

Navigating the Job Search Process: A Timeline for Doctoral Candidates in Education

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Abstract: *Procuring a job in higher education requires endurance, determination, and a great deal of preparation. The following article suggests a timeline for doctoral candidates in education who are seeking a post-doctoral or tenure-track position in higher education. Recommendations are organized by job-search benchmarks, including preparing in the summer, applying in the fall, interviewing by phone, the Internet, or in person in winter, and negotiating contracts in late winter or early spring.*

Keywords: *Job search, tenure-track, post-doctoral, application, interview, contract*

As candidates in a special education doctoral program, we learned early in our coursework about the *Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment* report (SEFNA, 2011), a document based on a 4-year research effort to examine the balance of supply and demand for special education doctoral leadership personnel. The findings were clear: The faculty shortage is on the rise, and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) are scrambling to hire qualified PhDs. The overall message for future job seekers was hopeful. It was our understanding that there was an exodus in the field due to the retirement of baby boomers with PhDs, and we were needed. With this landscape in mind, we prepared ourselves for an exciting year of job searching. What we experienced was indeed exciting, but we also learned the reality of the job search process was much more complex and tenuous than we had imagined. In this article we provide a suggested timeline and checklist for doctoral candidates who are “all but dissertation” (ABD) status and ready to search and apply for university positions (see Table 1). We believe these tips can be applied broadly, beyond the scope of positions specific to special education.

ORGANIZE (SUMMER)

There are several common items that nearly all applications will require: vita, transcripts, teaching philosophy, research agenda, writing samples, course evaluations, and a list of references with contact details. Preparing these materials will not only save you time in the fall when you are applying, but this process will also mentally prepare you to talk about your strengths and skills during upcoming phone interviews. Now is also the time to select and confirm references. Ask professors who know you well and who can speak to your specific skills. Talk with them about how they usually provide references for students. Do whatever you can to make the process as easy for them as possible. Some may ask you to draft a template that

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they can tweak. Others may develop the template and ask you to fill in the specific details (e.g., chair of the search committee, position title, name of the school). In either instance, you will procure a signed, tailored version of a letter of reference. Be careful to determine exactly how hiring committees are asking for letters to be submitted. They may require your references to upload the letters electronically. Others may require a mailed hard copy. Do not be afraid to ask your references to email you when the letter has been submitted, if you are not able to submit the letters on their behalf. This email acts as a reminder for them and helps you to maintain your records to ensure your applications are complete. Last, create an organizational system to keep track of your applications (see Table 1 for example headings). This system will help you to keep track of deadlines, document requirements, and remember when you submitted materials.

Table 1. *Timeline and Tasks for the Job Search Process*

When & What										
<i>Summer</i>										
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Organize your application materials and develop a system for tracking the job search process										
<input type="checkbox"/> Draft a letter of application that can be tailored to each position.										
<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare PDF versions of Common Application Items:										
<input type="checkbox"/> Updated Vita										
<input type="checkbox"/> Research agenda (next 5 years)										
<input type="checkbox"/> Teaching Philosophy										
<input type="checkbox"/> Three writing samples (published if possible)										
<input type="checkbox"/> Course evaluations (if you have taught at post-secondary level)										
<input type="checkbox"/> List of references with contact details										
<input type="checkbox"/> Obtain										
<input type="checkbox"/> Copies of Official Transcript										
<input type="checkbox"/> Agreement from referees										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask how they normally provide references? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do they want you to write your own reference for them to tweak and sign? ▪ Do they write one reference letter and ask you to change salient details such as salutation, recipient’s address, and name of school applying to? ▪ Do they want you to mail it for them, or will they put it in the mail? How will you know they actually mailed it? 										
<input type="checkbox"/> Create an excel spreadsheet to track the application process, e.g. :										
Position	University	Location	Highest Degree	Salary	Point of Contact	Include in Application	Closing Date	Date Applied	Correspondence	Interview Date(s)
<i>August to October</i>										
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Search job postings and decide where to apply.										
<input type="checkbox"/> Regularly check main higher education job posting websites:										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • www.higheredjobs.com • https://chroniclevitae.com/job_search/new • Consider subscribing to RSS feeds of job posting sites through a RSS website (e.g., Feedly.com) 										
<input type="checkbox"/> Consider the parameters of your search and adjust accordingly										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you want to live in a specific geographic location? • Do you need to stay local? • Are you primarily interested in a teaching focused university? Or research intensive university? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If you are not sure at which type of university you prefer to work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Talk to other professors at both types of universities and ask what drew them there 										

- Read Higher Education blogs about the pros and cons of both
- If you are still not sure, apply to both types. It may become clear as you progress through the interview process.

