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More than Reordering the Cover Letter: Preparing for Careers at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

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Part 1: A Day in the Life

In contrast to institutions where tenure and promotion are awarded primarily on the basis of research credentials, small liberal arts colleges (SLACs) typically expect that faculty will excel as teachers, scholars, and leading members of their campus communities. This means that faculty members at SLACs carry out their own research agenda while teaching a variety of courses and investing in pedagogical development, navigating mentorship relationships with students, and working with colleagues from a variety of disciplines on all areas of college governance. As a result, daily life as a SLAC faculty member is varied, often featuring a vibrant—or even dizzying—mix of teaching, service, and research activities.

Teaching

SLACs are, first and foremost, teaching-focused institutions where faculty play a big role in supporting students' academic, personal, and professional development. Therefore, it is a rare day during the semester that a faculty member does not spend at least some time on teaching or other student-focused work, even for those who have classes only two or three days a week. Much of this daily work centers on the classes the faculty member is currently teaching—typically in the neighborhood of two to four distinct courses in a given semester. Class sizes can be quite small and seminar-style discussions and active learning activities are common. Preparing for class meetings comprises a significant part of the daily workload, as does meeting with students one-on-one or in small groups to discuss feedback on projects, help them master difficult course material, or talk more generally about class or other matters. Through this work, faculty provide “front line” support for students, helping to connect them with campus resources and, often, following up on those referrals.

In addition to their current teaching responsibilities, SLAC faculty members' daily schedule may include devoting time to developing courses they will teach in the future. Academic departments at SLACs can be quite small, with each faculty member responsible for teaching a broad portfolio of courses that cover much or even all of a subfield. Especially in their first few years on the job, this can mean creating and preparing many new or new-to-you courses. SLACs also often feature opportunities for teaching that extends or crosses disciplinary boundaries. These opportunities may include solo-teaching a topical course that brings political science into dialogue with other disciplines or co-teaching interdisciplinary courses with colleagues from other departments who share thematic teaching interests. They may also include teaching non-disciplinary courses as part of a freshman-year experience or other all-college curricular programs.

Because undergraduate teaching is so central to the SLAC mission, faculty dedicate time to their

pedagogical development, and often participate in opportunities to improve their own teaching and contribute to departmental and faculty-wide initiatives to enhance the quality of teaching at the institution as a whole. Periodic activities in this vein might include attending workshops on pedagogical issues, presenting or writing about their own teaching innovations, or meeting with a colleague—whether in their own or another department—to discuss shared teaching challenges. Many institutions also have funding opportunities to support the pedagogical development of, for example, project-based learning, internships, service learning, or hybrid teaching on campus, and faculty spend time brainstorming, applying, researching, implementing, and assessing these teaching strategies. For additional information on two other resources—the APSA Education Section and the Teaching and Learning Conference—see chapter 30 in this volume.

Service

Departments and faculties at SLACs are relatively small, administrative and support staff are lean, and shared governance is highly valued. This can entail a good deal of service from individual faculty members, who are expected to contribute in significant ways to running both their own department and the institution of which it is a part. In addition, SLACs located in small towns or otherwise remote locations often serve as important cultural and informational resources beyond the campus walls. In turn, faculty may be encouraged to draw upon their expertise in service to their local community. Many SLACs also value disciplinary service and encourage and even reward faculty for professional activity such as peer reviewing, participation on professional association committees, or editorial board service.

What this means on a daily basis varies. Some days may feature no service work at all, or fifteen minutes here or there to complete an administrative survey or take a call from a local media reporter. Others may include an hour-long committee or department meeting, and yet others may entail sustained work to review job candidate files or prepare for an upcoming event. To the extent that SLAC faculty have significant responsibilities in student recruitment, retention, and mentorship, daily service tasks might also include advising, recommendation letter writing, meeting with prospective students, or participating in admissions or alumni events. Informal conversation with colleagues also drives institutional governance and community building, as relationships are a significant way that work gets done on a SLAC campus.

