

PhD Career Guide for Academia

Knowing Yourself

Why should you take time to reflect on who you are, what you value, and what you seek in a career prior to conducting an academic job search? Successful academic job searchers recommend starting early. For example, one said that the following were the most important factors in the job search: “starting to plan the search at least a year before it begins and really understanding what I want in a job and what I bring to the positions that interest me.” Understanding your career goals, expectations and potential contributions are critical to making sure you are headed in the direction that is best for you. Before investing time, energy and resources, think about what aspects of an academic career matter most to you. The following resources offer job candidates tools for clarifying their strengths, hopes, and possible next steps in professional development, as well as considering what constitutes a “best fit” in terms of academic setting and position. Identifying “best fit” during the early stages of career planning is essential for managing yourself and your time while on the job market.

Understanding Your Strengths

In order to capitalize on your strengths, Dr. Laura Morgan Roberts, a researcher, professor, and organizational consultant, suggests that as job seekers you need to:

1. gather feedback from people who know and observe you at and beyond work,
2. recognize patterns in that feedback,
3. create a self-portrait from that data, and
4. develop a personalized job description to understand what type of job you seek – and where you possess strengths for that desired position, as well as where you might engage in a bit of professional development before beginning a job search.

Creating Your Individual Development Plan (IDP)

The IDP aims to help graduate students and post-doctoral scholar’s transition into the proactive, independent stages of researching and planning career directions. The IDP allows for individual reflection as well as conversation with mentors and career development specialists through a revolving four-step process:

- Step one is to conduct a self-assessment, in collaboration with mentors, peers and colleagues, to identify your short and long-term goals, areas of strength and areas needing further development, action steps required to meet your goals and the timeline.
- Step two is to write the actual IDP, again in consultation with mentors and individuals who know you well.
- Step three is to implement the plan by utilizing various resources (human and electronic) and adhering, as much as possible, to set timelines.
- Step four, which emerges as you reach a certain goal(s) or if you discover that your interests have changed, is to evaluate and revise the IDP, which leads you back to step one—self-assessment.

An IDP template with guiding questions is available at: <https://www.grad.umn.edu/current-students-academic-professional-development-building-your-plan/plan>

Getting Comfortable with Networking

As a Ph.D. student, you may often be advised to network within and outside your discipline, as well as on and off campus to connect with people who have similar scholarly or career interests. Some graduate students are uncomfortable with the concept of networking because of their past experiences or the misperception that the primary purpose of networking is to promote oneself for personal gain- employment for instance. Networking, then, is “more than a job-seeking routine; it’s a life-long career enhancement tool” that can become comfortable for you whatever your personality type. If you think about networking as a two-way process where you contribute to other people’s development as they contribute to yours, you will find that networking is more about establishing and expanding upon a network of individuals receiving mutual support, as opposed to only one person benefiting from the knowledge and experiences of others.

Finding Your Institutional and Position “Fit”

Deans and job search committee chairs at various types of colleges report that rejected application materials tend to reflect one assumption shared by job seekers and their references: the set of application materials a candidate sends to a the faculty search committee at a major research institution will be sufficient for sending to all other institutions and for all other positions where the job applicant hopes to become a job candidate. It is essential that you customize your application for each institution.

To write an appropriate set of job application materials, a candidate also needs to understand the differences among “academic institutional types” – research and comprehensive universities, liberal arts and community colleges, and be aware of the variations in faculty roles and the expectations of faculty at different types of institutions. You need to appraise the “fit” between your strengths and particular positions/institutions. Your chances of being interviewed and hired will increase if the position to which you are applying is well suited to your strengths and career interests.

