

Tips for Getting a Job in Academia

Karen Barbera

Personnel Research Associates

Jennifer Carr

Bowling Green State University

Irene Sasaki

The Dow Chemical Company

Looking for a job in academia? Want some tips on what to do and what to avoid? You've probably read some of the popular books on the job search process but need more tailored information to landing a job in academia. In this article, we've gathered valuable tips and advice from SIOP members who have successfully navigated the academic job search process. There are tips on the preparation stage, vita, interview/site visit, job talk, and offer negotiation part of the process—all good advice for the academic job seeker.

How do I get started? Early preparation is the key

A precursor to this question perhaps is “When do I get started,” and the answer is “Early.” Our experts agreed that early preparation throughout one's graduate student career is important to develop the credentials needed. Take actions early and consistently to make yourself an attractive candidate:

- *Publish.* Even if you are only “toying” with the idea of a career in academia, it is important to lead/participate in projects that have a good chance of being submitted for publication in the short-term frame. Do this as soon as possible in your graduate training as it often takes time to get a research project to the point of journal submission.
- *Gain teaching experience.* Independently teach a course. Collect and document your teaching evaluations. If the opportunity to independently teach a course is not available to you, gain teaching experience through guest lecturing, teaching a lab or discussion section, and/or developing relevant test items.
- *Present your work.* Strive to be in symposia (rather than posters) as well as any other experiences presenting your work in front of an interested yet critical group.
- *Network.* There is no real consensus on how much networking matters, but at a minimum, networking provides you with experience in talking with colleagues (which at first seems like an entirely different language) in a variety of situations.
- *Gain mentoring experience.* Work with younger students (including undergraduates) and consciously work to improve mentoring ability. This allows you to develop your mentoring style and to acquire “lessons learned.”

- *Determine the type of program you are targeting.* The big question for I-O PhDs is whether to teach in a psychology department or business school. Determining which program you prefer will dictate many of your preparation activities. For example, if you are targeting a position in a management department, you might want to gain experience teaching an MBA course. Likewise, if you want to work in a program that has a strong applied focus, gaining practical experience in applied settings may be appropriate.
- *Read one or more books on getting your first academic job.* *The Compleat Academic: A Career Guide* by John Darley, Mark Zanna, and Henry Roedinger (APA, 2003) is a particularly good source.

The Vita and Other Supporting Materials

The number one criterion for academic jobs is the vita. Many new PhDs have no top-tier publications so having just one can be a significant differentiator. Get advice from your advisor, colleagues, and even friends on creating an aesthetically pleasing and informative vita. Also, check out Web sites of doctoral programs, which often have links to their students' vitas.

Ask friends/colleagues to review your vita. What are their first impressions? Are your strengths evident upon a quick scan? If not, modify the vita. Often, this can be as simple as switching the order in which information is presented or using bolding or other methods to show emphasis.

In addition to your vita, create a teaching portfolio. Include a statement of your teaching philosophy, course syllabi, sample lectures/projects, exams, and instructor evaluations. Also include a statement of which courses you feel qualified to teach, and why. Be sure to tailor your portfolio to the position you are seeking. A large university may have different needs and expectations than a small, liberal arts college.

Letters of recommendation require some preparation on your part as well. Determine which faculty members will write your letter of recommendation, and give them plenty of advance notice. Give all letter writers copies/examples of your application materials to refresh their memories on your credentials. In addition, you might want to meet with each letter writer individually to discuss specific areas that you would like them to address in their letters to ensure coverage across letter writers (e.g., ask your chair to specifically comment on the status of your degree if you are ABD and make sure that you are consistent in how you position this). Depending upon your letter writers' familiarity with your teaching skills, invite letter writer(s) to sit in and observe you teach.

The Interview/Site Visit

An invitation to interview or have a site visit is evidence that your credentials have been at least favorably reviewed. What happens during your visit, however, can be key to determining whether you are a good fit for a

department, and the type of colleague that others want to have. As in all aspects of the job search process, preparation is important:

- *Research the program.* Learn about the program and its structure, the faculty, and the administrators. Read faculty members' vitas (often available through the Web). Read recent articles of the primary faculty on the search committee. Prepare talking points or questions to ask each faculty member.
- *Determine how you fit the program.* Conduct an honest assessment of who you are and what you are looking for. While you want to "sell" yourself, you need to be true to yourself and be clear about what you are looking for. Know why you have applied to a particular program, and how you can help to enhance it.
- *Practice responses to likely questions.* Expect questions on your research, teaching, and mentoring experiences. Some typical research questions for new PhDs include dissertation topic/progress, current research activities, long-term research plan, target journals, how you see your research fitting with their program, and whether or not you'll continue working with the people from your current university. Be careful with this last one, as too much reliance on one's advisor is a "red flag." Some typical teaching questions include your teaching philosophy, the courses you are qualified/prepared to teach, and the courses you most enjoy teaching.
- *Prepare a set of meaningful questions to ask.* Asking questions conveys your interest in the program and will provide you with valuable information to evaluate your opportunities. Be careful though about the nature of your questions and what they might convey about you (e.g., do your questions imply that you are overly concerned with establishing a part-time consulting practice?). In general, avoid questions about salary until you are further along in the selection process. Appropriate questions include questions about the environment, the program's strength in the university, advising responsibilities, teaching loads, tenure requirements, opportunities for collaboration, committee responsibilities, and so forth.

