

Job Search in the Time of the Pandemic: Advice and Reflection Amidst the Challenges

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Introduction

Looking for a full-time job in academia is challenging for both first-timers and those with multiple job hunt experiences due to the highly competitive job market. Especially, tenure-track faculty positions have always been competitive: Only 10% to 30% of Ph.D. holders get a tenure-track professor job (Effective Altruism Forum, 2020). The current COVID-19 pandemic and the declined economy make finding tenure-track faculty positions in educational or instructional technology fields harder than ever. The U.S. Department of Labor reported that state and local education employment dropped in both public and private sectors in almost all states due to funding cutbacks during the pandemic (Rosewicz & Maciag, 2020). As a result of the pandemic, faculty of all types, especially adjunct faculty, were faced with job losses or salary changes across all institutional classifications (Sziron, 2021). International students who need H1B and Green Card sponsorships face additional challenges in finding academic jobs at this time due to the increasing number of universities that decline the immigration sponsorship because of the financial difficulties as well as the political climate

This article provides advice and reflections to those engaging in a tenure-track faculty job search in the field of educational and instructional technology. Although the paper's focus is geared more towards international students in America who seek tenure-track faculty positions, the advice provided will undoubtedly apply to other job-seeking students. The authors, tenured or tenure-track faculty members, and former international students in American universities bring together experiences looking for tenure-track positions in instructional technology and evaluating candidates for tenure-track positions as faculty members. The authors identified four strategic areas for consideration and discussion when students apply for tenure-track and other types of jobs in academia: reading job advertisements, creating documentation, preparing for interviews, and making online or campus presentations. Further, they discussed critical strategies and shared insights in managing the challenges of the job search.

Reading the Job Ads

A careful reading of the job advertisement or job description is the first crucial step in job hunting. The job advertisement describes what kind of person the organization is looking for, including the required and preferred qualifications. An example of a typical required qualification in educational technology is a K-12 teaching experience due to a focus on K-12 teacher education. Another significant type of program in the field focuses on corporate training. For such programs, work experiences in industry or the private sector could ensure getting a tenure-track job. If your capabilities are significantly different from the description in the job advertisement, this may not be an opportunity for you. Again, only 10% to 30% of Ph.D. holders get a tenure-track professor job (Effective Altruism Forum, 2020), which shows that the job market is highly competitive. If the job description does not make you feel "this sounds like me," then the chance of you getting the job will be slim. There are plenty of candidates in the market, and some candidates would certainly have qualifications that match the job descriptions.

However, you should always apply for the job even if it does not entirely match your qualifications as long as you have some capabilities that match the job description. In many cases, you would find yourself meeting parts of the required and preferred qualifications. It is a difficult decision to make, choosing if you give up or try. However, due to the competitive job market of tenure-track positions, it is probably better to apply for more jobs than fewer. Another reason for the encouragement to apply is that the job description is about an ideal candidate. In reality, the institutes rarely find a perfect match in their searching efforts. Each candidate is unique, and so are you. You might have some qualifications that are not listed in the job descriptions but are helpful in the department.

Once you decide to apply for the position, you want to make every effort to show your match to the advertised work. The Search Committee, who selects and recommends the candidate to hire, will evaluate your job application based on how close you are to the job description. You are not allowed to lie in your job application. You cannot list experiences that you do not have. However, you can strategically highlight your knowledge and expertise that are pertinent to the job description.

Documentation: Letter, CV, and References

As discussed in the previous section, showing your match to the job description is what you need to accomplish for your successful job hunt. The first step to show this match is to tailor your job documents to each position. In typical universities, tenure-track faculty members are evaluated based on their research, teaching, and service accomplishments, so you want to list and discuss your experiences in terms of the three areas. Research accomplishments include peer-reviewed journal publications and external and internal grant experiences. The best teaching experience would be your experience teaching a class as a solo teacher in the field of instructional design. However, other types of teaching experiences count, such as a solo teaching experience in another area or experience working as a teaching assistant in the field. Since the job market is very competitive, the key to your success is how many publications and teaching experiences you accumulate before the job hunt. While service experiences tend to be less emphasized than research and teaching experiences, you certainly want to have some service experiences inside

and outside your school. Services for academic organizations, such as Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), will look strong in your job application. Such experiences at an academic organization will help your networking with faculty members in the field, too. The following sections discuss specific advice for each application material.

Cover letters

It would be best to describe what you have accomplished in your cover letter or letter of intent. Typically, the letter opened up a narrative about your interest in the position and followed by your academic credentials. A good cover letter should provide what the institution is looking for, and thus, it should vary according to the job descriptions. Suppose you are applying for a research-focused job. In that case, your cover letter will talk mainly about your research accomplishments, such as peer-reviewed journal publications and external and internal grants that you have received, and the relevant research experiences you have had.

