories could include nonacademic pursuits, community activities, and hobbies.
- *Curriculum Vitae, Vita, CV*- a special type of resume usually used within the academic community. Highlights earned degrees, teaching and research experience, publications, presentations, and related activities.
- *Credentials or Dossier*- do not have a standard meaning. Typically these words refer to a cover letter, vita, and letters of recommendation (possibly a transcript). Departments may offer advice on typical meanings for your field. The only way to be absolutely sure what is meant by these terms is to call the institution and ask.

Curriculum Vitae

1. *Format*

- There is no one correct and proper format for every CV.
- Format should be determined by the amount of information and the choice of strengths and achievements to be emphasized. Realize that once you are a serious applicant, your vita will need to withstand very close and careful reading; however, initially it may receive no more than a 30 second skim.
- To promote easy skimming, avoid long sentences or huge blocks of text.
- Typographical errors or misspellings can remove you from consideration.
- Overall appearance, paper quality, neatness, and readability must all make a positive impression.

2. *Length*

- A CV is different from a resume due to its content not its length.
- The relevance of information is more important than the number of pages.

3. *Content*

Include information on the following three essential categories:

a. Identification:

- Clearly state your name, address, and telephone number.
- You may list home, office, and fax numbers as well as email and internet addresses.
- To avoid confusion, the name you use on your CV should be consistent with other materials such as your transcript and letters of recommendation. If your name appears differently on these documents, for example, a professor using your nickname, list your nickname in parentheses.

b. Education:

- Include information about graduate and undergraduate degrees including academic discipline, names and locations of degree-granting institutions, dates degrees were offered, and honors.
- You may choose to list or omit attendance at institutions other than those which granted you degrees. You may want to list them to highlight specialized study, geographic location, or type of institution.

c. Relevant Experience:

- List teaching, research, and related experiences including graduate assistantships, internships, and postdoctoral fellowships.
- Including names of mentors or advisors with a prestigious reputation in your field can help to get you noticed.
- Provide only completely accurate information! Even the slightest discrepancy could remove you from further consideration.
- Exclude irrelevant information; stay focused on job-related abilities and potential.
- Exclude personal data such as photographs; race, religion, and ethnicity; age, date or place of birth; physical characteristics; or family information.
- Use short sentences beginning with action verbs.

Tailoring Your CV

Because institutions vary in their mission, focus, and goals, you should tailor your CV to the specific institution to which you are applying. Although institutions rarely have such a clear-cut distinction between a teaching and research focus, the following guidelines may be helpful in tailoring your CV.

Research Emphasis: If you are applying to institutions with graduate or professional programs that place significant emphasis on research, as well as teaching, focus on:

- scholarly productivity
- research interests
- research experience
- areas of specialty
- field or laboratory experience
- technical expertise
- grant writing
- collaboration with others recognized in your field

Teaching Emphasis: If you are applying to institutions whose primary mission is undergraduate education, focus on:

- teaching experience
- teaching interests
- generalist qualifications
- student contact
- experience or attendance at similar institutions
- applicable teaching training and licensure

Submitting your CV at Conferences

Be sure to adhere to conference guidelines such as page limitations. CV's, which exceed such limitations, may simply be discarded. If necessary, a complete version of your vita can be submitted to an interested employer after the conference.

Uses for the CV Outside of the Job Search

- merit/tenure reviews
- publishing
- grant applications
- consulting
- leadership roles, awards, or special recognition
- sabbatical or fellowship opportunities
- speaking engagements

Note: Because your CV will be required for many other purposes other than a job search, it is important to keep it continually updated throughout your career.

Additional Materials

You may also be asked to send a dissertation abstract, summary of research plans, chapter of dissertation, or entire paper. Requirements vary from field to field. Check with your department for specifics in addition to the following general guidelines:

Abstract

- Follow the conventions for your field.
- Length is usually one or two pages.
- Use active tense.
- Stress findings and conclusions whenever possible.
- Briefly describe how your research fits into the broader context.
- Seek feedback from your advisor.

Statement of research plans

- Preparing your statement of research plans provides good practice for interviews.
- Briefly mention any plans to publish dissertation or turn it into a book.
- Be sure to describe future plans which are independent of your dissertation or advisor's research.
- Provide a brief context for your research, including what others have done and describe your research plans.
- Write clearly and concisely.
- Aim to make the reader want to ask further questions.

Other requests could include the following:

- syllabus
- proposal for a course you would like to teach
- teaching philosophy
- portfolio or slides of your work (visual fields)

Cover Letter

Note: For detailed information, please read the “Employment Letters” Career Brief, which is linked to the Career Center’s home page. The following are a few tips and guidelines that pertain specifically to the academic job search.

- Always send a cover letter along with your vita.
- Address letters to a specific individual. Consult the Yearbook of Higher Education and college catalogs for names of department chairs. It is recommended that you call to verify information and the correct spelling of names.
- Indicate knowledge of the institution. Research!
- Use direct and concise language.
- Length is typically one page for sciences and social sciences. It is usually longer (up to two pages) for humanities.

Format:

1. Salutation

- Spell out the word “professor.”

2. First Paragraph

- Explain why you are writing and how you became aware of the position.

3. Middle Paragraph

- Focus on the highlights and qualifications which are most relevant to the position. For example, when applying to a large research institution, it is important to emphasize your interest in the department. When applying to a small college, it is also helpful to indicate your interest in the institution.

4. Final Paragraph

- Offer to send additional information/materials.
- Thank the reader.
- Indicate how you can be reached.

5. Closing

B. Learn about and practice interviewing skills.

Be prepared to discuss your dissertation, future research interests, teaching experience and philosophy, and your interest in the institution. When preparing for these types of questions, be sure to review commonly asked questions.