Researching Options: Electronic Resources

- The Chronicle of Higher Education’s (<http://www.chronicle.com>) job section includes position descriptions (<http://chronicle.com/jobs/>) and is the most used job search resource. However, in anticipation of the job search, refer to the advice columns (<http://chronicle.com/section/Advice/66/>) with topics ranging from conducting a job search to life on particular career paths. These are valuable career planning tools. Both the job section and advice columns are fully searchable.
- A number of other public web sites offer both position descriptions/job openings and career planning resources. Early in your career planning, you might make use of the sites to (1) discover what types of positions/jobs are being offered, (2) take note of the qualifications listed as required of candidates, and (3) preview the types of institutions offering positions you find interesting. Each of the following links is designed around a particular goal or purpose beyond offering job postings – sample the list to see which ones will be most be useful to you:
 - Academic 360 <http://www.academic360.com/>
 - Academic Careers <http://www.academiccareers.com/index.html>
 - Higher Education Jobs <http://www.higheredjobs.com/>
 - Academic Keys http://www.academickeys.com/splash_flash.php
 - Nation Job Network <http://www.nationjob.com/education/>
 - Academic Employment Network <http://www.academploy.com/>
 - University Jobs <http://www.univjobs.com/>
- Often, these non-*Chronicle* resources are the most reliable places to search for position openings announced after a field’s official job search “season” has ended or if a search committee budget opts to spend advertising funds on a number of less costly placements than a single expensive *Chronicle* advertisement.
- State university systems often use a single centralized Human Resources web page to post position openings and descriptions for all the schools in their system. As an example, review the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities job search page (<http://www.mnscu.edu/about/jobopportunities/index.html>), which allows you to search the entire system for open positions, and will also link you to the Human Resource/Employment pages of each individual college or university. You will find similarly organized pages for the state university systems of many other US states.

Enhancing Options: People Resources

The Preparing Future Faculty Program (PFF) sponsored by the Center for Educational Innovation (CEI) include several courses for graduate students and post- doctoral fellows focused on preparing for teaching and the job search.

- GRAD 8101: focuses on teaching in higher education
- GRAD 8102: focuses on how higher education works, developing a career plan, and creating applications materials; also, incorporates mentored teaching opportunities
- GRAD 8200: short courses focused on academic career planning and job search preparation

Other teaching courses offered by CEI include GRAD 5102 and 5105 focus on the role of a teaching assistant and are designed especially for graduate students whose first language is other than English. You will find web pages focused on these graduate programs at <https://cei.umn.edu/>.

CTL also offers individual no-fee consultations and helps set up mock interview sessions as part of a consultation process (cei@umn.edu). The CEI and PFF staff have built successful academic careers and disciplinary teaching expertise while conducting research related to teaching and career development in higher education, keeping them in touch with classroom teaching and hiring processes/practices at a variety of institutions and types of institutions across (and beyond) the U.S.

Connecting with Departmental Alums

Those “advanced” graduate students who passed along tips and helped you understand how your department worked when you were a “new” graduate student are likely now holding academic or professional positions, and again are in a position to pass along tips and help you understand how the job search process works outside of your home department. Send an e-mail to that former office or lab mate who is a couple of years into the new job. Craft an initial e-mail that your colleague-in-this-fairly-new-position will be able to answer in 5-10 minutes at the keyboard, and let this person know that you are asking them to describe their experience, to consider what they learned about writing good job application materials while they were on the job market, and to discuss what they might do differently if entering the job market now.

Conducting Informational Interviews

Setting up an information interview might help you in analyzing job opportunities and determining which ones to pursue. For example, if you see a majority of open positions at a type of university or college you’ve not experienced as a student, teaching assistant or adjunct instructor, or if you’re wondering if community colleges, for example, across the country operate in ways similar to the one where you’ve been adjunct teaching for the past year, you might want to set up an information interview to learn more. These interviews offer an opportunity to gather personalized responses to your information- and context-seeking questions. Information interviews may be conducted by phone or in-person; you’ll need to network in order to make these interview connections. You might ask about the day-to-day work life of a full-time faculty member, about how teaching and scholarship and service are prioritized, about how faculty and students interact in and out of the classroom, about how careers develop at the particular type of institution, and about how the faculty member would compare their institution to similar institutions elsewhere in the country. If you know your contact well or come to feel comfortable with a person you’ve just met through the information interview, you might ask to observe that person’s classes and to attend open meetings for a day.