Meanwhile, suppose the position is more teaching-focused, such as a tenure-track position at a teaching institution or a clinical professor job in a research university. In that case, you want to spend more time talking about your teaching experience in the cover letter. While most tenure-track positions require strong qualifications both in research and teaching, some universities also emphasize service experience more.

In general, your letter should highlight the required qualifications based on your past and current experiences. Also, you may try your best to address the preferred qualifications. For example, working as a research or teaching assistant could extend your presentation as long as possible, well-aligned with the preferred capabilities.

In addition to the cover letters, some universities ask for research or service statements and teaching philosophies. The content of such a write-up would overlap with the cover letter content, but it would provide you with more space to discuss your experience. Many books and online articles are available on how to write a cover letter and other job documents for an academic job search, so you should consult such resources. Additionally, you could ask for feedback from your professor on your job documents. If your professor has experience serving on a search committee, they would have some insights into preparing robust job applications.

Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV)

CV is the factual list of your accomplishments, experiences, and competencies, and capabilities, including your educational degrees, professional experiences, research and scholarly achievement, and service work you have done. Career counselors suggest tailoring each CV when applying for different jobs. Suppose you are applying for a tenure-track assistant professor job in a research one university. Your CV's content should highlight more about your research accomplishment and relevant research experiences according to the job description. In this case, your research accomplishment usually comes before your teaching experiences in the CV.

Other knowledge and skills you could highlight in your CV could be related to research tools and applications. For example, being proficient in using the SPSS program to conduct quantitative

analysis, experienced in using NVivo to conduct qualitative data analysis, skillful in visualizing both quantitative and qualitative data, and proficient in analyzing video data are highly appreciated research skills. Finding a way to present these essential competencies you have in your CV is vital too. Your CV should reflect what you have done and demonstrate your commitment to and passion for the field of professional service. Like your educational background, research accomplishment, and teaching experiences, your professional assistance in your CV represents who you are and what you have done as a professional.

To be successful at a tenure-track job search, you would want to have at least three or more articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Although having a first-authored paper would make your profile significantly stronger, co-authored publications also count, primarily if published in peer-reviewed journals. The CV must be factual and does not have many places to "tailor" it to match each job description. You can still tailor your CV to be research-focused by having the list of publications and grants at the beginning of the CV or make it more teaching-focused by listing your teaching experiences first.

Letter of Reference

Finally, reference letters also should demonstrate the match between your qualifications and job descriptions. Although your references decide the content of your recommendation letter, you can communicate with them individually about the nature of the jobs you are applying for and what kind of experiences you wish them to emphasize in their recommendation letters. It is also advisable to provide your references with your cover letter or letter of intent for the job application and your updated CV, both of which would provide your contacts with more focused information about the job you are applying for.

Interview Preparation: Phone, Zoom, and One-Way Video Recording

Once you successfully pass the search committee members' document review, you could move to the next step --- an interview. Usually, there are two interview phases: the initial and the campus interviews. Before the pandemic, search committee members interview candidates by phone. Then, with new technologies, they started interviewing using web conferencing applications such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Webex. The same rule of showing your match to the job description persists in your interviews. Additionally, due to the stressful nature of job interviews, your preparation will be critical for achieving positive results.

The first round of interviews usually happens remotely, either by a voice-only traditional phone call or by a video call using Zoom, Skype, and so on. In either case, you want to prepare an environment without distraction. You want to be in a quiet place so that the search committee will hear your voice, and you can listen to their voices.

Initial Interview

Format. The search committee chair facilitates the interview meeting with each member, asking at least a specific question. Sometimes, the search committee will ask permission to record the

interview session to share with non-attending members. In the end, you are allowed to ask questions about the search.

However, do not be surprised if the search committee asks you to video record yourself answering interview questions. Not many colleges or universities are conducting this one-way online interview, but some places do. Your computer camera is activated to record your answers to specific questions given a time limit without the search committee members. You have an opportunity to redo your recorded response once or twice if not satisfied.

Preparation. If you are going for a phone interview, you will face another type of difficulty. It would be best if you talked to multiple people on the phone. Since, in most cases, you don't know the voices of everyone in the search committee, you would have a hard time identifying who is speaking. If you can learn the names of the search committee before the interview, find their information online and print out their photos. Seeing their pictures while talking on the phone could make you feel less stressed in this awkward setting of talking to multiple people at a time.

In the case of video interviews, be sure that you have a secure and robust internet connection. Internet interruption will result in a stressful interview and will not help your success. Make sure to dress business casual to show your respect as well as commonsense. If you are not sure of what "business casual" means, ask for advice from your professors and store staff. Check how the environment would look through the camera, too. The background must be clean so that you would look professional. The light probably does not want to be so dark, so you do not look creepy, either!

