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What Your PhD Advisors Can't Tell You Because They Don't Know: Landing a Job at a Student-Focused Institution

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Introduction

More than half of political science professors in the United States are employed in non-PhD granting departments.¹ While some of these are *research intensive* (R1 or R2) *institutions*, many more are institutions where undergraduate education is the primary focus (hereafter “student-focused” institutions). For faculty members who prioritize teaching and want to closely mentor undergraduates, student-focused institutions provide meaningful and rewarding careers.

At the same time, most PhD faculty have spent their graduate and professional careers in departments with doctoral programs at R1s and R2s. They may not provide very good advice for applying and interviewing for jobs at student-focused institutions because they have never worked at such an institution.

I spent a quarter century at a regional, master’s institution in the South, where the regular teaching load was eight courses per year. I spent 20 years in administration, which included 16 years as department chair and dean. I participated in scores of searches and many issues came up repeatedly. This essay will provide concrete advice on how to prepare an application and interview at a student-focused institution from someone on the other side of the interview desk.

Be a PhD, Not an ABD

I knew what the time demands were for a new faculty member—with the mandatory trainings, multiple class preparations, grading, office hours, faculty meetings, assessment, and significant service requirements. I also had seen too many ABD candidates who joined the faculty and saw their defense dates delayed by a year or more. Sadly, some never finished, and consequently, did not earn tenure. Thus, I always pushed candidates to do everything possible to finish before they arrive on campus as a faculty member. (See chapters 14 and 15 for solid advice on starting—and completing—your dissertation project.)

Seek Teaching Experience

As a chair and dean, I wanted to see that candidates had been instructors of record with complete responsibility for every aspect of the course, from choosing the textbook to course design, creating student assessments, and responsibility for all grading. Serving as a teaching assistant with some grading responsibility in a large section led by a PhD faculty member is all well and good. However, this is not a

substitute for classroom experience. Moreover, having one or more courses “in the can,” so to speak, will make your life easier as a new faculty member.

If you are unable to teach your own course at your institution, consider a Visiting Assistant Professorship position or part time work with a community college. Other types of pedagogical instruction are also a plus, whether it’s participation in a “Preparing Future Faculty” program, courses in education or pedagogy, online course development training, participation in APSA’s Teaching and Learning Conference, or even, yes, secondary teaching certification. (For further insight into how to gain teaching experience, see chapter 28 on teaching assistantships, 29 on teaching your own class, 30 on APSA’s Teaching & Learning Conference, and 44 on adjunct and fixed-term positions).

Craft Your Teaching Statement

Many student-focused institutions will ask for a *teaching philosophy statement*. Most that I read—and the ones I wrote—were pretty lousy. College teaching is a discipline unto itself, with its own literature, theory, and jargon. The strongest teaching statements are those that tap into this literature and also discuss the liberal arts skills that you emphasize, the pedagogical approaches you use, and the ways you measure student learning that go beyond rote memorization (chapter 43 provides advice on teaching philosophy statements, as well as on other types of statements increasingly requested by search committees).

Revise Your Application Letter

Prioritize your teaching experience and commitment in your *application letter*. Too many application letters read as though the candidate is applying for a position at a research-intensive institution (or R1). While I was interested in a candidate’s dissertation, I’m going to hire based on the candidate’s commitment to student learning and development.

Be sure to list the courses that you are interested in teaching. However, make sure that they are appropriate for a primarily undergraduate audience. Better yet, read the department’s course offerings and list those courses already on the books that you have taught or have the academic background to teach.

Remember, too, political science and/or civic education are components of many liberal arts’ general education programs. Your letter should also discuss your experience and/or ability to engage the apathetic nonmajor as well as your enthusiastic political science student.

You should include a description of your dissertation research and your future research agenda. However, it is secondary to the section on teaching and your experience or interest in service opportunities is tertiary.

Seek Tailored Recommendation Letters

When applying to a student-focused institution, make sure that at least one of your recommendation letters can speak to your classroom and/or online teaching and student interaction. This may not be one of your committee members, unless this person has observed you in the classroom or interacting online. The most tone-deaf letter I read said, “I haven’t seen So-and-So teaching but I’m sure s/he will do fine.” If none of your faculty mentors can speak to your skill as an instructor, ask a colleague to observe you and write a letter of support. Make it an additional letter if you don’t want to replace a letter from one of your mentors and if the application portal allows you to.

Plan for Two “Job Talks”

Yes, you will present your research during your interview. However, you will probably teach a class too. This is important; prepare for it as intensely as you prepare your research presentation. You may, or may not, be able to teach on the topic of your choice. So be prepared for anything.

Have a Realistic Research Agenda

You will be asked about your *research agenda* during the interview. Your responses should indicate that you understand that you will have little time for research and writing and that student research assistants will be scarce. Your institution will probably not have an Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) membership and the library, even with today's database subscriptions, will be smaller than at your PhD institution. You can still do excellent work and make your mark in the discipline. However, as an administrator, I wanted to see that the candidate had a plan that could be executed with the resources available.

Negotiate the Offer

Of course, salary is going to be front and center in your mind. Be realistic. Research salaries using public employee databases or resources such as Glassdoor. Also, be sure to account for the cost of living, which can make a huge difference in what your salary offer may purchase.

In addition, be sure to negotiate for more than salary. When you receive an offer is your best may be your best—or only—opportunity to secure resources to support your research agenda. (In my experience, STEM candidates were very good at this; social science and humanities candidates were not.) Consider asking for a course release, travel money, software, book allowance, data set purchases, support for undergraduate research assistants, technology, and more. Think creatively and long term. (See chapter 46 for additional advice on negotiating tactics.)

I recommend asking about domestic partner benefits and spousal/partner hiring practices when negotiating a position. However, be prepared for a “no.” Consequently, you may need to explore the local community for employment opportunities for a spouse/partner. (See chapter 48).

Enjoy the Adventure

Working at a student-focused institution offers many rewards and opportunities. Not only are there many opportunities to mentor students and to develop long-lasting relationships with alumni, but these institutions also provide many opportunities to gain leadership skills and to learn about how universities work. Take advantage of these opportunities and enjoy the adventure.

Endnotes

- 1 Derived from Jackson, Rory and Betsy Super. 2018. “2016-2017 Departmental Survey: Faculty Composition Report.” Washington, DC: APSA. Available: <https://apsanet.org/Portals/54/APSA%20Files/Data%20Reports/Employment%20Data/Faculty%20Composition%20Report%202016-2017.pdf?ver=2018-03-26-160737-587×tamp=1522094866226> and APSA “2018 Community College Faculty Survey,” Available: <https://www.apsanet.org/Portals/54/APSA%20Files/Data%20Reports/Charts/2018-June-cotm.pdf?ver=2018-06-25-094431-427>). Extrapolating from Jackson and Super's study, approximately 2000 political science faculty in PhD granting institutions, and approximately 1500 at MA and BA-granting institutions. Thus, coupled with the 2600 political science faculty surveyed by APSA, I conclude that approximately 4100 political scientists are employed at non-PhD granting institutions.

