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# The Hiring Process at Teaching Colleges



July 7, 2016

Image: *Trainspotting (1996)*

If you're going on the academic job market this fall, you've already read a metric ton of articles,

blogs, and wiki posts describing in graphic detail just how brutal that market is. I'm not going to dispute or rehash that characterization. What I will argue is that most of the advice you're reading is probably too narrow.

I work at a small liberal-arts college — also known by our charming acronym, SLAC. Colleges like mine are teaching-centric (a 4-4 load), largely enrollment-dependent, and quite different from research universities when it comes to faculty hiring and advancement. That's important because the non-elite, teaching-oriented colleges are where a lot of the academic jobs are. Yet far too many advice columns on the faculty career act as if search committees only operate in one way — the way they do at R-1 campuses. You're told how to be successful in your "job talk" — you know, the hourlong session where you publicly discuss your scholarly work, research agenda, and (typically) how kickass of a book your dissertation is about to become. That (and not getting drunk at dinner with the search committee) is key, you are told.

But that isn't key in the hiring process at teaching colleges.If you're in a field — say, anything in the humanities — where there's a daunting ratio of candidates to open positions, being strategic and intentional about the application materials you send to different types of institutions *can* make a real difference in how you fare. A happy exception to the overload of R1 advice is Karen Kelsky's recent column on job-searching at a SLAC (and, for once, you should read the comments, too). It's a good start and my goal here is to go further.

At SLACs, a teaching demonstration is at the heart of our campus interview process. I had heard nothing about that when I was a Ph.D. student entering the market myself, even though all of my interviews were at small liberal-arts institutions. I quickly discovered that the hiring landscape at these colleges was much different than the one I'd been prepared for. Ultimately, I was successful, but only by adjusting on the fly to a new set of strategies.

Subsequently in my career, I've chaired a history search committee, been a department chair, and served as an external member of nearly a dozen other searches. In my current position as director of my university's teaching center, I meet with any candidate for a full-time faculty position who interviews on our campus. Guess how many "job talks" I've either done or observed in all that time? None.

From my varied experiences, I'm more convinced than ever that graduate programs need to pay attention to SLAC-oriented strategies when preparing their students for the job market. I've heard it said that an academic career is almost guaranteed downward mobility — that is, most of us end up working at institutions less prestigious and less wealthy than where we earned our Ph.D.s. That aphorism is a bit classist for my tastes, but it contains a core truth: In seeking faculty positions, graduate students end up going somewhere very different from where they were trained. And that reality, I believe, needs to be at the heart of any successful job-seeking

strategy.

So what does that mean in practical terms? How should you prepare your application materials for faculty positions at teaching-oriented campuses? What is this arcane lore that aspiring SLACers need to know? I'm so glad you asked.

**Tailor your cover letters.** That may be evergreen advice, but I've seen it honored most often in the breach. In the Internet age, there's no excuse for not knowing something about the institution and department to which you're applying and making that clear in your letter. At a teaching college, your letter needs to speak to the position, which means foreground your teaching.

In practical terms, talk about pedagogy *before* your research. I know, I know — every sample cover letter you've seen jumps into the dissertation immediately after the salutation, and your adviser told you to wow the committee with your scholarly chops. Yet when I'm reading more than 100 cover letters, honestly, the dissertations all run together. It's not that your research is worthless — on the contrary. But I need to see if you can teach two sections of the survey and the upper-level courses in your specialty, and whether you've had any experience with students. When I read a cover letter that has a page and a half on the nuanced historiographical approach of someone's dissertation before it even mentions teaching — no matter how interested I am in that particular scholarly topic — I have to wonder if that candidate really gets what my university is about.

So start the body of your letter with your teaching experience and approach to pedagogy. Even if that experience has been confined to being a TA for large courses, it's still fertile ground: What's your overall approach to pedagogy? What challenges have you encountered in the classroom? What successes can you point to? If you've had the chance to teach your own classes — whether at your Ph.D. institution or as an adjunct somewhere else — start your letter there. That type of experience helps candidates stand out. Show the committee that you've been developing not only teaching experience, but a set of pedagogical tools that complements what the department or program does.

Ideally, your discussion should also focus on how you would fit into the department's curriculum and teaching. What courses does it offer that you've either taught or could develop? Does the institution have any programs where faculty across the disciplines are asked to contribute (core curriculum, honors courses, new student seminars), and would those be areas in which you could participate? Does the department serve a large number of majors, or is the teaching load primarily general-education "service" courses? When I see a cover letter that speaks to such issues, it shows that you as a candidate are not only serious about the same things my university is serious about, but you have done your homework and put a lot of thought into how you might fit into our faculty community and the shared work that we do.