Entering the Academic Market

One way to determine whether you're ready to enter the job market is to contact your director of graduate studies and ask for a list of recent graduates who have received faculty appointments. In conversation with your adviser – and perhaps with these now “new faculty” – you will want to find answers to these questions: What kind of publications and teaching experience did these people have? What kind of institutions did they receive offers from?

As last questions, be sure to ask “How do my credentials compare with theirs? Am I likely to be competitive for the kind of job I want?” If you're not sure of the answers to these questions, you could ask a trusted advisor or other faculty member to give you some candid advice. If it turns out that you're not positioned to be competitive for a faculty position in your field, don't be discouraged. Get to work on suggestions embedded in the “Knowing Yourself” section of this guide to showcase strengths and address professional weaknesses so that you can enter the next hiring cycle with necessary skills and a well-developed job search portfolio.

Understanding Academic Hiring Cycles

Academic hiring follows rather predictable cycles; however, these can differ in small and big ways from discipline to discipline, and department to department. Therefore, it's wise to check with knowledgeable members of your department about specific dates and timelines. That said, an academic hiring cycle for tenure track academic positions will generally look like this:

- In the fall – usually in early October – job calls are advertised in professional society journals, in academic publications (like the *Chronicle*) and online.
- Deadlines for submitting materials occur in late October or early November.
- Hiring Committee conducts initial screening, generally working from a rubric based on the qualifications listed in the job call. A number of applicants may be asked to submit additional materials – writing sample, dissertation abstracts, teaching portfolio materials, transcripts, et cetera.
- First round interviews, perhaps at a national convention or perhaps by phone, occur in December.
- On-campus interviews are extended to finalists in February or March. Expenses are typically covered by the interviewing department for candidates who are (a) offered the position and accept it; (b) are asked to campus but not offered the position.
- Offers are made later in the spring, with the appointment to begin at the start of the following academic year in August.

This means that you should aim to have your job search dossier complete and ready for distribution by September a year before you hope to begin your academic career. Since it takes months to create a strong dossier you should begin the job search well before you want to send out the first application.

Creating an Academic Job Search Portfolio

Academic job search portfolio documents fall into two basic categories:

- **Required Materials:** These are items you will be *asked* to include with an initial application. Generally this includes a cover letter, CV, and list of references or copies of reference letters. Increasingly, applicants are being asked to submit a teaching philosophy, a research statement or plan, or a combined statement of teaching and research interests. You will need to tailor these documents to meet the expectations set out for each position for which submit a packet of application materials!
- **Optional Materials:** Documents that support your candidacy, which you may make available during an interview. This might include preparing a portfolio of representative teaching materials (syllabus, assignments/assessments, and evaluations of teaching) and copies gathering copies of your recent publications/presentations. Do not send materials that are not requested; however, be proactive about supplying samples of teaching experience and research expertise. In addition to preparing a portfolio of samples to bring to interviews, consider creating a web-based portfolio, including the URL for this page in a cover letter and CV.

For ease of access – and ease of mind – plan to store job search materials in at least two ways:

- As paper documents in an indexed three ring binder or discrete folders
- In multiple virtual formats: a hard drive database backed up on flash drive and one other storage space; as a personal electronic portfolio that will allow you to warehouse originals and variations; or as a public e-folio (for example, see <http://efoliomn.com/>) or web page that will provide you with URLs to share in cover letters, directing readers to a place where they can find further information about your expertise and experience.

Creating at least one paper copy and using two different electronic platforms for storage of your job search materials will help you to build a flexible plan for distribution of materials, while providing you with appropriate document back-ups.

