

## **The Successful Job Applicant: What the University of Nebraska—Kearney**

### **Seeks in a New Assistant Professor**

Richard L. Miller, Robert F. Rycek, and William J. Wozniak

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Located in south central Nebraska, the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), is a Carnegie Masters I Comprehensive public institution comprising 5,400 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate students. Most UNK students are Nebraska residents (94%), first-generation college students, graduates in the top half of their high school class (86%), and at least part-time workers. UNK has a 16 to 1 student-to-faculty ratio with 296 full-time and 86 part-time faculty. Faculty teach a 12-hour load but 3 hours can be reassigned for research. A notable feature of UNK is its commitment to undergraduate research, and as a result, UNK consistently sends one of the largest contingents of students to the National Conference on Undergraduate Research.

The department has 9 full-time faculty, 175 majors, and offers only bachelor's degrees. The curriculum has a series of core courses that includes laboratory experiences in statistics and experimental psychology plus two additional lab courses in cognate areas. As a result, 67% of our graduates have made research presentations at either regional or national conferences. The department has hosted a number of conferences over the years and has a strong commitment to undergraduate research.

#### Teaching

Teaching is preeminent at UNK. Teaching, however, is not limited to the classroom but also includes mentoring students in research and field experiences or both. We believe that students learn best through experience, thus we use experiential learning to teach psychology. The values that we look for in a new faculty member include not only having a

passion for one's discipline, but a desire to share that passion with students. Faculty members should have a good, broad-based command of their specialty area since the person may be the only representative of that area in the department. However, a generalist's perspective and a willingness to expand their horizons are essential values.

The teaching skills we expect include a command of the discipline, a good presence in the classroom, and an ability to work with and supervise students. We expect new faculty to be able to take a student's idea and facilitate development of that idea into a researchable question. We look for mentoring skills that help guide a student to form a hypothesis, develop the design and data analysis, complete a manuscript, and present the finished product. We seek evidence of eclectic research interests, statistical skills, computer literacy, and the ability to use technology to enhance teaching and learning. Finally, since collaborative work is common in our department, it is valuable to have good teamwork skills.

A job applicant's prior teaching experiences should include full responsibility for both introductory and upper level courses. Demonstrated ability to teach within one's specialty area is essential, and evidence of a willingness to teach outside of one's specialty area is an asset. Familiarity with teaching techniques other than the lecture approach is also important. Mentoring experience, especially as a graduate student mentoring undergraduates, is desirable. Finally, we look for professional activity in the area of teaching of psychology (e.g., attending teaching conferences scholarly work in the teaching of psychology, and so on).

### Scholarship

Our department expects faculty to engage actively in scholarly activities that lead to the advancement of knowledge. We look for someone who not only has a research program but who also has a desire and the commitment to find answers wherever questions and controversy exist. Collaborative research is our norm, especially research on the scholarship of teaching, which provides an arena that all members of our faculty find interesting. It is also important that the new faculty member's scholarly interests connect with colleagues in other sub-disciplines and with student interests. Although programmatic research can be pursued,

the new faculty member's research interests should transcend a particular area and be adapted to the process of providing a quality education for students. The willingness to pursue a student proposal, even on a topic outside of one's area of expertise, is an asset to our experiential learning model.

Scholarship in our department requires a variety of skills. New faculty members must have the ability to design research projects that can be completed with students and within the framework of the academic semester or year. They must have the ability to write and edit the documents required for successful research, including IRB protocols, grant applications, conference presentations, and journal articles. They must be able to keep abreast of the latest developments in their area of expertise on their own, and from a distance via e-mail contacts and an occasional specialized convention. They must be able to represent their specialty when working with other specialists, possibly from other departments. Finally, they must have the ability to create student interest in research, and to mentor students in all aspects of the research process, from data collection to publication.

Some of the experiences that we think are predictors of future scholarly success at UNK include: collaboration with peers and with undergraduate students, work that addresses a diverse range of questions rather than questions concerning a single topic and from a single perspective, presentations and publications outside of the thesis and dissertation, completion of research without using sophisticated equipment, and involvement at the "hands-on" level, such as writing grant applications and coding data.

### Service

We view service as a set of activities that go well beyond committee work. Service is a way of connecting across the academy, a commitment to educating the student not only within our discipline, but also through general studies, service learning, and research mentoring. We value service to the profession, especially activities that provide opportunities for our students. We value active academic citizenship at UNK and believe that it can enhance the education of students via policy and curriculum development, as well as encouragement and

support of the scientific enterprise. We encourage faculty to become involved in service activities to ensure that sound educational principles are used to inform academic decision-making. Ultimately, service becomes leadership, an essential element for innovation and growth.

As much as scholarship involves the sharing of ideas within a community of scholars, service that supports scholarly communication provides a valuable lesson for students. From simply organizing travel to a convention, to reviewing papers for publication, to organizing a large conference, service provides opportunities for students and faculty to enhance teaching and scholarship. Some of the experiences that could help prospective faculty members develop service skills include volunteer activities at their graduate institution and in their community as well as service on academic committees and task groups.

#### Some Additional Insights

Skills and experiences in these three domains can certainly be assessed in application materials. However, the values of candidates are more difficult to assess. Some evidence of an applicant's professional values can be collected from the application letter, teaching portfolio, and letters of recommendation. More important to us are the questions that candidates ask during the interview process and how well they listen and respond to our answers. These interactions help us judge the extent that they will be able to incorporate UNK's mission and values into their professional plans for teaching. From this information, we try to judge how well they match our department and predict the likelihood of their becoming a respected colleague.