September to December

Apply!

- Read job postings carefully
- Address all job requirements and preferred skills throughout your application items
- Tailor your drafted letter of application to each university
- Follow directions exactly (e.g., if they ask you to mail hard copies do not email electronic copies).
 - But don't be afraid to ask for clarification
 - Be nice to secretaries/office managers – they are being inundated with applications and may become a little snarky – don't be tempted to bite back. If hired, you will rely heavily upon this person in the future.
- Submit the application well before the deadline if possible to avoid technical glitches and give the search committee more time with your materials.
- Don't forget to maintain your record of applications on the excel file you created in the summer. You'll be glad you did when invitations for phone interviews come rolling in.

November to January

Phone/Skype interviews

- Test your connection (avoid cell phones; test run a Skype session)
- Locate the university's original job posting and your application cover letter
- Prepare and practice descriptive, focused, and brief responses for generic questions (or specific questions if these are provided to you)
- Make a brief "cheat sheet" with critical information about the university:
 - pictures and brief bios of committee members, including their research interests
 - types of programs offered (undergrad and grad only?, doctoral?, online?, certifications?)
 - specific courses you would like to teach (list a textbook you would use to teach each course)
- * you can keep this sheet out during your interview

Late January to Early March

Preparing for campus interviews

- Assemble a small notebook or leather binder for you to carry with you during the interview, including:
 - (a) a pad of paper for notes
 - (b) your itinerary
 - (c) a copy of your vita
 - (d) a copy of your teaching philosophy / teaching evaluations
 - (e) your research agenda
 - (f) a "who's who" list of pictures, titles, and research interests
 - (g) a brief cheat sheet with pertinent information about the school, department, programs of study, etc.
 - (h) a list of questions for you to ask
- Develop and practice your research presentation and/or teaching presentation and assemble any related materials
- Pack thoughtfully and lightly

Late February to Early April **Negotiating the job offer**

- Respond to the initial offer promptly to thank the dean for the offer
- Discuss the package with mentors or other experienced faculty with whom you have a relationship
- Make a “wish list” of your optimal package, and provide a clear justification for everything you are requesting
- Edit your “wish list” and ask for the items for which you can provide the strongest and clearest justification – email this negotiated offer to the dean or hiring personnel

DECIDE WHERE TO APPLY (AUGUST TO OCTOBER)

The first step is determining which *type* of university is a good match for you (e.g., research intensive, teaching intensive). There are many variables to consider. Are you tied to a specific geographic location? When you picture yourself as an assistant professor in a tenure track position where do you fall on this continuum: (a) Passionately teaching four courses per semester to future professionals in your field of expertise and writing one or two scholarly publications for practitioners; OR (b) devising, implementing, and writing on a 2/2/2 yearly schedule (i.e., two in planning phase, two in implementation phase, and writing up two for publication), plus teaching 1 or 2 courses per semester? The former is a typical “teaching” university position and the latter is a typical “research” university position. However, this is a continuum. Some “teaching” universities require substantial scholarship including experimental research, whereas some “research” universities pride themselves in their teaching and require heavier teaching loads or expect substantial grant awards. You should try to narrow your search to the parameters you set when identifying your desired “what” and “where.” If you are not sure, then cast a wide net.

Once you have identified your search parameters, be sure that you tap into many resources for learning about positions as they come available. Your university may have a list-serve that regularly announces positions, there may be a bulletin board where positions are listed, and, of course, positions are posted online. The two most common websites providing academic postings are <http://www.chroniclevitae.com> and <http://www.higheredjobs.com>. In addition, check your professional organizations for postings. Finally, do not forget to rely on word of mouth. During conferences, ask others if they know of positions in your field. The important thing is to access all the sources available to you. It is possible that an excellent position will be cataloged in a strange place on the website. For example, during our recent job search cycle, several positions were posted under the “education” tab, but not the “special education” tab.

If you want to work at a research-intensive university, particularly one that is top-ranked, you should consider applying to post-doctoral positions. Include them in your search and take the application process as seriously as you would tenure-track position. Post-doctoral positions provide you the opportunity to build your resume, allow those manuscripts that are in the submitted phase to become published, and afford you opportunities to add to your scholarship through new publications. Individuals with post-doctoral experience are in high demand with universities.

