

The Office Next Door: Making Yourself an Excellent Faculty Candidate

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I chair the Department of Psychology at the University of San Diego (USD), a private Catholic-affiliated Doctoral II institution comprising of the College of Arts and Sciences, School of Law, School of Education, School of Nursing, and School of Business. USD enrolls approximately 7,000 students, 4,000 of them in the College of Arts and Sciences. More than 7,000 students typically apply for the 1,000 places available in each first-year class, and nearly half are accepted. The student/faculty ratio is 15 to 1, and the freshman retention rate approaches 90 percent. Despite USD's status as a national doctoral institution, the Department of Psychology is an undergraduate program housed in the College of Arts and Sciences, the heart and soul of the University, having more in common with liberal arts colleges than with research universities. We are a teaching-oriented program, but we do have expectations for faculty scholarship, especially as embodied in research involving students.

So You Are in the Job Market?

As you complete your graduate studies and look ahead to a career in academe, your first encounter with prospective academic employers is likely to come via advertisements describing position openings. Although these ads provide some description of the hiring institutions and departments, they are typically brief. For example, I recently examined a sample of 10 typical academic ads for psychologists and found their average length was about 200 words, with the occasional announcement containing as few as 75 words. This brief introduction may whet your appetite, but is not likely to provide enough information to tell you very much about the college or university and the likelihood that this job was meant for you.

Know Thyself

The injunction to know thyself is as important to us today as it was to Socrates. Teaching, to many outsiders, appears easy; after all, they may reason it involves nothing more than appearing two or three times each week to entertain a group of young people. However, as anyone who has done it is well aware, good teaching is hard work—and, as Brewer (1996) argued, it is perhaps more appropriately seen as a calling than a profession. There are some things you can ask yourself as you attempt to determine whether you have been “called.”

Are You a Hard Worker?

Thomas Edison is supposed to have said that genius is 99 percent perspiration, and I believe that maxim may apply to teaching. Yes, you must have knowledge and the ability to convey it, but you also must prepare, show up, and do the job, day (and night) in and day (and night) out. Nearly anyone with appropriate education would have the technical content knowledge and skills to do what teachers do; it is other traits—characteristics like work ethic, integrity, and reliability—that will set you apart as an outstanding candidate. To the extent you can do it, get the experience, particularly in teaching, which will allow you to demonstrate these strengths; doing so will prove indispensable if you pursue a position at institutions like USD.

Are You a Team Player?

Good departments depend on constructive interpersonal dynamics and shared responsibility for getting work done. Departments like USD that value teaching call upon their faculty in myriad ways that go beyond academic or scientific specialties. You are likely to serve on committees, provide consultation to students and faculty alike on issues related to your area of specialization, and to play an integral role in such processes as program assessment, academic advising, and curriculum development. You may also need to be flexible enough to prepare and teach courses needed by your department, even when they are not in your preferred area. These activities and many others require the cooperative attitude and effective interpersonal skills that characterize effective teamwork.

Do You Have Patience and Love for People?

Nothing is more fundamentally important in teaching than the recognition that, although you may have taught a particular concept a hundred times, the beginning student is hearing it for the first time, today in your class. You must therefore teach the material with the enthusiasm and passion the student deserves, and not with the weary demeanor of someone who is tired of hearing (or saying) it. When your students present you with papers from which any respect for APA style seems totally absent, you must remind yourself that, although you have seen these same errors more times than you can count, this may be the first time this student has been asked to complete this type of assignment. If you can see yourself taking pleasure from these things, and doing it year after year, in an environment in which students routinely expect personal attention and time from faculty, perhaps you are the teacher we seek. If, on the other hand, you find the campus more pleasant when the students are away, or if you always know how many days remain until the next vacation, you probably are not our candidate.

Do You Know What You Want to Do?

You will be better prepared to make good decisions about your career and your future if you have found (or created) opportunities to sample key aspects of academic life: teaching, research, committee service, and community work. It is one thing to tell a search committee you believe you would enjoy campus service or that you would be a good research mentor for undergraduates; it is quite another thing to be able to demonstrate it, based on your experience in graduate school.

Know the Institution

Colleges and universities are not all the same. As Freeman (2002) made clear in his discussion of research universities and liberal arts colleges, there are important differences among institutions, in teaching, research, advising, diversity, and sense of community, for students and faculty alike. Understanding the character of these differences is fundamental to making good choices and to finding an academic home.

When we recruit faculty at USD, we look for people with a passion for undergraduate teaching and with programs of research that are likely to engage undergraduates in meaningful ways as collaborators.

Not so long ago, we received a letter of application that named a group of distinguished researchers with whom the applicant looked forward to working in our department. This might have been a very useful tactic if the researchers had actually been members of our faculty; unfortunately, however, they were faculty members at a well-known research center at a nearby university. The candidate had mistaken our university for a different campus across town, and as a result was applying to the wrong department, one quite different from ours. Experiences of this nature do not, of course, serve applicants well, and they prompt me to offer some suggestions:

Read the Job Announcement

Is the position in your specialty area? Are the job requirements consistent with your interests and abilities? Search committees routinely receive numerous applications from individuals whose credentials clearly indicate their failure to read (or respect) the position description and their lack of background in the area required. Such lack of interest is not a good way to impress potential colleagues.

Do Your Homework

Every college and university makes a wealth of information available via Web sites and print material. Take advantage of these resources during the job search process. Different types of institutions really do emphasize different aspects of applicant experience and interest in their recruitment of faculty (Landrum & Clump, 2004), and it will be to your advantage to be aware of key characteristics of the department and institution to which you are applying. Know the faculty and their interests, the nature of the student body, any special marks of distinction that characterize the school, and something about the local community. Knowledge of this sort will be helpful as you decide whether you would be well suited to the institution, and if you can use it in the application and interview process you will demonstrate to the

search committee that you cared enough to invest time and effort in finding a good fit as you seek an academic home.

Assess the Organizational Climate

Matsumoto and Juang (2004) distinguished between organizational culture and organizational climate. It may be possible to learn a fair amount about an institution's organizational culture (beliefs, values, procedures, and the like) from readily available sources, whether electronic or print. Organizational climate, however, has more to do with the "feel" of the campus, and may be more readily assessed when you actually visit. How do the faculty relate to one another? What do students say about life on the campus? Do you feel comfortable in the environment of the department?

The Office Next Door

These days, when I read applicant files and interview prospective colleagues, my mind often wanders to the office next door. I am of course interested in the education and the experience of the candidates, and I read their letters of recommendation, curricula vitae, and teaching portfolios with care. However, as I survey these credentials, consider teaching experience, and listen to what applicants say, I am also reminding myself that the person we hire is likely to live in the office next door well beyond my own retirement. We are not only selecting a teacher-scholar, but a colleague, a neighbor, a team member, and, we hope, a friend. We have set aside many applications from individuals with prestigious educational pedigrees when, in the final analysis, we simply did not believe the individual would be a good fit.

If you apply for a position in our department, and if you read the ad carefully enough to know you are qualified, your job then becomes to convince us that you will be an outstanding colleague. You will be competing with many others who are highly intelligent, well-educated, experienced, and perhaps well-published. If you hope to stand out from the crowd, you will need to show us your passion, your capacity for hard work, your love of students, and your potential to thrive in our particular kind of environment. In short, you must

give us a reason to believe that our campus will be a better place if you live in the office next door.

References

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