Research

As with teaching and service, SLAC faculty members carry out their research activities in an interdisciplinary, student-focused environment. On-campus research presentations—including job talks—may feature audiences that include undergraduate students and faculty from a broad range of disciplines in addition to political science colleagues. There may be opportunities for interdisciplinary research collaboration. And engaging students in meaningful research experiences, whether through participation in some aspect of a faculty member's research program or conducting their own independent research under faculty supervision, is often valued and encouraged.

Balancing research alongside teaching and service responsibilities can be a challenging part of SLAC faculty members' daily work life. For some, a solution might be to focus on different research tasks at different points in the academic year. For example, some might do background reading or code data while classes are in session and reserve more sustained writing for long summer and winter breaks. Others might designate small blocks of time for daily or weekly writing sessions, either on their own or alongside colleagues who help to keep each other on track for meeting short-term goals. Some faculty members find it useful to adjust their research program to include projects they can carry out more efficiently in the SLAC setting, especially while on the tenure track. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), research that can be done with limited travel or financial support, and projects that are amenable to collaboration with undergraduate students may be especially fruitful avenues to pursue (see chapter 24 on publishing in this volume for more details on SOTL research).

Part 2: Advice to Graduate Students

For those interested in pursuing this career path, we encourage preparing in four ways. Graduate students should consider this preparation for a career at a SLAC, not just for the SLAC job market, as demonstrating your preparation for the responsibilities of SLAC faculty is the best approach to succeeding at the interview stage.

Pedagogical Expertise

Graduate students should think early and often about their *pedagogical expertise* and experience, perhaps the most important qualification for SLAC positions. Graduate students interested in a SLAC career should develop teaching and mentoring expertise that scales over their graduate training. For example, you might observe different faculty undergraduate classes, lead discussion sections, hold office hours, develop a lecture and/or a full course, design and implement assessments of student learning, and reflect on curricular and pedagogical decisions (such as course assessment, recruiting). Certainly, the accessibility of these experiences varies widely—few if any graduate students will have this range of pedagogical experience during their graduate work (Ishiyama, Miles, and Balarezo 2010; Marineau 2018; Trowbridge and Woodward 2021)—and there are tradeoffs in dedicating time to teaching or making progress towards your dissertation defense. But, we encourage graduate students to take advantage of training and experiences available within the department and university, as well as less traditional teaching opportunities. These could range from adjuncting over the summer, guest lecturing, mentoring in a research lab (Becker and Zvobgo, 2020), or teaching in non-academic environments. Graduate students can also join the Political Science Education section of APSA and attend TLC (see chapter 30 in this volume). More teaching experience is not necessarily better. More important than the quantity of teaching experience is demonstrating commitment to teaching by learning and articulating two things: (1) your pedagogical priorities,¹ and (2) examples and expertise around these pedagogical priorities. Evidence of your teaching voice should structure your teaching statement, and your answer to a frequent interview question about what your classroom looks like.

SLAC Teaching and Research Trajectories

Often, the teaching and research happening at PhD granting institutions is very different from that in a SLAC, and a persuasive SLAC candidate will be able to translate their professional trajectory across institutional environments. While many graduate students will have specialized teaching experience, we encourage thinking through the courses you might teach at a SLAC environment. While bigger research institutions can support offering the same class content multiple semesters or even multiple sections the same semester, SLAC departments offer many content courses on one- or two-year rotations, meaning that faculty need a wide repertoire of courses. While graduate students certainly don't need to have experience developing and instructing all of the courses they expect to teach as faculty, they should think about what such a course rotation might look like. The rotation may include interdisciplinary courses and common SLAC curriculum like first year seminars.

In smaller departments, faculty are often responsible for teaching a wide range of writing, speaking, methodology, and statistical analytical skills throughout their classes. Pay attention to ways in which this skill development is and could be integrated across your teaching repertoire. Also seek out broad methodological training, experiences, or conversations to think through and equip yourself to work with students using diverse methodologies. Being able to teach a senior capstone course and advise student research across content and methodologies is desirable to most SLAC departments.

A common misconception is that SLAC faculty do not publish or maintain an active research agenda. Rather, most SLACs require research and/or professional productivity in traditional measures of research productivity, but also interdisciplinary journals, public facing work, scholarship of teaching and learning research, and collaborative research with students. Another misconception is that there are no research resources at SLACs. Certainly, these vary across institutions, but are less likely to facilitate long research trips off campus and time out of the classroom, and more likely to facilitate specific experiences

and collaboration with undergraduate students. A search committee and faculty evaluation committee are likely to wonder if and how your research translates to those institutional priorities and resources, and if it can thrive in an interdisciplinary environment.

