

Interviewing for the First Faculty Position: Finding the Best Fit

Ann Bingham

University of Nevada, Reno

Abstract: Starting the search for your first full-time faculty position can be an overwhelming prospect and not all graduate students receive direction on how to find the best “fit” for them. This brief article offers tips for graduate students beginning the search for positions in higher education to make sure they consider all components critical in the life of a scholar: teaching, scholarship, and service.

Keywords: graduate students, higher education, job search

It can be an overwhelming yet exciting time when doctoral candidates are nearing the end of the dissertation process and considering where they may find themselves after successfully earning the degree. If you are interested in a faculty position, you likely find yourself pouring over the pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or browsing *HigherEdJobs.com* hoping to find an opening that was written specifically with you in mind. While it is important to be a good fit for a potential university position, it is equally essential that the university is a good fit for you. I am sure you feel the pressure of earning a salary rather than paying tuition, but there are other important considerations when determining if a position will bring you all the satisfaction you have imagined. Following are some specific aspects of potential employment you may wish to consider when interviewing for the first faculty position to make sure the fit is right.

It is important for you to do your homework to learn about the university, college, and department that house the position for which you are interested. The chair of the search committee will likely have contacted you. This is where your research can begin. Check the university website to see if the chair’s curriculum vita is available. Then follow this same procedure to learn about other faculty who may teach in your program as well as the department chair and college dean. Look on the university, department, and/or college webpages to see what aspects of their program they highlight to recruit potential students. This will not only give you a good idea about their strengths, but also let you know how your own skills and expertise can contribute to those strengths or fill a need in the department.

While you have been a doctoral student you have likely been asked to teach a class, assist in a research project, collaborate on a grant, or share your expertise with a school district and/or other community agency. These activities fall into the three general areas of expectation for a faculty member: Teaching, Scholarly Activity, and Service or Outreach. These areas can guide the questions that will help you determine how comfortable you might be at a specific higher education institution.

TEACHING

Teaching typically involves at least 40% of a faculty member's time commitment. You may have had experiences in your doctoral program as a teaching assistant for a course or have been given an established syllabus when you had full responsibility for a class. It is important to understand the teaching expectations when you are considering a position. For example, some new faculty members find themselves teaching multiple sections of the same course, which limits the preparation time involved, but may multiply the amount of grading. The size of classes is also a consideration when considering the type of assignments you might give or the ability for students to do group work. Conversely, if you are expected to teach different courses during a semester the amount of preparation for the courses prior to the beginning of the semester will increase. Some basic questions to help you determine teaching expectations are:

1. What specific classes would I be teaching? How often would I teach each class?
2. What is the expected course load for an assistant professor? Is this negotiable? Will I receive a course release during my first year while I acclimate myself to the position?
3. What teaching technology applications are available? Will I be expected to use technology? If so, what supports are provided to assist me as I prepare that aspect of a course?
4. Will I be expected to supervise practicums or student teachers? If so, how many students will I supervise each semester? Will supervision impact my teaching load? Will I be expected to travel outside of the immediate area for supervision?

SCHOLARLY ACTIVITY

You may have published while you have been in your doctoral program or you may be thinking about how to whittle your dissertation down to size so it will fit the page requirements of an important journal in your field. You may also consider yourself exhausted with the whole exercise of research. Regardless of what your enthusiasm for publishing may be, the old axiom "publish or perish" is very real in most faculty positions and scholarly activity is typically expected to account for up to 40% of your time. It is important for you to determine scholarly expectations as well as what supports might be at different universities where you interview. The following questions may help:

1. What are expectations regarding publications for an assistant professor?
2. Are internal grants available that can help me get my research going?
3. Will I have a graduate assistant to work with me on research projects? If so, how many hours per week?
4. What is the expectation for grants? Can being awarded a grant impact course release? What percentage of direct cost comes back to me as Principal Investigator on a grant?

