

## Advice from people on the other side of the fence

### **From Jeff Boersema (Seattle University, UO alum):**

So here's a couple of words of advice which you can do what you want with. If it isn't useful, discard it.

Of course it helps during the job application process if you know exactly what kind of job you want and what kind of school it will be at. If that's the case, then you can narrowly focus your job search on those schools and prepare application materials that emphasize exactly how good of a fit you are at the school you're applying for.

But I don't think that it's necessary to have such a strong sense of what you want. I think that during my first job search, I might have benefitted from a healthy openness to different kinds of schools and different kinds of job descriptions. I may have closed some doors to places that would have worked out well because I didn't have the imagination to see myself there. I now believe that there is a range of models of schools that could have worked out well for me.

So I guess my first piece of advice is that it can be a good thing if you don't know what you want. In some sense the application process (including interviews and campus visits) is a chance for you to explore what you want.

However, having said that, I also think that it is important (or at least very helpful) that something in your application material indicates to the people reading your file that you're someone who would fit.

When we read applications for jobs at SU we're of course looking for a strong teaching record and a promise of research commensurate with our expectations. We're also hoping to see some sort of indication that the kind of job that they're looking for fits us. There are aspects of SU that make it unique (it's a Jesuit university, teaching is still our primary focus, but research is expected, research with undergraduates is also becoming expected, etc.) It certainly helps when we're reading files to see some indication that they'll fit the particularities of SU. Often this is not something that the candidate addresses intentionally, and sometimes it is. In some sense, you just have to put yourself out there (in the application materials) and let the search committees decide for you what the best fit is.

### **From Michele Intermont (Kalamazoo College)**

#### 1. Some general advice:

Hello! Wow, year number 6 already?? This fall is a scary fall then, hoping that the thesis will be done and having to act as if it will be so that you can apply for jobs.

My role is to say: Don't worry! It will all work out!

I'll be happy to take a look at your research statement, and I'll get back to you on that. As for what do small liberal arts colleges look for? How does your application get read?

We start with the cover letter. And it should make it clear that you know what sort of job

you are applying for. That is: a) make it personal - the address of the school should be on top, the letter should be addressed to the chair of the search by name, you should mention the school by name in the letter b) make it clear that you want to teach undergrads. That doesn't mean you can't or shouldn't mention research. But it does mean that a cover letter which says "I hear you have a job opening. I'm a great  $C^*$  algebraist, and I know I'd be really happy working your dept" isn't going to get read very carefully. We want to know that you first want to teach, that you are interested in working with undergrads (ie, that you won't come to campus only 2 days a week and then stay home to do your research on the other days, that you'll be open to independent studies, tea and Colloquium type things etc). Then we will ascertain whether or not you're interested in keeping up some research. After all, to be able to achieve tenure at many places, you will need research.

Your application should be ordered too. We'll be reading your teaching statement carefully. Include one. Maybe you won't include it for postdocs or research positions, but write one for a position at a school like K. Make sure it appears after your vita and BEFORE the research statement. There will likely be no one at the school who will be an expert in your research, and that statement likely won't get read. It will be glanced at. People will look to see if you can seem to explain your ideas to a layman. And if you get invited for an interview, then it may be read more carefully.

This is what occurs to me off the top of my head. Of course, you should ask John Fink the same question! He's been a part of many more search committees than I have :).

Oh, be sure to mention in your cover letter that you went to a small liberal arts college and don't be afraid to mention it.

BTW, it's ok if you don't know whether or not you really want to teach a liberal arts college, but you'll have to make a choice in your application: Pretend you do. Or say "Gee, I really don't know and I'd like to find out! Having gone to K, I know how wonderful such schools can be for students, and I'd like to know if I can find a niche for myself in such a place as a prof."

2. Excerpt from her reaction to my research statement,

"My first thought was 'Oh dear. 4 pages.' " Then she suggested things to cut.

3. In answer to the question, "any advice about phone interviews?":

Questions I would think to ask as an interviewer:

Why us?(This is where having something specific to say about the school comes in).

What course would you most like to teach here in your first year? (And Intro to  $C^*$ -algebras is not a good answer. Abstract Algebra I on the other hand would be a good answer. Or some other course normally found in the undergrad curriculum. Operative word being normally.)

What strategies do you have to try to keep up your research with our 12 hour teaching load (or whatever it is....somewhere between 9 and 12 is normal. 12 is a lot. You'll want to know if it's 3 courses or 4 per term. What is a typical schedule ie, two sections of calc I plus one other course or all distinct...that sort of thing). Truth is, we all struggle with this, so it's not like we expect you to have a great answer. We want to know that a) you understand it will be difficult b) have given some thought to it because if not, you'll not get tenure.