Application Resources

The following resources – as links to “best of the best” – will help you create both the commonly required job search documents and any supplementary documents that will support your candidacy for particular positions:

- **Portfolio:** For an overview – purposes of portfolios, ideas about creating individual documents, and strategies for organizing a portfolio to tell your story – see [Teaching Portfolios](#).
- **Cover Letter:** To consider the basic requirements of a cover letter, see the [Preparing Future Faculty page](#) that includes a useful starting out template. The cover letter – even more than the CV – helps committee members see how your qualifications fit the position, what you would bring to the department, how you see yourself working within and developing a career at the university. Use the position announcement to help structure your letter: if teaching is the number one qualification, then address teaching first; draw keywords from the announcement into your sentences and examples. To understand why/how letters for community colleges and small liberal arts institutions might be different, search for these articles in the jobs section of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “Not a Toy College,” “What Small Colleges Really Want,” “Know Thy Students,” and “How Would You Teach this Class.”
- **Curriculum Vitae (CV):** See the School of Public Health’s Office of Career Services [Curriculum Vita Guide](#).
- **Statement of Teaching Philosophy:** Guidelines for “Writing a Philosophy of Teaching Statement” from the Ohio State University (<https://ucat.osu.edu/professional-development/teaching-portfolio/>) provide a framework for developing individualized teaching philosophies.
- **Research Statements:** Research statements, frequently required at top-tier universities, are now becoming required documents in applications for liberal arts and comprehensive university positions. Two resources will help you understand the basic structure and focus/organizational expectations readers bring to these documents. See [One Strategy for Writing a Research Statement](#) for tips.
- **Copies of publications and conference presentation materials:** Write a short cover sheet for your selection of publications and presentation texts; this analysis serves as an overview of your research and professional development as a scholar. You might hand this out when asked about your research interests and plans; additionally, if you are maintaining an E-Folio or some other web presence during your job search, this narrative might become the front page of a section featuring your research interests, publications and presentations.

Examples of Teaching Experience and Excellence, beyond the Teaching Philosophy

- Narrative Analysis/Summary of teaching expertise: this document goes beyond a listing of course title; it includes short course descriptions highlighting student learning goals and it specifies the teaching responsibilities you’ve undertaken as grader, TA, teacher of record.
- Annotated Listing of courses you are prepared to teach: this might be a one-page document featuring a one paragraph précis for each new course you are prepared to teach; if you’ve developed a full syllabus for some of these dream courses, those documents can be mentioned here as well.
- Documentation of Professional Development: you have sought out and completed related to research, teaching and learning – often only the basic details can fit into a CV and/or be addressed within a teaching philosophy statement; however, if your teaching experience comes primarily through professional development workshops and courses, or if you hope to incorporate professional development into your teaching role (mentoring TAs or publishing scholarship of teaching and learning, for example), documentation of professional development in teaching and learning allows you show teaching experience in alternative ways.
- Experience relating to international and domestic diversity: again, such expertise should be incorporated into the primary portfolio materials (the CV, teaching philosophy and cover letter); however, the development

of a broad and deep expertise in multicultural teaching and learning (MCTL) can be addressed in a distinct statement on diversity/MCTL.

- Documentation of Technology and Teaching: again, do address your uses of technology in a segment of your Teaching Philosophy; be sure to address the pedagogy guiding the classroom technology choices you make, and support general statements with a few specific examples. To supplement the teaching philosophy section, you might draft (and seek publication of) a short scholarship of teaching article outlining how and why you incorporated technology in support of student learning in a particular course; or you could prepare a one-page compilation describing technology tools/platforms you've incorporated into your teaching.
- Create a Course Portfolio: for a more integrative approach to showcasing how you incorporate all of these practical and pedagogical concerns into your teaching practice, you might create a "course portfolio" for one of your courses. A course portfolio provides a snapshot of students' learning within a specific course and offers a teacher's scholarly reflection on the created and completed course; typical elements of a course portfolio include the following:
 - Syllabus – including course calendar and any other supplemental materials/appendixes
 - Course assignments and tests – descriptions of written, project and group assignments; copies of quizzes and exams
 - Documentation of student learning and teacher feedback (their exams and your rubric; their project/assignment work – drafts, revisions, final projects – with your comments and grades)
 - Student evaluations of teaching – informal and formal measures
 - A short analysis conveying the teacher's reflections on the syllabus, analysis of instructional practices/pedagogical choices, and synthesizing how assignments combined with feedback provided a foundation for assessing student learning; see The Peer Review of Teaching Project for examples (<http://www.courseportfolio.org>).

