

The Successful Job Applicant: What Syracuse University

Seeks in New Assistant Professors

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The Psychology Department at Syracuse University (SU) has 25 faculty and approximately 75 graduate students. SU has an enrollment of approximately 15,000 students, and almost 11,000 are undergraduates. It is a private university located in central New York, known for its lakes, hills, orchards, wineries, basketball, and of course, snow. SU is a Carnegie I research university. SU believes its niche is a Student-Centered Research University. In this regard, it expects that students, including undergraduates, and faculty be fully engaged in scientific research. This philosophy promotes the notion that scientific pursuit and discovery are central to our collective intellectual growth. At the same time, it is widely believed that teaching is an important characteristic of lifelong learning. To this end, students at all levels, including undergraduates, and faculty are encouraged to engage in teaching with the rationale that teaching is one of the better ways to learn any content material. SU has a long-standing tradition of involving its students in research and teaching processes. What I hope to describe in the next few pages is the type of faculty member we attempt to hire, and in parallel, the type of training and teaching opportunities that we provide graduate students at Syracuse University.

Importance of Research in Faculty Hiring

Over my 24 years in the Psychology Department at SU I cannot recall a hire that was made on the basis of strong teaching. Similarly, I cannot recall a tenure or promotion decision made primarily on the basis of teaching. Our department is traditional in the sense that all faculty members are expected to be strong, independent researchers. When we interview and mentor junior faculty, we make clear to them that research productivity is the most important

element of the job. In hiring an assistant professor several factors always seem to arise. First, we seek a person who has demonstrated independent research capability along with scholarship productivity. It is important that even a new faculty member already have a programmatic research trajectory. Another important aspect of candidates' scholarship is its potential for extramural funding. Candidates who have been funded in the past, or worked on funded projects, are certainly viewed favorably. It is important, even at the interview stage, that job candidates have ideas for grant proposals and a clear direction for seeking funding. Lastly, the importance of the research interest and fit with other departmental research cannot be overlooked in faculty hiring.

Psychology departments these days tend to develop research themes that involve a critical mass of related faculty. New hires often are negotiated with a dean in order to strengthen a particular research theme. If job candidates do their homework, they will know the themes of a given department and be able to configure their application materials to match the research theme(s) targeted in a job advertisement. In my experience, research fit and productivity constitute the basis for an interview invitation. At SU, we are looking for a researcher who can teach, and not the other way around. In our department, and many other research-oriented departments, prospective faculty must realize that the "publish or perish" mentality is still very much alive.

Importance of Teaching in Faculty Hiring

Regardless of an individual's interest or expertise in research, there will always be academic positions for those interested in post-secondary teaching. Not all professors do research, but virtually all professors teach. Even in schools that have been traditionally driven by research, the past decade has witnessed an increased emphasis on the importance of teaching. For example, SU is a research university that is largely dependent on tuition revenue. During the economic downturn around 1990, the university realized that students and parents were important consumers. Syracuse University decided to redouble its efforts in the classroom and other undergraduate services. This strategy represented a bit of a paradigm

shift in placing greater value on undergraduate teaching and advising. Even various state-supported universities were under the gun to improve teaching or face financial cuts from the state legislature. Job applicants need to be aware of the teaching values of a given college or university.

Institutions vary greatly in faculty commitment to teaching from 100% teaching effort, to 50-50% research and teaching, to 75-100% research. In other words, job applicants should know the emphasis placed on teaching by every institution to which they apply. The job applicant must do some homework with regard to the teaching demands and needs of the department. An applicant might be able to tailor his or her cover letter and teaching materials to demonstrate capability to meet departmental teaching demands. Teaching fit is seen as a definite plus in hiring.

Consistent with SU's mission, our department looks for junior faculty with previous teacher training and experience. This point is important because psychology is the largest major at SU, so our courses are in high demand. Ideally, our job applicants have some breadth in the courses already taught and those they are capable of teaching. In my experience, it is helpful if the applicant can cover one or more of the "bread and butter" courses such as introductory psychology, statistics, or research methods. These are in addition to courses in a specialty area (i.e., social, developmental, clinical, etc.). Departments often mention specialties in a job ad, and an applicant is wise to connect to at least one of these specialty areas. Departments like ours seldom hire hybrids, people that are mixtures of psychology training with no prevailing focus.

Evaluating the teaching ability of an entry-level professor is a challenge for most departments. It is helpful if applicants already have teaching experience and can supply a teaching portfolio (see Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan, 1993; Seldin, 1997; see also the following Web sites: Penn State University's Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence <<http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/Resources/>> (keyword: portfolio); The Ohio State

University <<http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/>>; Syracuse University <<http://ww.syr.edu>>; and the University of Texas <<http://ww.utexas.edu/academic/cte/teachfolio.html>>).

Many of our graduate students complete the compilation of their teaching portfolios before graduation. They typically include a vita, teaching philosophy statement, course syllabi, sample lesson plans, course evaluations, and letters of recommendation from mentors.