4. Another email:

Don't be rushed in the process of finding your job. I say that just because the time line I expect is that postdocs are whittled down and decided upon in early January (or a little before), and tenure track positions at smaller schools take advantage of the January meetings to interview, with campus interviews coming sometime after that, in mid Jan to mid April. I could be out of date here, but I expect I'm not that far off. And, see, when you get an offer from someplace, they will give you a week or two to decide. Not much more. And once you accept a position, it is really, really bad form and bad for your reputation to renege. (It is possible for some places to allow you to start a year late and take advantage of some great opportunity that comes up or some great postdoc, but it's not something that a small school can easily accommodate and so it is non-trivial).

5. A phone conversation on how to choose which jobs to apply for:

- Investigate peoples research on MathSci Net or ArXiv to see what they are doing recently.
- Ask (when phone interviewed/interviewed) what it takes to get tenure.
- It is hard to move up in jobs (to a lighter teaching load), but not completely impossible.
- For a long term carrer at a liberal arts school, apply for two year positions at a good liberal arts school, to get some experience.
- Keep track of which versions of documents you sent to each school and why you applied for each job.
- Talk to people you know who have been on the job market resecently and got the kind of job you want.

### **John Fink (Kalamazoo College)**

Some quick answers to the application process and what lib arts schools might look for/at:

0. The Context: There's a stack of 100 applications. Committee member Jones must somehow get through all of these by tomorrow at 4 pm when the Search Committee has scheduled its first meeting. Between now and then Prof. Jones has a set of exams to finish for her ODE class, a grant application to edit for the Development Officer, a Real Analysis class to prepare for, and a set of proofs for her latest article in the Annals to go over. Plus, it's her night to cook supper, and her daughter's Brownie Troop is having their monthly meeting in the Fellowship Hall of First Methodist Church across town.

Your application is number 27 on the stack. What will you include that makes Prof. Jones want to spend more than 30 seconds on it?

Some things to consider:

1. Your letter: Did you write it to Prof. Jones and her committee, or did you write it to [generic math dept]? Michele's (A current faculty member at Kalamazoo College recently hired) letter began something like, ". . . I am excited to think about the possibilities of teaching at Kalamazoo . . ." Letters none of us read further begin: "Dear Sir, Please consider my application for the position you advertise."

2. Your references: Can somebody write with authority about your teaching? What we want to read: ". . . I have seen Ms. Archey in class on several occasions, and can testify to her X, Y, and Z." or "Students have said the following things about Ms. Archey: "She is X" or, "In spite of W, she was really incredibly Z".

What we don't bother to read: "Although I have not seen Ms. Archey in the classroom myself, I understand from others that she is quite competent . . . ."

3. Your CV: Of course you'll want to show as much  $C^*$  Algebra stuff as you can. And research talks, papers, etc. Any college worthy of your talents will expect a research trajectory. But a college worthy of your soul will also want to see stuff that makes you YOU: courses taught, yes, but also social outreach, hobbies, passions, . . .

4. Your Teaching Philosophy: This was not part of my application process 30 years ago, but I'm seeing more and more of this in applications. It's most effective if you stay concrete. Prof Jones has been teaching for 17 years: she may have already tried lots of ideas whose shortcomings you have yet to realize. But she has never experienced the world of teaching through your own eyes. So you should try to leave her with something of yourself in this essay.

**Chris Phillips (University of Oregon)**

How I read the files:

Ignore the cover letter completely for tenure track, and look in it for only names of potential faculty collaborators for postdocs; ignore the teaching statement unless the person is being seriously considered on the basis of research (and maybe ignore it even then); pay most attention to the research part of the vita, letters of recommendation, and, if the candidate is being seriously considered or is in my area, the research statement.

**Dev Sinha (University of Oregon)**

At the U of O, we look for very different things at the two levels of jobs. For post-docs, we almost exclusively look for someone who one or two particular faculty would work closely with and are excited about the candidate's work. Our post-doc is kind of like a second apprenticeship. There are other post-doc positions out there which can be more broad in what they look for, but our geographic isolation means that someone would really need to work with people here in order to have a good chance at being productive.

For tenure-track jobs, we try to get the best researcher possible among those who seem like good colleagues and teachers. We are looking for someone who can supervise PhD students, so a good amount of independence and originality are desirable. Though Jon Brundan was hired here right out of grad school, that is an exception. We tend to pay more attention to people who are 2-4 years out with 5-10 or more papers in good journals (the number of papers varies with the field).

-Dev