

LETTERS

Job Search Techniques Apply to Academia, Other Fields

The article "So You Want to Be a Professor!" by Matthew Anderson (PHYSICS TODAY, April 2001, page 50) will be very useful to graduate students applying for an academic position. The process is so different from more than a half-century ago, when the department chair would write to a colleague at a graduate institution: "We expect to have an opening for next fall. Do you have someone suitable?"

As a retired department chair and a veteran of several searches and a few thousand applications, perhaps I can provide additional perspective. One area needs emphasizing:

Research the institution to which you are applying. Colleges and universities vary in size and selectivity. With Web sites, this research is now much easier. Especially when a couple may be looking for positions and planning to relocate together (see the article in PHYSICS TODAY, July 1999, page 32), extra research of both the institution and the area should be done early.

Overall, Anderson's advice is excellent; yet the view from the receiving end can make the process somewhat more comprehensible. Logging in several hundred applications and collating the letters of reference and supplementary material into packets for review is an extra burden for the already busy departmental coordinator. Applicants should not send more material than is required. Also, too many applications arrive after letters of recommendation, many at the very last minute.

Government regulations regarding the application process can seem contradictory: Employers may not discriminate and interviewers may not ask. Yet the department and the college must file the total number of applications, with breakdown by

gender, minority status, religious preference, and so on. Often the only clue for ethnicity, and even for gender, is in the letters of reference.

Many applications (and even letters of recommendation) are obviously photocopied and read like bulk mailings. An applicant's remarks indicating a miscomprehension of the institution will likely be cause for rejection. For example, we are a small, undergraduate, liberal arts college, yet one applicant wrote, "I would even be willing to teach a class" and another wrote, "I feel that I can contribute significantly to your high-energy group."

Anderson's comments on preparing the application are excellent. I will add that having the whole application reviewed by at least one person is very useful. Spell-checking software is fine, but inadequate. Furthermore, statements that seem clear to the applicant may not be clear to someone else. And specifics can be much more informative than general statements. Applicants who have properly researched an institution can indicate where and how they might fit into and strengthen the program. Their research can also help them tailor letters of recommendation for each institution.

Each department has its variations of sorting. At Bowdoin, the entire department faculty reads completed applications, weighs many factors, and makes comparisons for several categories—research, teaching, publications, and so on—and conducts an overall assessment. The pile is reduced to about a dozen folders for selection of applicants to be interviewed. The process is complex. Anderson wished he'd had feedback about his "failed" applications, but in most instances no one factor is cause for rejection.

Once the best applications have been selected, the interview process begins. At Bowdoin, the candidate meets a variety of people. For a tenure-track position, the list of interviewers runs as follows: president, dean of faculty, department members, faculty affairs subcommittee, and students. There will undoubtedly be much repetition, yet the applicant

must adjust his or her responses to each interviewer and setting. This repetitive process is helpful in establishing fit, which, as Anderson points out, is important for both the candidate and the institution.

Bowdoin also has a colloquium at which the candidate describes his or her research at a level suitable for undergraduate majors. This critical step shows the candidate's ability to express complex ideas clearly and at an appropriate level.

After all the interviews, each group tries to form a consensus, giving each candidate a preference rating. Usually the agreement is surprisingly uniform. Some quotes from my reports on recent candidates provide hints for improving individual interviews:

▷ In conversation he seemed enthusiastic and lively, yet his presentation was wooden.

▷ Well organized, clearly and enthusiastically presented, especially considering his difficult topic.

▷ I found the computer "hunt and find" in front of an audience distracting. And he was too tied to his machine to engage the audience.

▷ A green jacket, yellow vest, and orange tie amused even the majors.

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The recent article by Matthew Anderson on how to become a professor was interesting and useful. However, there was no comparable article directed at other job venues for physicists.

I am not, nor have I ever been, a member of the tenure track academic community. Several issues raised by Anderson's reasoned approach can be applied to job searching in general. The most important requirement, apparently missed by many job seekers, is to understand the job that is to be done and demonstrate how you can do it—and do it better than your competition.

According to the author, the standard academic protocol includes giving a colloquium and perhaps teaching a class. The applicant also

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