SERVICE

Oftentimes given the expectations for teaching and scholarly activity new junior faculty members are "protected" from very time-consuming service activities. Yet there is typically still an expectation that as an assistant professor you will take on some level of service within your program or department involving approximately 20% of your

time. It is important to determine what type of service will be expected of you. You might consider asking:

1. What service activities are expected of junior faculty in the department, college, or university?
2. Does the college recognize and credit service given outside the university setting, i.e., local schools or agencies?

OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

To make sure you know what will be expected of you it is important to clarify a university's policies regarding performance evaluations. You should ask how often evaluations take place, who is responsible for conducting them, and if merit raises are available based upon your performance. Because you will likely be working toward promotion and tenure, you should find out what a typical time line is for an assistant professor to go up for promotion and tenure. Ask what type of a promotion and tenure package you will need to submit and how it will be reviewed. Find out if policies are in place to provide you with feedback on your advancement towards promotion and tenure. If so, find out how frequently this can be expected. If the department or college has a Promotion and Tenure Manual, ask for a copy.

Beyond any salary negotiations, other benefits contribute to your ability to be successful in a faculty position. Ask about travel funds so you can expand networking opportunities by attending important conferences in your field. Make sure to find out if there are additional funds available if you are presenting. Determine what type of technology will be available to you, including whether there are preferred types of hardware and software. Ask whether or not you will have an individual printer in your office. If you have a desktop computer in your office, determine whether a laptop or tablet would be available for traveling or working at home. Find out whether there is technological support available. Since you may be relocating, question what moving expenses are offered. If you have a spouse or significant other or other dependents see if free or reduced tuition may be available for them at the university. Be specific in determining which family members qualify and if there are time limitations in receiving this benefit.

COLLEGIALITY - THE MOST IMPORTANT FIT

Just as it was important for you to find a doctoral committee that provides support for you during your doctoral study, you will want to surround yourself with colleagues who are invested in your success. To this end ask members of the search committee how long different faculty members have been in their current positions. A degree of longevity in a department is a good indicator that faculty are happy in their work situations. Prior to setting up your itinerary for the interview ask to have a short amount of time with different stakeholder groups. Talk with students. Ask them about their classes and their favorite professors. Students are very perceptive of how favorably faculty members regard one another. Meet with faculty members in your program area. Ask specifically for the lowdown on the dean and/or the department chair. Do not be afraid to ask probing questions about what kind of a work environment you might be entering. Remember, just as you are putting your best self forward to sell yourself in this interview faculty members are trying to sell their university. Ask faculty if you can trust the department chair and ask the department chair whether you can trust the dean. Ask faculty how they support one another. Are they willing to read one another's work prior

to submission for publication? Do they collaborate in writing articles or grants? Try to determine whether they like each other.

Make sure you ask the dean what the timeline might be to let you know once a decision has been made regarding the position. This is important as you may have other universities asking to interview you. Find out who will let you know; if you are offered the position, find out what type of timeline you would have to make a decision. Once you have returned home take the time to reflect upon your experience. Think about how comfortable you might be given the specific expectations. Ask yourself if you made a connection with someone with whom you could collaborate. Try to visualize yourself in the setting. Does it feel right?

When you receive the phone call offering you the position, your experience at the university will have provided you with information you can use to negotiate an appropriate contract. There will be times when a dean is limited in what salary can be offered to a new assistant professor, but that does not mean you cannot negotiate for other benefits. Discuss what kind of monetary support can be provided you as you relocate to the new university. Consider asking for an assurance that you will teach the same courses across both semesters of your first year to reduce prep time. Determine whether you can receive increased graduate assistant support or funding for a specific research project. Ask for an individual copy of research-related software. If a potential colleague told you about an interesting project, ask for your office to be located in proximity for optimal collaboration.

Without question the rigorous interview for faculty positions is unlike any other job interview you may have encountered. This process can be made much easier if you prepare yourself ahead of time. Chances are if it felt right for you, it felt right for them as well, and you have accomplished exactly what you wanted – the best fit.