Avoid the following pitfalls during your interview/visit:

- *Appearing narrow or inflexible.* Giving thought in advance to how you fit into the program should help you to avoid this pitfall. Be sure to consider your experiences broadly. Be particularly careful about the questions that you ask and what others may infer from them.
- *Excessive name dropping or blatant ego-stroking.* While you want to make a connection between your research and that of other faculty members, do not make leaps when connections are not there.
- *Demonstrating unrealistic confidence.* We all know the importance of setting difficult but attainable goals. Have appropriate goals for what

you can accomplish and contribute to the department.

- *Believing that you are not always “On.”* You are *always* “On” and being judged. This extends to the time that you might spend in informal settings and in meetings with students as well as to interactions at the conference, cocktail parties, and so forth.
- *Being overly casual or formal with students.* This is particularly important for new faculty members. The faculty needs to see you as their colleague, not as a graduate student. However, you need to be friendly and approachable to the students.

The Job Talk

Once a candidate is at the on-site interview stage, the *job talk* plays a large role (some would argue too big of one), so it is important to take this very seriously. Preparation here can go a long way:

- *Prepare your job talk content.* Your job talk should help to give a broad picture of who you are and what your research agenda is. That said, you also need to be careful about trying to do too much in your job talk. Time is limited. Think about your “take home message” and build the talk around that one point.
- *Prepare attractive presentation materials.* Use a mixture of graphs, text, and other things to best convey your information. Avoid gimmicks. Limit the amount of information provided on a single slide.
- *Tailor your talk to the audience.* Ask questions prior to your visit that provide insight into the expectations and norms of the department with regard to job talks. Ask who will attend the talk and modify your presentation and/or speaking notes as needed to fit their knowledge levels. Further tailor the information to demonstrate how your research fits with that of the faculty where you are interviewing. While you should tailor your talk to the audience, ultimately you need to be true to yourself and your own interests.
- *Prepare for likely questions.* Anticipate theory, practice, and methodological questions and practice your responses to them. Prepare back-up slides where relevant.
- *Practice, practice, practice.* Practice your talk in front of a critical audience, treating your practice sessions as though they are actual job talks.
- *Have back-ups for emergencies.* Paranoia can be healthy. If you are doing a computer-based slide show, also bring a set of transparencies. Have electronic and hard copies of all materials.

During the job talk itself:

- *Pace yourself.* Know your time limit and pace yourself accordingly.
- *Demonstrate poise and enthusiasm.* It is important to be professional yet engaged with your audience. Balance humility along with self-assurance.

- *Answer questions effectively.*
 - Listen to the question—don't interrupt. Feel free to ask questions to clarify if you do not understand.
 - Demonstrate confidence. Asking for feedback on your responses (e.g., "Was that answer okay?") undermines your competence.
 - Be aware of signals that indicate defensiveness and/or condescension and self-monitor accordingly.
 - If you don't know the answer, say so. However, also state how you might get the answer through future research.

Negotiating the Offer

Often, job seekers focus most on getting the offer and give too little attention to how they will negotiate an offer once it is made. While it is best to negotiate everything up front, realize that for some universities, some expenses and issues are simply not negotiable. Be sure to approach the negotiation as a collaboration. You don't want to damage your relationship with the program over a few thousand dollars.

Be sure to consider the following when negotiating an offer:

- *Evaluate your needs in advance.* What level of salary do you need to be happy? Consider how important salary is relative to other job dimensions before you enter the market and respond to job postings.
- *Be realistic with your salary range.* Understanding what is being offered in the marketplace. Visit the SIOP Web site to review salary data. Look at what other programs are offering in their job postings. If necessary, adjust according to current economic conditions.
- *Consider the salary in light of the total compensation picture.* Understand that multiple aspects of compensation exist in academics: 9-month salary, summer salary, start-up money, assistantship availability, travel money, everyday resources (e.g., copying), consulting, and grants. Learn about what most programs offer, and be creative in what you ask for (e.g., a third-year course release).
- *Show self-reliance.* Demonstrate that you are willing to contribute to your own funding (e.g., applying for internal and external grants).
- *Get all specifics in writing.* This includes equipment needs, lab space, course load, and so forth.

We hope this information will enhance your ability to successfully get an academic position. Good luck in your search!

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