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How Do You Get Hired by a SLAC?

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Would you consider posting on how to get hired and tenured at small liberal-arts colleges and/or teaching colleges? I find a general silence and confusion about the hiring and promotion process as SLACs and teaching colleges. All the advice I can find about the academic job market emphasizes R1s. Plus, I keep hearing that

SLACs now require ever more research from their faculty, but I can't find specific details.

My goal in getting a Ph.D. has always been to get hired and tenured at a teaching-centered institution, rather than pursue research. I'm confident in my research skills, but teaching is my passion. If you have insights on how SLACs operate, hire, and tenure, I would be very grateful.

I can offer plenty of advice on this front but I also hope that readers — especially faculty members at SLACs and small teaching colleges — will chime in with advice in the comments below. As an academic career consultant for the past five years, I've worked with hundreds of clients who are currently employed at (or aiming for) these types of institutions, and I've learned a great deal about them. But regular readers know that my career as a student and professor was spent entirely at large R1s, and my advice always has a bit of an R1 bent. So I hope that we may use this column as a crowdsourcing opportunity.

Teaching matters a great deal at any small liberal-arts college. However, the degree to which teaching matters more than research varies a great deal from campus to campus, and is also in a state of flux.

The single most important piece of advice that I emphasize with clients on the job market is that a wide range of institutions fall into the category of "SLAC" (i.e., Small Liberal-Arts College). While all of them emphasize undergraduate teaching, some of them maintain hiring and tenure standards that are virtually identical to those at elite R1s. In other words, hiring and tenure at those elite liberal-arts colleges is overwhelmingly based on research productivity. Examples would include Amherst or Williams Colleges in the Northeast, and Pomona College in California.

The most common mistake that job seekers make is "believing the hype" that elite SLACs put out on their promotional materials and websites — that is, that teaching is the sine qua non of faculty evaluation there. Teaching is certainly important, and likely more heavily weighted in the tenure process at such colleges than at an R1. But just like at an R1, teaching at elite SLACs will not substitute for intensive research productivity — multiple, peer-reviewed journal articles, a monograph planned or under contract (if you are in a book field), a well-developed idea for a second project, etc. When applying to such colleges, you must place your research in the foreground, and your cover letter should follow my usual [research-focused cover letter](#) template (which you can also find [explained in my book](#)).

There are, of course, many small colleges that are genuinely focused on teaching. Your application materials to those institutions should indeed emphasize your teaching.

How do you know which small colleges fall into which end of the teaching-research spectrum?

That is the challenge, especially for Ph.D.s early in their careers. As a very, very broad and general recommendation, you can start by looking at national rankings, like the ones put out by *U.S. News and World Report*. Top-ranked SLACs have a high likelihood of favoring a research-focused approach in hiring. Note: That is *not* a foolproof indicator. You must also study the job ad closely, as it will provide plenty of clues — in particular, whether it mentions research or teaching duties first or predominantly. And then there are particular campus and departmental cultures that might be distinct. If you can mobilize the wisdom of your mentors, or contacts at similar institutions, that is valuable information.

There is one other consideration as well. You mention that you've heard that SLACs now require ever more research from their faculty, and that is true. It is what's known as the "aspirational" phenomenon, and it's unfortunately ever more common.

Because the job market has contracted so severely, small and marginal teaching colleges can now attract candidates who earned their Ph.D.s from the most elite research universities. At the same time, in a perilous economy, an escalating number of small colleges are facing bankruptcy and closure each year. In the "arms race" for prestige, endowment money, and grants, they may seek to boost research productivity expectations among faculty (with little of the institutional support for that productivity that is common at research institutions).

So SLACs that may once have been solidly teaching-focused in hiring and tenure may now be in a state of aspirational flux. How are you to know? Again, be a detective: Study the job ad and the campus website closely, and mobilize the shared insights of your network.

An accurate read is not always easy, I know. At [The Professor Is In](#), my team of editors and I often have extended conversations about a particular client's application to a midrange SLAC, all of us weighing in with our most current understanding of the campus, the department, the ad itself, and any recent aspirational impulses that we've seen affect hiring there. It is not always clear or straightforward.

In terms of how to describe your teaching in your applications, keep in mind: Your ability to teach undergraduates and involve students in your research will be closely evaluated. As in all applications, be specific and concrete — not dreamy and emotional. In your email to me, you used what I call "the P-word" — passion. I urge you to eschew that tired, saccharine, and overused term, and instead focus your cover letter and application materials on specific courses and teaching methods. If you attended a SLAC you may well have a sense of the ethos, and can draw on that with concrete and specific teaching ideas and proposals. Please read my column, [Don't Become Liberal Arts Mush!](#), on why not to wax poetic about your own undergraduate SLAC nostalgia.

I'll stop here, and invite those who teach at SLACs currently to contribute thoughts and comments.

Dear Readers: Have a question about the academic job market and/or professionalization? Send it to The Professor Is In! Karen welcomes any and all questions related to the job market, preparing for the job market while in graduate school, coping with the adjunct struggle, and assistant professorhood. Send questions to gettenure@gmail.com.



Karen Kelsky is a career consultant who runs the website The Professor Is In. She's been a tenured professor at two public universities (Oregon and Illinois) and has advised many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as mentored junior faculty. She answers reader questions as a contributor to Vitae.

For more advice, order Dr. Karen's new book, **The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job**.

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