

# What Makes a Competitive Faculty Application Package?



After 3 years of meticulous attempts, I finally have an answer to the question, "What makes a competitive faculty application package?"

Let me take you back to 2004, the year I completed my Ph.D. A competitive faculty application package, I was told, should include publications in prestigious journals such as *Cell*, *Nature*, or *Science*; evidence of fundraising such as travel grants and in-kind research support; and teaching experience as a teaching assistant or guest lecturer. The only thing my CV was missing was the prestigious publications.

***Clearly I needed to raise my game—but how? What makes an application package stand out among 450 other applications?***

During my postdoctoral training (from 2005 to 2008), I took care of that. My project produced a co-first author publication in *Nature*, along with five other first-author publications in peer-reviewed journals and seven other publications.

With my publication record reinforced, I cast myself onto the faculty job market. The result? No interviews. My postdoctoral adviser was encouraging: He told me that faculty positions come in waves and that the job market will be better in the next couple of years. So I accepted a time-limited position at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service (USDA-ARS), where I could develop an independent

research program and create an even stronger research record than I had before. By 2010, I figured, I would be a really strong candidate for a faculty position.

Between the fall of 2011 and the following spring, I sent 25 applications: Again, no interviews. I started to wonder if the rules changed. I asked many professors for advice, read *Science* and *Nature* career advice columns, attended sessions at conferences aimed at helping to prepare application packages, and asked recently hired women faculty for advice. I got mostly the same old suggestions, but I did learn some new things. I learned that women who had been offered faculty positions had typically applied for between 40 to 50 positions before finally succeeding. I also learned that each of the positions I applied to received between 100 and 450 applications. The average was 230.



Fatma Kaplan

Courtesy of Fatma Kaplan

Clearly I needed to raise my game—but how? What makes an application package stand out among 450 other applications? Did I need more publications in prestigious journals? Did I need more classroom teaching experience? Did I need a federal research grant in my name?

Was that it? Did I need a research grant? Unfortunately, when I was a Ph.D. student and postdoc, I was not eligible for federal grants. I coauthored grants with my principal investigator (PI) to fund my Ph.D. dissertation and postdoctoral work, but those were in my PI's name. On top of that, my research at the USDA-ARS provided no opportunity to practice my grantsmanship, because the work was already funded. But I had an idea.

In the fall of 2012, I applied for 64 positions. For the first 30, I sent off the usual CV, listing a strong publication record, teaching experience as an adjunct lecturer, and the kinds of funding that postdocs typically have: fellowships, in-kind research support, and travel grants. Again, this resulted in no interviews.

For the next 34 positions, I added to my CV information about the federally funded research grants I had coauthored. I also asked my reference letter writers to write new letters in which my contributions were clearly stated. This batch of applications drew

two phone interviews in the United States and an in-person interview in Canada—progress, but still no faculty offers.

In 2013, I continued to find ways to emphasize my ability to attract outside funding. In the fall, I added a National Science Foundation-style preproposal in place of the usual research statement. I applied to 50 positions. The result: A phone interview and an in-person interview, both in the United States, and many compliments on my application package.

That's my story so far. I've applied for close to 150 positions. I still haven't received a faculty offer, but by making a strong case that I can win funding, I have managed to do a little better than I was doing at first.

To me the lesson is clear. To be competitive, I need a federally funded research grant to list alongside those publications in prestigious journals. At the very least—to be considered—I need to figure out how to make a stronger argument that I can get funded. Everything else is icing on the cake.

## **In Person Guidelines**

Your essay should be about 800 words long and personal in tone. Please send us your submission as an editable text document attachment in an e-mail message, addressed to [snweditor@aaas.org](mailto:snweditor@aaas.org) (Subject: In Person submission); Microsoft Word format is preferred, but OpenOffice format is acceptable. Please do NOT include photographs or other attachments with the original submission.

We will give each manuscript we receive careful consideration and contact you within 6 weeks if we decide to publish your essay. Most essays will be edited prior to publication. If you do not hear from us in 6 weeks, feel free to submit your work elsewhere.