

BEING ON THE JOB MARKET IN TIMES OF CRISIS: HELPFUL TIPS FROM SOMEONE WHO SURVIVED

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1. When did you start the application process?

My goal was to apply for assistant professorships in sociology within research-oriented universities. The actual application process began months before the formal postings of job announcements. I began by revising and updating my Curriculum Vitae (CV). Unlike CVs for other professional fields, academic CVs should adhere to listing only one's most prestigious publications, a few conference presentations, a short section on service, and an overview of teaching experience. The goal is to quickly convey to the search committee (SC) that you are well on your way to being a successful, tenure-obtaining scholar along the lines of (1) research, (2) teaching, and (3) service. I gave a copy of my CV to colleagues, faculty advisors, committee members, and junior faculty who were fresh off the job market. I asked that they ruthlessly edit and critique my CV for anything that they thought was out-of-line. In the end, they gave me invaluable feedback toward making my CV "pop".

After my job market CV was in-shape, I moved on to the next stage: I collected and catalogued all of my teaching evaluations. I scoured them for the best and worst statements, making sure to highlight the ones that put my best foot forward. I was aware of less-than-flattering statements and mentally tucked away how I would respond if someone asked about them. For the evaluations

that were not yet digitalized, I made sure to scan them in order to have an electronic copy on-hand.

Next in order were all my course-syllabi. I garnered quite a bit of teaching experience while at UVa, and I made sure that all my diverse syllabi were in uniform condition. I deleted excess information (such as blurbs about UVa-specific honor codes and the nuances of specific calendar years) and included a paragraph synopsis of the goals and methods of the course on the front page.

Some universities request various forms of statements: from research vignettes and teaching philosophies, to commentaries on one's future research agenda over the future five years. Websites like UVA's Career Center: <http://www.career.virginia.edu> as well as the Career Center at UC Berkeley: <http://career.berkeley.edu> provide useful advice on how to deal with the issue of writing a compelling statement. In general, I suggest that these types of statements should be no more than one page to one and one-half pages. Put yourself in the shoes of a search committee chair that must read a couple hundred of these statements. They should be concise, clear, and explicit about one's current research and its significance, ones' pedagogy, and how one has already embarked on a research agenda that will extend at least five years down the line.

Next up, I collected the best of my writing samples. My advisors suggested I select my top published articles. If one is without publications, have no fear. I am told that well-crafted "revise and resubmitted" articles suffice, as well as dissertation chapters (generally the introductory chapter and some kind of a "findings/discussion" chapter).

Writing the cover letter proved the most time-consuming and stress-inducing activity. Besides the CV, this document is the one to which search committees will pay the most attention. After days and days of hitting the delete button, I finally settled upon a formula that encompassed seven essentials: (1) I made it clear that I completed my dissertation and that I would defend it before the job began. (2) I clearly demonstrated how my work fit within their specific departmental and institutional needs via my research and teaching. (3) I showed how my dissertation research intersects with at least two recognizable sub-areas of sociological practice. (4) I highlighted other research apart from my dissertation, how specific research has led to journal publications, and on-going research projects with noted professors. (5) I explained my love for teaching, especially teaching courses in my specialties, which classes I taught more than once, and what pedagogical training and awards I received. (6) I spoke about service to my department, institution, discipline and surrounding community. (7)

The last paragraph re-emphasized my fit for their advertised position and listed the specific characteristics about their department and institution that would enable the fulfillment of my research agenda.

Finally, I gave copies of my CV, a sample cover letter, and various statements to the members of my committee who agreed to write letters of recommendation. Even though three recommendation letters are the norm, I asked four people to write letters. This proved advantageous for when specific job announcements asked for four instead of three (which happened five times). I was also able to pick which three letters I sent to which schools (based on correlating departmental foci with letter-writer reputation). I also followed up a week after just to ensure that my committee members were on their way to writing the letter. Later in the process I gave all writers an excel sheet that listed the institutions' deadlines and addresses. Such organization helped both them and me to keep track of the process. I suggest speaking with each of your prospective letter writers in order to work out an organizational strategy amenable to all involved.

2. How long was your application package?

There was huge variation in the size of application packages from one university to another. Some wanted nothing more than a CV, while others (and I am not joking about the following list) asked for my CV, four writing samples, three syllabi, a teaching statement, a research statement, a statement of future career goals, a dissertation summary, at least two sample course assignments, and four letters of recommendation (all sent via post-mail).