Your Dissertation

- Be able to explain your work to a variety of people, from experts in your field to deans outside your department.
- Begin with a brief summary (about one paragraph) to provide the listener with a general understanding of your work, elicit interest, and convey its importance.

Your future research interests

- Be able to discuss interests, beyond your dissertation, at a convincing level of detail.
- Convey enthusiasm about your ideas.

Teaching

- Be prepared to discuss your teaching approach, successful teaching experiences, and new courses you would be prepared to offer, including the suggested text. (Try to find out what text the department is currently using.)
- Be open to teaching introductory courses.

Your interest in the institution

- Research the school and faculty members by reading catalogs, college guides, and using library indices and databases.
- You may need to convey interest most strongly at less prestigious universities and four-year colleges because they take pride in their distinctive institutional personality and tend to hire people who fit in well.

Typical Questions for You

About Research

- Why did you choose your dissertation topic?
- Can you tell us briefly what theoretical framework you used in developing your research?
- Of course you've read _____? (names an unfamiliar article/book related to your dissertation).
- If you were to begin it again, are there any changes you would make in your dissertation?
- In doing your research, why didn't you _____? (This question can take many forms. You are being asked to respond appropriately to an intellectual challenge to your work.)
- What contribution does your dissertation make to the field?
- You realize that several members of this department tend to approach the subject from a very different perspective than does your advisor...
- Tell me about your dissertation (asked in a meeting with a dean who knows very little about your field).
- Why didn't you finish your dissertation sooner?
- I see you have very few publications...
- What are your research plans for the next two/five/ten years?
- What are your plans for applying for external funding over the next few years?
- Do you plan to apply for any major funding? If yes, what sources?

About Teaching

- Are you a good teacher? Why?
- How do you feel about having to teach required courses?
- What is your approach to teaching introductory _____?
- How do you motivate students?
- How would you encourage students to major in our field?
- In your first semester you would be responsible for our course in _____. How would you structure it? What textbook would you use?
- Many of our students are probably (more/less academically talented; older/younger) than those you've become used to at your institution. How successful would you be with them?
- What is your teaching philosophy?
- If you could teach any course you wanted to, what would it be?
- Have you had any experience with the case study method? If so, please describe one of your experiences.
- What do you think is the proper relationship between classroom instruction and professional exposure?

About Your Willingness to Participate in the Department and School

- Can you summarize the contribution you would make to our department?
- What level of interest do you have in becoming involved in committee work?
- Why are you interested in our kind of school?
- What institutional issues particularly interest you?

About Your Career and Personal Choices

- If you have more than one job offer, how will you decide?
- How do you feel about living in a small college town like this in an isolated area?
- I can't imagine why a young person like you would want to go into this field...
- I understand your spouse is completing his/her Ph.D. What if you receive job offers in different locations? (This questions is not legal in most contexts, but you should be prepared for it.)
- What do you do in your spare time?
- Who else is interviewing you?
- What will it take to persuade you to take this job?
- What kind of salary are you looking for?

Questions for Them

The right answer to this is always “yes,” or you risk appearing uninterested. Prepare some questions in advance, but, above all, ask questions that show a response to what you have learned from the interviewers, and that are lively, rather than formulaic. Questions about salary and benefits are not appropriate at the interview. Wait until you are offered a job to ask about these matters.

(“Typical Questions for You” and “Questions for Them” were adapted from the *Academic Job Search Handbook* by Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick. Copyright © 1992 by the University of Pennsylvania Press. Reprinted with permission.)

Illegal Questions

- Employers cannot legally ask questions that lead to discrimination on the basis of race, sex, marital status, religion, national origin, or physical disability.
- Review interviewing books for examples of illegal questions and options for addressing them.

Attire

- Dress to convey a professional appearance (clothes properly fitted and pressed, shoes shined, etc.).
For men, this generally means a suit or pants and a jacket.
For women, this generally means a dress, suit, or skirt with a jacket.
- Dress more casually for informal events which may be part of an all-day visit.
- Bring a portfolio or briefcase to keep papers and handouts organized.

What to Bring

- Extra copies of your vita, dissertation abstract, statement of research plans, and additional materials
- Samples of course syllabi, reprints, and article abstracts to show if necessary
- Enough handouts for your presentation (campus interview)
- Accessories or repair materials such as buttons or an extra pair of contacts that might be needed in case of emergency
- When flying, carry-on luggage packed with all essential items

Conference or Convention Interviews

- The importance of conference interviews varies by field.
- Conference interviews can be stressful and confusing; remember that other candidates face the same conditions.
- Practice before the interview to ensure that you can convey key information in a limited amount of time.
- Be prepared to be interviewed by a group, usually three to six people.
- When scheduling interviews, allow enough time to account for interviews that run late and traveling time from one location to another.

Campus Interviews

- The search committee will be assessing intangible qualities such as how you would “fit in.”
- Daylong interviews can include a presentation to faculty, lecture to a class, group interview, several individual meetings, meals, and a reception.
- Since you will be meeting with many people, remember to be equally enthusiastic. The tenth person you meet will form a first impression of you just like the first person you met.

The Presentation and Questions

A poor seminar is seldom overlooked. If faced with a tough or unreasonable question, stay calm. Be confident enough to admit if you don't know something.

You will be evaluated on:

- Past research
- How you handle questions and think on your feet
- Stage presence and sense of humor

Social Events

- Realize these are also part of the screening process.
- Follow your host's lead in terms of how much to discuss professional versus social topics.
- Show you can fit in by initiating conversations with others, displaying interest in the people you are with, etc.
- If others are drinking, you can do so if you wish. However, it is not advisable to have more than one drink.

It's a Two-Way Process

Don't forget the interview is a two-way process and your chance to evaluate the institution. Consider:

- the location and physical setting
- the students
- the department
- the broader institution