Finally, when you organize examples of teaching experience and of scholarly development into paper-based portfolio to show search committee members during interviews and on-campus visits, be sure that you have multiple copies on hand and don't plan to distribute an entire portfolio to each committee member as soon as you walk into a first interview. Listen to cues from your audience – a question that asks what you would like to teach, a conversation about how you might or have taught a particular type of course, a query about the type of readings you typically assign, an invitation to talk about the benefits of students writing across the curriculum. Alternatively, you might share a web link to an e-portfolio – for example, e-portfolio Minnesota (<http://www.efoliominnesota.com>) as a supplement or alternative to sharing paper copies at an interview. Having both on hand – and having your e-portfolio URL embedded in the print documents is most helpful.

Preparing Future Faculty – INTERVIEWING TIPS

- If you receive an invitation to interview – they have already determined you are competent for the position.
- The academic interview process could include 3 types of interviews: conference or convention interview, phone interviews (these are usually screening interviews), and the on-campus interview.
- They are hoping to assess your POTENTIAL, FIT, and TENURABILITY.
- Be able to adapt to flexible and unpredictable situations, informal settings, meetings.
- Convey interest in the Institution for which you are applying.
- Interviews could include a presentation or teaching a course to faculty, as well as one or more interviews with various faculties.
- Dress professionally, and try and arrive at least 10-15 minutes early (or even earlier and walk the campus).

Presentation "Job Talk"

- It is used to assess a candidate's research, how he or she handles questions and thinks on his or her feet, how he or she performs in the classroom, and even if he or she has a sense of humor (stage presence).
- Pay particular attention to giving the context and motivation of your research.

- Within the first 5 minutes you should convince your audience that your research is important.
- Speak enthusiastically about your work.
- Establish eye-contact (with everyone present)
- Do not be monotone – speak enthusiastically about the exciting parts of your research.
- End with a strong conclusion
- During the Q&A part of the session – stay calm and do not let yourself be put on the defensive.
- Respond to every unreasonable question reasonably.

Interviewing with Faculty/Administrators

- If small school, you could interview with faculty from related disciplines, as well as a Provost or even the President. At large schools, you could interview with Deans.
- Talk about the unique contributions you can make to the department with both your research and your teaching.
- Show that you understand the Department's goals, and demonstrate what you can add to them.
- It is good to ask them big picture questions such as the mission of the university and how/where the department fits within that.
- Treat everyone you come in contact with as if they are a part of the decision making process (be respectful, enthusiastic, and don't forget to always smile).
- Be detailed and descriptive in your responses to their questions.
- If their question is unclear, ask for clarification. If their facial impressions convey confusion, ask if there are areas they would like clarity.
- Highlight your unique strengths and strategies you use to engage your research and the classroom.

Interviewing the Institution

- Interviewing is a two-way process (you are interviewing them as well).
- Your goal is to assess the culture of the institution and department – to determine if you feel it would be a good fit (i.e. physical appearance, setting, personalities of others in the dept., etc.).
- Pay attention to how individuals within the department relate to each other; is it collegial.
- If you meet with students (undergraduate or graduate), take these meetings seriously. Their feedback plays a vital role in the selection process. If you don't have the chance to meet with students during your visit – ask the faculty to describe the culture of the student body.
- Pick up a copy of the student newspaper or department newsletter.
- Feel free to comment positively on what you are learning about the institution and department.

