Preface

Welcome to the *CS Assistant Professor's Handbook*. In this book, I will attempt to demystify the job of the tenure-track assistant professor. I will talk about what the job entails, briefly about how to get such a job, the financial aspects of the job, and then about each big aspect of the job: students, research, teaching, and service. I will talk about how to do effective outreach, and finally talk about how to take care of yourselves while on the tenure track. I hope you find this book useful!

About me

I'm Vijay Chidambaram, an assistant (associate from Fall 22) professor at the University of Texas at Austin. I was born and brought up in Chennai, India. I did my undergraduate education at the College of Engineering, Guindy (CEG) in Chennai, and then did my graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with Remzi Arpaci-Dusseau and Andrea Arpaci-Dusseau. I got my Masters degree in 2011, and my PhD in 2015.

At the end of my PhD, I was lucky enough to get a tenure-track assistant professor position at the Computer Science department at the University of Texas at Austin. I deferred the offer for a year, doing a post-doc at VMware Research. I then joined UT Austin in Fall 2016, and was promoted to Associate professor starting Fall 2022.

Why write this book?

I'm writing this book for multiple reasons. First, I'm writing it as a memoir of my own assistant-professor days, as a sort of documentation of the journey. I was inspired in this regard by Arun Kumar's blog post series, "The Secret Lives of Millennial CS Assistant Professors" (incidentally, Arun and I were room-mates for a while when we were getting our PhDs in Wisconsin!). Second, I feel like there is no central place where a graduate student who is interested in an academic job could get this information. There are definitely excellent blog posts and tweet threads on various aspects of the job (which I'll link to in this book), but the information is scattered and not organized. This is one way of giving back to the community, collecting together all the information and advice I've been given over the years. Finally, I feel like this is information I'll give my own students and postdocs hopefully multiple times in the coming years. Following Matt Might's advice, I'm writing it down since it will be useful for a wider audience.

Who is this book for?

The main audience for this book is folks who just started (or expect to start soon) as an tenure-track assistant professor in computer science. Reading this the summer before starting the position, or the first semester on the job, should help you navigate different aspects of this job. The book should also be useful to senior graduate students who will go on the job market in one or two years.

The book should also serve as an introduction to the academic life for all students, both graduate and undergraduate, who are wondering what it is like to be a tenure-track assistant professor.

Important Caveats

There are a number of caveats I have to mention.

First, this book represents my opinions on the topics covered here. There is a large variety of opinions on all these topics, and if you ask N professors you will get N answers. There is no correct answer, and this is just one take on these topics.

Second, this book is based on my own experiences on the tenure track, and as such it is going to be based on what it is like to be a tenure-track assistant professor in computer science at an R1 public research university in the USA. I'd imagine experiences vary widely at an undergrad-focussed university, or in Europe, or in a different discipline like biology. Even among R1 public universities in the USA, there are significant differences. So please take that into account when reading the book.

Finally, this book is not meant to be definitive on any of the topics covered here. It only represents my own experiences and opinions. It is quite likely there are better ways of doing many of the things I discuss in the book. I'll link to expert advice and books wherever I can.

Scope of the book

Folks can sign for book updates using this Google form, and I've been getting requests for a lot of things where I don't really have any expertise (such as startups). For version 1.0 of this book, my plan is to just talk about my own experiences, but I do plan to supplant this with interviews/guest chapters from other folks.