**When you talk about your research, mention ways it connects with undergraduates.** You'll still want to talk about your dissertation and research agenda in the cover letter (after your awesome reflections about teaching, of course), but for a SLAC, how you pitch your scholarship might vary, depending on the college. Elite liberal-arts colleges are like research universities, in that publishing articles and monographs are the coin of the realm. But beyond that narrow pool, most teaching institutions want to see how your scholarship intertwines with your teaching and your work with students.

Many SLACs use the Boyer Model of Scholarship, or something very close to it, for evaluating faculty scholarship. Be familiar with that model, as it's a great summary of how institutions like mine see scholarly work within the larger context of our mission. If you can directly involve undergraduates in your research, that's golden. Can you bring students to conferences as co-presenters? Can you help them develop projects that introduce them to your field's scholarly community? Those are stated goals in almost every SLAC's strategic plan, and for good reason. We profess to be student-centered, and what better way to model that than to bring our students into our field's conversations? Think about how your own work might embody that sort of possibility, or at least how it informs and engages your teaching.

**Anticipate a strong focus on teaching throughout the interview process.** If you score a phone/Skype/conference interview at a teaching college, we'll ask you a lot about teaching, so be ready. Some of the questions that tend to tell us a lot about a candidate's approach to pedagogy include:

- What was the most challenging circumstance or incident you've encountered in your teaching, and how did you address it?
- How would you define "student success?"
- What are your favorite courses to teach, and why?

Interviewers want to get a sense of how you would fit with our students, so doing some research (again: college websites are invaluable here) on the student demographics can be very helpful. You might say something like this: "Your website mentions that a majority of your students are first-generation college students. This year, I taught the survey course at a community college with a similar demographic, and here's how I tailored my pedagogy. …" In my experience, when committees at teaching-oriented colleges discuss scholarship with a candidate, the conversation quickly moves to how that work connects with undergraduate teaching and student learning. Thinking through those connections will be invaluable preparation.

**You will almost certainly be asked to do a teaching demonstration.** If you are invited to a campus interview, the teaching demo at a SLAC is the equivalent of the job talk at a research university. I've heard of a few occasions where committees have asked candidates to do

both a teaching demo *and* a traditional, research-oriented job talk, but that is the exception, in my experience. I've seen some good advice out there on teaching demos, most recently Josh Eyler's Twitter essay on the topic, which you should definitely check out.

My chief recommendation here is to ascertain the structure of the demo as best you can. Are you going to be taking over a class session of someone's course? Is the topic chosen for you, or at your discretion? Will it be in front of actual students, or faculty pretending to be students? The most common scenario is stepping into a class and doing the topic scheduled for that day. If that's the case, see if you can get a copy of the course syllabus so you have an idea of what the students have been doing thus far.

Whatever the circumstance, avoid doing a straight lecture. It's fine to include *some* lecturing (think "bite-sized nuggets"), but the best teaching demonstrations I've observed have also included discussion and other active engagement with students. There's no set recipe for doing "the best" teaching demo. Rather, your own pedagogical authenticity and enthusiasm for the material — this is, after all, the discipline to which we've all pledged ourselves — are the hallmarks of effective candidates.

Your student audience will almost certainly understand the context and want you to succeed; if you engage them, they will likely rise to the occasion. I've observed several demos where I thought, "I know these students; why aren't they this engaged when they're in *my* class?" The teaching demo has the potential to make a stronger impression than many of the other aspects of your portfolio. A strong demonstration, in my experience, has vaulted candidates from "lower-tier" Ph.D. programs over those from Ivies.

Teaching and student success are at the heart of the SLAC mission, and that centrality is mirrored in the way we structure our hiring process.

**A few Don'ts for good measure.** Please, please, please do not give the impression that a 4-4 teaching load is something you might "settle for" if "absolutely necessary." It's a heavy load, not a death sentence. All of us do it here, and we still find time to do research and sleep and other stuff. It is really off-putting to see candidates sniff disdainfully at the prospect (whether they mean to or not).

In that same vein, complaining about students — even if some members of the search committee do it in conversation — is never a good look. Nor is complaining about your graduate program. Even if it is filled with awful, narcissistic, petty tyrants (and I know many programs are), you don't want the committee members to remember those stories more than they remember you.

It's a bit of a different world here in SLAC-land, and the unfamiliar aspects of the hiring process

can seem intimidating, but there are thousands of us who wouldn't trade our professional situations for anything. Sure, in this era, any tenure-track job is a good job (for the most part). But SLACs tend to have closer-knit faculty communities and contain more readily available opportunities to do creative and interesting teaching, while avoiding the oppressive publish-a-monograph-or-else-your-life-is-meaningless vibe that suffuses some research institutions.

In these difficult times for aspiring faculty members, being open to a variety of options and strategic about pursuing all of them offers the best hope of career success. While my advice here is culled from personal experience — with the obligatory disclaimer that results may vary — I believe these strategies are sound propositions for navigating this particular sector of the academic job market. I wish you only the best as you do so this upcoming year.

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