Campus Interview

Format. At the initial interview, the search committee will use the output to decide whether to invite you or not as a candidate for a campus or onsite interview. While waiting for an invitation, it is a good practice to send a thank-you note via email to the search committee chair for the opportunity to interview.

Once you pass the phone or the video interviews, the next step would be an invitation for the on-campus interview. Most candidates cannot come this far, so you must be very proud of yourself if you get to this final stage of the job hunt. However, you should also be ready that this last step would be the most stressful, tiring, and scary part of the job hunting journey.

The on-campus interview would consist of interviews with the search committee, the department chair, and the Dean. Sometimes students in the department will interview you as well. Hopefully, by now, you already know about the Search Committee members. Still, you will also need to do your homework to learn about the Department Chair and Dean and the missions, agendas, and initiatives in the Department, School, and the University.

Preparation. The on-campus interview could be a stressful experience at the get-go. But interviews are not the only tasks during the campus visit. If you happen to receive an invitation to interview in another state, the campus visit starts as soon as you arrive at the nearby airport.

Typically, the search committee chair or member will come to the airport to pick you up and offer you a ride to the campus, restaurant, and hotel. Yes, you would most likely have a two-day visit. You will fly in at the end of the first day and interview and fly out the following day.

On-campus interviews are essential because everyone evaluates or judges if you are the right fit for the position and the department, college, and university. The search committee chair or members gather as much information about you at every opportunity, such as airport pick-up/drop-off, dinner, or campus tour. You can only relax when you are in the hotel by yourself or in the restroom! Many consider the campus visit as the most tiring and stressful step in the job search.

Presentation Preparation

Additionally, in the cases of research-focused universities, you would be asked to provide a Job Talk where you present your research in front of the Search Committee and other faculty members in the department. The Job Talk looks very similar to your dissertation defense if this helps you visualize how it looks.

Finally, in most cases, except for some research-focus universities, you will have another challenging task to complete, i.e., teaching demonstration. You will provide a lesson, typically about 45 minutes, in front of the search committee and other faculty members. Sometimes, the teaching demonstration happens before a group of students in the department. All groups evaluate your potential as a teacher in the program. It would be best if you showed your ability to teach content and have effective interactions with students. You would feel very awkward and nervous to teach in front of the people judging you, but a teaching demonstration is an excellent opportunity to showcase your teaching skills. In most universities, successfully teaching students is critical for professors, so you want to prepare well to impress professors and students in the teaching demonstration.

Since the campus visit is so busy, stressful, and tiring, make sure to sleep well before the campus visit. You have a lot to prepare, but you will not have a successful campus visit if you sacrifice your sleep. Since teaching demonstrations and Job Talks happen at many universities, it is a great idea to prepare for them even before getting invited to a campus visit. In this way, you would feel less stressed and panicked even if asked to visit a campus in a week!

Other Things to Consider

While getting a sponsorship is critical if you are an international student, you need to recognize that fewer and fewer universities sponsor H1B and Green Cards due to the declining economy. If the job description says that the university will not provide the sponsorship while you need it, do not waste your time applying for the position. They cannot support you no matter how much you need it. Sometimes you figure out that the university does not provide sponsorship at the interview. Then, please take it as a great interview practice opportunity. Often, you don't know if they give the support until you go to the final round. You might feel tempted to ask if they provide the sponsorship, but it is usually best not to ask about "what they provide you" unless you get the job offer. Too many people negotiate before even getting a job, which gives a wrong

impression. Once the Search Committee is attracted to you enough to provide you with the job offer, that is when you get the privilege to negotiate for sponsorship and other requests.

You can also refer to books on tenure-track job hunting, such as "The Professor is in: The essential guide to turning your Ph.D. into a job" by Dr. Karen Kelsky. Her book and others provide details about how to write a robust application and prepare for the interviews.

Conclusion

Many believe that job search ends when one gets a job. The authors who have been working for years say that the job search does not end at all. At least for the two of the authors, they have changed jobs three or four times. Career counselors state that most individuals change jobs four or five times during their career, if not a lifetime.

As the authors look back to their own job search experiences, they suggest that it is vital to take note of successful strategies one did or learned from others. They also mentioned that it is also good to identify what did not work well and not use it again. Some noted that one needs to pay detailed attention in putting together the job application packet. Every hiring organization, academia or not, has its preference on a good CV, letter of application and references, statement of teaching, and research philosophy. Finally, keeping track of where one applies is essential. The worst thing that can happen to an application is sending a letter to an institution with the name. Much worse is a letter that speaks of qualifications missing in the job advertisement.

The authors believe that searching for a job can be a full-time endeavor. The reflections and advice shared in the paper would be a good guide for planning to find the right job or a new position in the future.

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