3. Was interviewing at the ASA conference useful? In what way?

To begin, the American Sociology Association's "job bank" at the annual conference was a bit awkward. It reminded me of speed-dating with the tone and timbre of a cattle-call. You possess twenty minutes to meet three to five faculty members, conduct polite introductory small talk, tell a varied collection of faculty about your research, teaching and service, and answer their off-the-cuff questions about anything and everything under the sun. (As as soon as I sat down at one table I was grilled about my thoughts on the now infamous Barack and Michelle Obama caricature on the 21 July 2008 cover of *The New Yorker*). Some say that the ASA job bank can only hurt you (via a bad impression) and not help you (since hires are not actually made at the meeting). With all that said, I actually found these awkward meet-and-greets very useful. They were both great practice for talking about my research to faculty in a succinct way, and

they mirrored the 20-30 minute individual faculty meetings that one has when partaking in on-campus job interviews. And besides, I can't knock it too much—it was at the ASA job bank that I met the chair of the department that offered me a job five months later.

4. How did you prepare for job talks?

Practice, practice, practice. I held several practice job interviews on campus to which I invited graduate school colleagues and faculty members. I asked for both immediate oral feedback as well as written feedback after they thought about the talk for a while. I took these practices very seriously and even dressed in the suit that I would later wear on my actual interviews. This practice was immensely helpful. By the time I actually went to interviews I was “off book” and could confidently explain my work and answer hard-hitting questions extemporaneously. I also memorized a few short blurbs about my work that, depending on the type of question, could quickly but comprehensively, cover my overall research agenda. I was surprised how many times I used them in common parlance.

5. How would you describe the experience of campus interviews and job talks, what did you expect, and what advice would you give?

On-campus interviews are stressful. There's not much of a way around the anxiety, but I found that methodical preparation was the best medicine. As soon as I was invited to a campus, I began my homework on their department, university, and surrounding community. I looked up the basic demographics of the university, found what kind of ranking it possessed, and discovered what its facilities were like. I looked to answer general questions: Are they on a semester or quarter system, what is the basic teaching load, what major/graduate degrees are offered and with what concentrations? Of special import is the discovery of who is on the SC so that you can engage intellectually with their interests. I read each faculty member's CV, and at least one of their articles or introductory/concluding book chapters. I read their campus rag and the local newspapers in order to achieve a sense of the political and economic environment—and since I study racial identity and inequality—it was easy to bring a local event into my job talk. Such a course of action both conveyed the sense that I was serious about the job and that my work possessed the relevance for the area where I might work.

A big “do” is to realize that one is always “on-stage.” The ride from the airport, speaking with the department’s administrative assistants, meals, and meeting graduate students in the hallways, are all integral parts of the job interview. In this vein, it is well-served to be cognizant of your body language and overall demeanor. Whether right or wrong, people use these “cues” to deduce whether or not they want to share an office next to you for the next twenty to thirty years.

A big “do-not” is to become a gossip-source. One of the most unexpected aspects of on-campus interviews was the occasional attempt by a faculty member to probe into the private information of my graduate program and faculty. That is, sometimes faculty members used their private one-on-one time to ask questions akin to, “So, is Dr. X as acerbic as s/he appears in writing?” or “I hear Dr. Y is really unhappy there, is s/he looking around?” My advice is to remain tactfully agnostic on these issues and to switch the subject to how the subject matter of Dr. X’s work intersects with your own work. Besides, you have limited time with faculty members while there and you want to make sure they get a clear picture of you and your work. Don’t waste time trying to earn back-biting brownie points—besides it will likely backfire on you.

6. Would your job search have been easier if not for the financial crisis?

Yes, I believe so. Upon reflection, I believe I would have received fifteen to twenty on-campus invitations if not for the stock-market nose-dive. The bulk of job announcements began to appear in mid- to late-September when the Dow was over 11,000 and economic indicators, other than the housing-repossession crisis, seemed fine. On 10 October, the Dow was less than 8,500. It was also in early October that I began to receive phone calls and emails inviting me to campus in order to give a job talk. But by the end of October and into November, those same schools were calling back to tell me the invitations were rescinded due to the economy. The statement, “We regret to inform you, due to budgetary concerns...” was an all too common staple of my email inbox. I was quite nervous and began to really worry when jobs were still being cancelled in early January. Still, I landed a few interviews despite a bleak fiscal landscape, and in the end I came away with more than one job offer. Others, I am afraid, were not so fortunate.

7. What was the most helpful advice in your job application process?

Don’t take it personally. Functionally, a SC’s decision is more about your particular fit in their departmental needs than about whether you are a “good” job

candidate. And taking a more Machiavellian tack, sometimes it is less about you than it is about insider departmental politics, in-fighting, and Dean versus Chair power-plays. So really, don't take a rejection personally. Also, someone told me to find a non-academic hobby in which to engage once the job market is in full-swing. Anything that can take your mind off the email, phone, departmental mailbox (and your overall existence in the ivory tower) is a useful tool that should be employed.

8. What advice would you give to people entering the job market?

Make sure your applications arrive as soon as possible. The published deadlines that SC's give are advisory. SC's generally start looking at files as soon as they are complete and they generally want to contact the best candidates in order to arrange visits expeditiously and before other schools snatch them up. Early applicants also seem more eager and well-organized.