PREPARING APPLICATIONS (SEPTEMBER TO NOVEMBER)

Interviewing, application packets, and references should all be tailored to the specific university to which you apply, and they will look very different based on your audience. It is imperative that you read the postings carefully. Note the order that they list the job responsibilities. This is likely their hierarchy of importance. For example, if student teaching supervision is listed first, you should expect to be spending much of your time supervising

student teachers. This may help you to weed out potential non-starters or rank the positions in order of desirability. Once you have carefully read the posting, begin to brainstorm all the experiences you have had which align to the job requirements. Gather documents that evidence your experiences and tailor your drafted cover letter (prepared over the summer) to align closely to the position. Be sure to follow the directions exactly. You are likely to annoy the office manager if you send hard copies of documents that should have been uploaded directly to the HR site. If you are not clear about a process it is a good idea to email the specified contact to ask for clarification. Last, be sure to attend closely to submission deadlines and apply on time.

PHONE/SKYPE INTERVIEWS (NOVEMBER TO JANUARY)

Each search committee will evaluate all of the applications they receive and select a stack of around six candidates with whom they will offer an initial interview. You will most likely receive an email from the chair of the search committee informing you that your application has been selected and providing options for scheduling a phone or Skype interview. Be thoughtful, professional, and brief in your reply to this email. Thank the chair for the opportunity to interview, and be extremely flexible with your availability. Sometimes these interviews are scheduled within a couple of days of the initial email.

Once the interview is scheduled, consider any technical aspects of the interview right away. If you are going to Skype, test your connection, make a sign for your office (or home office) door (e.g., "Meeting in progress. Quiet, please!"). Have a practice session with a friend to ensure: (a) you are sitting at a comfortable height, (b) your audio is working well, (c) the lighting is bright enough, and (d) the area in view of the camera is not cluttered. You can keep a page or two of notes near your computer for reference, but do not keep a stack of papers; avoid sifting through papers during your interview. Dress professionally. Most likely your audience will view you on regular computer monitors, but in some instances your committee may be viewing you on a large projector screen. Be aware of your facial expressions and hand gestures, and remember to look at the camera when possible to convey eye contact.

One interesting and perhaps unexpected drawback to phone interviews is you are not able to interact with your committee members through body language (e.g., smiles, head nods). It can be strange to answer interview questions and not be able to determine how your responses are being received. For both platforms, a good strategy is to keep your answers descriptive, focused, and brief. Be descriptive by providing real-life examples to support anything you say you do (e.g., provide a specific example of an activity you would use to teach a certain topic). Be focused by answering their question directly and completely. Be brief by providing the best information in response to a specific question and then stopping. You do not have to describe every experience you have related to the topic; keep your answers dynamic and succinct. Ideally, you will provide a very good, complete response that piques the committee's interest and spurs a follow-up question. If your responses are powerful and alluring, it is likely that a conversation will emerge in which someone listening wants to hear more.

To prepare for these interviews, over prepare. First, retrieve the original job posting for this specific position. Refer to the required and preferred qualifications. Reread your cover letter and be clear about: (a) why you would want to work at this institution, (b) what qualifications you have that they are seeking, (c) how your research agenda would contribute to the programs and interests in their department, and (d) which courses you would feel prepared to teach. When explaining why you would want to work at this particular institution, be very specific. Refer to key phrases from their job posting, and explain in a sentence or two why you were compelled by each component. Talk about their programs of study and recent department grants they have acquired. Be both complementary and genuine. When talking about your own

qualifications, be very direct. You can refer to the job posting directly and give one or two concrete examples of how you can demonstrate each qualification. If you are asked about your research agenda, be prepared to give specific information about a couple of areas of interest, and describe with confidence how you are prepared to extend those interests into five years of research projects. Include any ideas you may have for obtaining external funding to support your research. For teaching, brainstorm two examples of teaching activities that demonstrate your ability to teach both face-to-face and online. Pick activities that demonstrate a high level of rigor and application. If you are asked to tell which courses you would like to teach at their university, list the course, list the text you would use, and very briefly describe one of these teaching activities as an example.

These initial interviews can be very stressful at first, but you will most likely find that they get easier once you have completed your first one. If you can practice with peers, mentors, or family members, do this. If the institution sends you questions, you should prepare and practice answers. As a warning, be prepared for them to ask you questions that are not on this list. If you do not receive questions, still practice talking about your experiences in a manner that is descriptive, focused, and brief.