It is helpful if a job applicant has a documented track record of strong teaching. Although such a background is extremely helpful, the applicant must pass muster at the interview stage. Most job interviews require that the applicant give a colloquium to the students and faculty. We require a research-based colloquium. In both cases, the audiences scrutinize the candidate's preparation, organization, teaching style, demeanor, speaking ability, responsiveness to questions, and quality of the instruction. I have seen many paper-qualified candidates essentially fail the colloquium test and lose a job offer. It is possible that this single speaking event is over-valued; however, it is the one public and formal performance put on by a job candidate. Like it or not, it carries tremendous weight in hiring decisions. I have no doubt that teaching experience is a great help in preparing candidates for their job talks.

My advice to all psychology graduate students is to get teaching experience before you leave school, even if you have to do it as a volunteer. At SU, most graduate students are involved in teaching, defending research, and presenting at conferences. I see a significant difference in the presentation skills of those who have taught versus those who have not. I see considerable growth in this regard across the students' graduate careers if they have been in the SU teaching program. This is a signature program of SU's Graduate School, and I believe it gives our students an advantage in the academic job market. I have provided the following section for readers who may be interested in learning more about SU's teacher training program.

Graduate Student Teacher Training at Syracuse University

SU has one of the strongest graduate student teacher training programs in the country. SU has made a commitment that not only will graduate students teach at SU, but that they will learn to teach well. SU has cultivated teacher-training programs across campus. With support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), and Syracuse University Chancellor's Fund for Innovation, the graduate school launched the Future Professoriate Project in 1992. This program comprehensively prepares future college and university faculty for teaching. This training begins with a teaching orientation program in the summer prior to graduate students' first academic semester. In this ten-day orientation, approximately 300 prospective teaching assistants from all departments on campus are brought together to listen to lectures, watch videotapes on teaching, discuss teaching methods and classroom issues, design lesson plans, and practice teaching to one another.

At the same time, they are given information about SU, the community, and the undergraduate student body. Certainly this orientation is not enough training to become an effective teacher, but it helps launch graduate students in the right direction. The graduate school continues to sponsor speakers, workshops, seminars, and training sessions throughout the year on various aspects of teaching. It also offers a graduate course on various aspects of teaching and preparation for the professoriate. Although this centralized teacher training goes on throughout the year, most direct teaching training is turned over to the departments.

For the past eight years I have had the good fortune, or poor judgment, depending on how you look at it, of teaching our large Introductory Psychology course. This course enrolls over 1600 students per year, and employs 10 teaching assistants and a graduate assistant coordinator. Most of our graduate students at some time or another have a tour of duty in the "Intro" course. It has been my job, and pleasure, to serve as a liaison between our department and the graduate school with regard to our students' teaching development. Graduate students may use the teaching opportunity as little more than a funding stream, or they may view teaching as an important aspect of their career development. Those who want

to pursue teaching as a significant part of their career can enter into the Future Professoriate Program (FPP).

Once students join the FPP, they are identified within the department as having a particular interest in teaching psychology. The students find a faculty mentor with whom to work on teaching-related activities. FPP students discuss their teaching experiences with the mentor and have the mentor observe them while teaching. Students in the FPP move from teaching in the introductory course to serving as a teaching assistant in a higher-level class. Typically, in these cases, the graduate student is working closely with his or her mentor, and may be teaching various parts of the class (i.e., some lectures, labs, or recitations). Students who are in their second year of teaching in the department are often involved in formal and informal discussions and colloquia on teaching. Such students also are likely to attend teaching activities sponsored by the graduate school.

Those graduate students who find teaching rewarding and important eventually will become Teaching Associates. They will be given their own course to teach under the supervision of their faculty mentor. Beside the usual graduate stipend and remitted tuition, these students are provided with additional funds to foster the development of their teaching (i.e., travel to a conference on teaching). At this level of teaching, the graduate student has responsibility for all aspects of the course. The student must order the books, design the syllabus, handle all grading, provide the class instruction, and manage all student issues. The mentor is involved in reviewing all aspects of the graduate student's work. The student creates a teaching portfolio that includes syllabi, lecture notes, teaching materials, and course evaluations. These teaching products now include materials from the introductory course, plus materials developed as a teaching assistant for another course, as well as all materials from the independently taught course.

It is not uncommon for experienced graduate students to teach at local community and four-year colleges. This teaching provides additional experience as well as a broader array of teaching products. Various recognition awards for teaching (i.e., Summer Teaching Fellow,

Outstanding TA Award) are based on the quality of the graduate student's portfolio, letters of recommendation, nominations from faculty, and course evaluations.

Some of our doctoral students will have participated in all phases of the FPP program in addition to their research and clinical training. They submit their teaching portfolio to the department liaison, and then it is forwarded to the Graduate School with a letter of endorsement. SU then awards the student a Certificate in Undergraduate Teaching, which is presented at the graduation ceremony. Our institutional research suggests that students value the FPP program, and they believe that the teaching experience, certificate, and portfolio help them in their job pursuits. I believe that students primarily interested in teaching positions should have an FPP type of experience. With research positions so competitive these days, a candidate with a strong teaching resume definitely has an advantage over those with limited teaching backgrounds. As long as graduate students can balance the demands of both research and teaching in graduate school, I believe a teacher-training program such as the FPP provides great preparation for an academic job. Not only may this training help land the job, it certainly will make the transition to academe a lot smoother. Thus if you are a graduate student in psychology, embrace teaching, get experience, document your performance, master teaching technology, learn to teach core courses, and find a good teaching fit. I can't think of a better job than teaching psychology and training others to do the same.

References

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