Be certain that all your letters of recommendation reach the SCs. Most SC's delay their appraisal of applications until all letters have arrived. If your institution uses a centralized reference mailing service, be aware that the campus may not send out any of your letters until all have been given to the service (it is for their clerical convenience, but it will delay your chances). If your departmental secretary is the one really in charge of sending out letters from your committee members, be extra-nice to this person. Buy the person a card and a gift to let them know how much this work, which may be extraneous to them, means the world to you.

Get to know the staff person who is responsible for compiling and maintaining your file. S/he can tell you when your file is complete, or if it is missing anything, and may also hint at the stage and progress of the search.

After you apply for a job, you will start receiving administrative documents sent by the department or division of human resources: employment questionnaires, affirmative action/diversity forms, etc. Do not ignore these. Complete and return them, rather than waiting to see if you get an invitation. For legal protections, more and more institutions are refusing to invite candidates until all legal documents are on file.

Further along the legal lines, familiarize yourself with the EEOC regulations regarding what questions people can and cannot ask you (whether you are married, your religious affiliation or racial background, if you are disabled, etc.). Even more importantly, craft some hypothetical responses to these questions

and do not assume that simply because they are illegal, (1) people will know that and (2) that legality will stop them. At every job interview but one, someone asked me a question that was legally out-of-bounds. Rather than respond with a curt “You legally cannot ask me that.” I preferred to say something akin to, “I see such things as very personal, I do hope you understand.” It is best to figure out how to sidestep these questions with grace and tact, rather than scare them with the fact that they crossed a legal line and that you are now in lawsuit-land. Of course, some things may be so egregious as to warrant direct confrontation. Be wise about this and seek sage council.

Never answer a phone call you do not know if you are on the job market. Worst case scenario: you are out with your friends in a crowded and noisy place and the chair of the SC has called you for an impromptu phone interview. Let the call go to voice-mail. Call them back when you are prepared—but make that time of preparation that very same day.

If flying to a campus interview, never check your baggage. If it becomes lost then you are in quite a predicament. Buy a travel-size suitcase that fits in airplane overhead compartments.

Buy a lint brush and carry breath-mints (not gum). These items are your friends.

Have multiple saved copies of your job talk accessible via a variety of methods. If you can, bring a laptop with your job talk saved on the desktop, save a copy of your job-talk on some sort of portable external drive, and email a copy of your job-talk to yourself. Also, bring a hard copy in case all three of these fail. In addition, make sure that you double-check the proper functioning of all the equipment well in advance. In each job talk I gave, there was some sort of technical malfunction just before the talk began. After a few of these mishaps, I made sure to ask the chair of the SC for at least 30 minutes in the room before my talk in order to familiarize myself with the room, set up the computer and overhead projector, and procure a bottle of water.

Ask someone, like the SC chair or chair of the department, to field the “question and answer” session that follows the job talk. Negotiating questions can be tricky, especially when junior faculty, graduate students, more established faculty, and SC members are all raising their hands at once. Questions of protocol and deference arise in these settings and you do not know what tensions may exist that you may unintentionally exacerbate by calling on certain people and not others. Better not to risk offense; ask the chair to dictate the order of questions.

After campus interviews are completed, follow-up with thank you emails to the chair of the SC, and if it is appropriate, to other faculty members with whom you really hit it off. Make them personal and do not simply cut and paste.

Save your money and put other projects on hold before you go on the market. Costs add up. I spent over \$700 on printing and mailing alone. This figure is not inclusive of the gas money and lost time/energy of assembling and individually tailoring each application. Some universities have transitioned to on-line applications, which help one's pocketbook, but they still require an investment of time. So also, many schools will ask you to buy your own plane ticket and then to reimburse you later. Universities are bureaucratic "iron cages," so it takes a while to get your money back.

If you receive an offer, first, throw a small party in your own honor. Then, after you're over it, negotiate for things, even the small things. Besides negotiating on salary and start-up funds, find out if you can have a reduced teaching load, ask about what kind of furniture will be in your office and/or if your office will be shared. Ask for guaranteed travel funds and whether or not you will have a graduate assistant. Some other questions to ask are: "Will I have a new computer with updated software?" "Will I get a new computer every X years?" "Will my previous work count toward tenure?" "What is the policy/expectation on grant-writing?"

Overall, I would say that my top five suggestions are (in no particular order): (1) Plan and prepare early. (2) Apply widely. (3) Apply to post-doctoral fellowships and one/two year positions, not just tenure-track positions. (4) Have extra-academic options (private industry, non-profit, etc) available. (5) Again, take nothing personally.

I hope answers and comments help those of you that will soon embark on the job market. Good luck!