PREPARING FOR CAMPUS INTERVIEWS (JANUARY TO MARCH)

You may receive a phone call or an email notifying you that you have been selected for a campus interview. Again, be as flexible as possible with scheduling. You will receive an itinerary before your trip, which will help you conceptualize the trip. Most likely you will not have any downtime, even if it is written into the schedule. Often, if you are given a brief "break," this time is spent walking from one meeting to another, or someone joins you for your "break." To prepare, you can assemble a notebook or folder with essential materials. You can carry this folder with you on the interview and refer to it as needed. First, include a blank notebook. You will want to take notes during your meetings so you can remember and review the information later and so you convey your interest in your interactions with others. Include a copy of your itinerary with notes in the margins as needed to help you navigate your day. Include a few of your artifacts (e.g., vita, teaching philosophy, research agenda). You may not need these, and your committee has already viewed them, but it may come in handy for reference if you are meeting with someone outside of your committee. Include the "who's who" list you made yourself for the phone or Skype interviews. Expand the list to include others who were added to your itinerary, including the Dean and Department Chair. Include your brief "cheat sheet" of information about the University, and include a list of questions for you to ask others. This list of questions is very important, as you will be asked constantly to ask questions. You want to avoid saying, "I have no more questions," as best you can. You will also want to tailor the questions you ask to the person with whom you are meeting. For example, you should have a different list of questions for doctoral students, the Dean, committee members, and other faculty. It is ok to pull out your list of questions for reference during these meetings, but a more subtle approach is to write a few questions on your pad of paper with space inserted for notes. We scheduled a meeting with our Dean of the College of Education prior to leaving for interviews. She advised us to "listen hard." This advice is very helpful, as you may find yourself overwhelmed by all of the different conversations.

Practice talking to others about your experiences, your interests, and your excitement about the specific school. Practice responding in a way that demonstrates a balance between what qualities you can offer and what qualities you admire in the university. You may need to prepare a research presentation or job talk. Doctoral candidates often present findings on their dissertation study, but you might consider telling a broader story through your research. If your

dissertation built on your previous work, highlight a small collection of your related work and end with a description of your future research agenda, including ideas you have for funding sources. You also may be asked to prepare a teaching presentation. You can email to ask questions about the class and the students. Aim to teach one or two clear objectives. Plan a brief lecture, and embed active student responding and hands-on activities.

Finally, pack thoughtfully and lightly. Limit yourself to carry-on only if possible, and bring only the essentials. You will want to dress professionally on the plane, but you do not need to wear a suit unless you will be going straight to interviews. Wear a suit or very professional attire for your interview days. Bring a large, professional briefcase or work tote to carry your note book, a water bottle, granola bars, and breathe mints. Be prepared for utter exhaustion.

DECIDING AND NEGOTIATING (FEBRUARY TO APRIL)

The Dean will most likely email you to offer you the position. You may or may not receive information about the specific package in this email. Respond to this initial email to express gratitude and excitement about the offer. Ask for time to consider the offer. This might range from a couple of days to a couple of weeks, and the school will dictate the length of this window. Once you receive a specific package, feel free to discuss the offer with your advisor or others at your school. The offer might include base pay, start-up funds (e.g., money to spend on course materials or research supplies), conference travel money, moving expenses, and course releases your first year. It is ok to ask about any of these items if they were not included in the initial offer. It is also ok to ask for additional amounts of money for these items. To design your counteroffer, create a "wish list" of your ideal package. You need to justify any additional amount for which you ask. For example, if you know you will want to buy a set of 10 iPads for research purposes, calculate the expense of this number of iPads and briefly explain how they will be used in research. Once your list is complete, edit your list. Decide on the items that are most important to you, and put those forward in your negotiations. Again, when you craft your email to the Dean, include a brief but clear justification for any additional items for which you ask. You will probably receive a counter to your counter. At this point, if you are happy with the response, accept the offer. You will receive a formal contract in the mail to sign and return. Read the fine print on these contracts. There are often strict stipulations about how moving expenses can or cannot be reimbursed, and if you are ABD, the contract may be contingent on you providing proof of graduation before the start date.

CONCLUSION

The best way to prepare for this enormous year is to stay healthy, both physically and emotionally. The endurance that is required to weather this process is staggering. You are prepared for this, by virtue of surviving a doctoral program. In order to convey your skills and strengths to search committees, you will need the energy and fortitude that can only come from a healthy and nourished body and mind. So seek these positions; we are needed, and we are valued. And while the process of searching for a job in higher education is not easy, it is undeniably an adventure.

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