Networking

As evidenced above, a day in the life of a SLAC faculty differs greatly from that of faculty at PhD granting institutions, and networks greatly facilitate flows of information. While this networking certainly may happen at content-based panels at the larger disciplinary conferences, we recommend seeking out panels, roundtables, and conferences that are likely to overlap with the work of SLAC faculty. Some of our most meaningful networking with other SLAC faculty happens at APSA TLC, teaching panels and workshops, regional interdisciplinary conferences, and undergraduate conferences (ex: Pi Sigma Alpha, Model UN). See chapter 18 in this volume for more on networking.

Interviewing

As we suggest above, we encourage graduate students to prepare themselves more for a SLAC career than for the interview. From our experience on search committees, a few “tells” highlight which candidates are committed to and familiar with a SLAC career.

Prioritize Relationships with Students

Search committees at SLACs are often trying to understand how a potential new colleague will relate to, support, and challenge students in and out of the classroom, and on what content. You can help make your case by addressing these issues in your cover letter and teaching statement. Some institutions also include a student representative on the search committee, have candidates meet with a group of students, or solicit feedback from students who attend candidates’ job talks. In the best-case scenario, a committee will understand which students to send to the candidate’s office for additional resources and conversations, and trust the candidate is equipped and excited for those conversations.

Demonstrate Teaching Philosophy, Effectiveness, and Flexibility

SLAC search committee members know that graduate students’ teaching experience is likely in a very different institutional context than their institutions. Accordingly, they are considering if the candidate is able to adapt and adjust their teaching to a new institution, department, students, and community. Candidates can demonstrate this by providing evidence of adjusting both content and pedagogical practices to improve student learning. Content adjustments may include transitioning away from a “canon” or narrow content. Pedagogical adjustments may include implementing different types of participation (for example, think/pair/share, fish bowl dialogues) and reflective (entrance and exit learning passes) exercises, and lesson plan organization (active learning, problem-based learning, case studies).²

Frame Priorities and Accomplishments in Terms of Intellectual Contributions to an Interdisciplinary Community

Many SLAC search committees are interdisciplinary, and interviews will likely involve meetings with faculty and administrators who are not political scientists. Candidates should think through and articulate their potential contributions to both the department and the college. Candidates who lead with the prestige of their graduate education, grants, or publication record may come across as missing the university’s institutional mission. Those qualifications absolutely matter but are most impactful when the candidate can communicate how they translate into their broader intellectual contributions to a SLAC community. For example, perhaps an experience supports a research trajectory that students could be involved in, or brings field work experience into the classroom, or could be a support to students applying to prestigious grants.

Conclusion

SLAC faculty have a wide range of responsibilities that make their work very different from that of their dissertation committee members. While at times overwhelming, faculty careers at SLAC institutions can also be very rewarding. Students often take multiple classes (if not one most semesters!) with the same professor, allowing for rich mentoring relationships that continue after students graduate. Institutional service can visibly shift institutional culture, community relationships, and opportunities and resources for students and faculty. Departmental colleagues think deeply about creating and implementing curriculum to best serve student needs. Faculty in small departments often have more research interests in common with faculty outside the department, offering the potential for rich interdisciplinary conversations and collaborations. Certainly, this climate of community learning and exploration is an ideal no institution fully lives up to, but the potential is worth exploring.

Endnotes

- 1 In addition to specific content areas of expertise, persuasive SLAC job applicants are able to articulate how they teach content through specific pedagogical practices like active learning strategies, experiential learning, writing instruction practices, capstones, project based learning, flipped classrooms, and more. Vanderbilt's Center for Teaching Excellence and the AACU's work on High Impact Learning Practices (HIPs) have accessible primers on many of these conversations, and APSA Educate and the Journal of Political Science Education publish resources and articles that apply these practices to political science content and contexts.
- 2 For additional resources and ideas, see Finkel (2000), Bain (2004), Bean (2011), Lang (2021).

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