Before the Interview

- Find out the length of the interview (and number of days), as well as what meetings and individuals you will be expected to meet during them.
- Find out if you will be making a presentation or teaching a course.
- Confirm all travel arrangements.
- Make sure you know the name of the person who has called you, where you are to arrive, how you will be met, the name of the person who will meet you, and all relevant phone numbers.
- If time before the interview starts, ask to have any materials that would help you learn more about the school and department sent to you.
- If you encounter unavoidable delays when traveling, call as soon as you can and explain why you will be delayed.
- Do your homework – learn about the institution and faculty (use websites, library resources for information on publications by members of the department).
- Try and learn the names of everyone in the department so you can address them accordingly.
- Practice both interview questions and your presentation (the more the better). Time your presentation so that you know it is the appropriate length of time.
- Develop a “cocktail party length” brief summary of your research to give to those outside the department.

- What to bring:
 - Extra copies of your CV, and any other materials you submitted to the search committee
 - If you are including handouts for your presentation, bring enough copies and make sure they are nice
 - Sample of syllabi for courses you designed or taught, reprints, abstracts of articles.

During the Interview

- Remember that each new person has not heard your story, so be prepared to share it again and again with enthusiasm.
- Always bring questions for them – if you can tailor your questions to each person or group you are meeting with the better.
- Firm handshake!
- Areas you will need to address: your Dissertation, your future research interests, teaching experience, your interest in the institution
- When you leave an interview meeting, say goodbye to each individually.
- If your interview includes social events, follow your hosts' lead in deciding how much to talk about professional, and how much about social topics.
- At the end of your interview experience be sure to find out when a decision will be made, or when you can expect to hear from them.
- Most interviewers are far more impressed by candidates who appear confident and candid than those who appear to be trying to give the "right" answers. BE HONEST!

After the Interview

- Write a thank you note (email) to the main person who arranged your day. You can ask the person to convey your thanks to others.
- Reiterate your interest in the thank you note – try and include specific information that you received from them that enhanced your interest.
- Reflect on the interview – what went well, what didn't go well.
- If not selected for the position, contact them for feedback.

Questions that Might be Asked in an Interview

ABOUT RESEARCH

- Why did you choose your dissertation topic?
- Can you tell us briefly what theoretical framework you used in developing your research?
- Of course you read _____? (names an unfamiliar article/book related to your dissertation)
- If you were to begin it again, are there any changes you would make in your dissertation?
- In doing your research, why didn't you _____? (This question can take many forms. You are being asked to respond appropriately to an intellectual challenge to your work.)
- What contributions does your dissertation make to the field?
- You realize that several members of this department tend to approach the subject from a very different perspective that does your advisor...
- Tell me about your dissertation (asked in a meeting with a dean who knows very little about your field.)
- Why didn't you finish your dissertation sooner?
- I see you have very few publications...
- What are your research plans for the next two/five/ten years?
- What are your plans for applying for external funding over the next few years? Any major funding?
- What facilities do you need to carry out your research plans?

ABOUT TEACHING

- Are you a good teacher?
- How do you feel about having to teach required courses?
- What is your approach to teaching Introductory _____?
- How do you motivate students?
- How would you encourage students to major in your field?
- In your first semester you would be responsible for our course in _____. How would you structure it? What textbook would you use?
- Many of our students are probably (more/less academically talented; older/younger) than those you've become used to at your institution. How successful would you be with them?
- What is your teaching philosophy?
- If you could teach any course you wanted to, what would it be?
- Have you had any experience with the case-study method?
- What do you think is the optimal balance between teaching and research?
- Have you had any experience with interactive on-line instruction?

WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DEPARTMENT AND SCHOOL

- Can you summarize the contribution you would make to our department?
- Are you willing to become involved in committee work?
- Why are you interested in our kind of school?
- What institutional issues particularly interest you?

CAREER AND PERSONAL CHOICES

- If you have more than one job offer, how will you decide?
- How do you feel about living in a small college town like this in an isolated rural area?
- I can't imagine why a young person like you would want to go into this field...
- What do you do in your space time?
- Who else is interviewing you?
- What will it take to persuade you to take this job?
- What kind of salary are you looking for?