

From Doctoral Study to Administration

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This piece was co-written with [Julie Miller Vick](#), who has retired as senior associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania and now works there part time as a senior career adviser.



Jenny: For much of the [history](#) of the [Career Talk column](#), we've focused on faculty careers. But in the coming months, we are going to turn to a different topic, and explore the career paths and concerns of M.A.s, A.B.D.s, and Ph.D.s who opt for careers in campus administration.

Julie: Let's start with the hiring process. How does it work? What application materials will you need? How is it different from a faculty search?

First, it's important to understand that, while all colleges and universities have similar missions, they operate in very different ways. Administrative offices may have come into being organically or strategically. The same office — say, international programs — may report to university life at one institution but to the provost at another. When you start applying for a particular administrative position, it's wise to figure out the office's place within the institution because that will affect the way you write your letter and contextualize the job.

Jenny: Administrative jobs are advertised on institutional websites, on national job sites such as *The Chronicle's Vitae* and HigherEdJobs, and on the websites of professional organizations such as CUPA-HR (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources) and HERC (Higher Education Recruitment Consortium). Advertising in those places allows an institution to get the word out about openings, but you'll likely be referred back to an institution's website to submit your application.

Julie: Administrative job ads usually spell out what the college is looking for in a fair amount of detail. Look to the job description for information on the main responsibilities of the position, whether it is new, and where the office sits within the campus organizational structure. The description will also give you a sense of the job's day-to-day duties: Will you spend most of your time organizing events? Analyzing data? Meeting with students? And it should mention any special skills or experience that may be needed.

Graduate students interested in learning more about administrative roles should start by reading job descriptions. That's a low-stakes way to get a sense of which types of positions might interest you and what a strong candidate looks like.

Jenny: You may be able to find out from the job description who you would report to. It's often easy to find out who that person is, and then you can address your cover letter to your potential boss.

Read the position description carefully. You should be looking at it closely as you write your cover letter and revise your CV into a shorter résumé. You should also be familiar with the idea of "required" and "preferred" qualifications. Seeing a B.A. listed as the educational requirement does not necessarily mean the job would be a poor fit for a Ph.D. It simply means a bachelor's is the bare minimum for applicants interested in the position. To apply successfully, you will probably need to have all of the required qualifications and most of the preferred ones. Unlike faculty positions, few administrative jobs will require you to have a Ph.D., but that does not mean you should not apply.

Julie: As with faculty positions, job searches in administration are usually led by a search/interview committee. Its members review the applications and determine a shortlist of candidates for screening interviews.

Unlike faculty searches, administrative jobs usually have no uniform recruiting timeline. When positions are posted, they need to be filled. Now, that doesn't mean they will be filled quickly. Hiring can move slowly in academe, and the time between a position's closing date and a hiring decision can still be a period of several months.

Why? It's simply a matter of staff time. It takes time to build a search committee, schedule interviews, come to a consensus, and then finalize the hire. The slowness of that process can be frustrating for candidates. Nonetheless, most administrative hires follow a much shorter timeline from application to start date than most faculty positions.

Jenny: At some institutions, the human-resources department may be your primary contact for an administrative search. HR staff may play a large role in writing job descriptions, and have some responsibility for screening candidates. The hiring department may have to work with HR to determine the salary that can be offered. It may be HR that calls you to offer you the job.

All of this varies from campus to campus. It's important to note it, however, as it's often a surprise to graduate students and Ph.D.s when they apply for an administrative job and find themselves interacting with HR rather than the office with the job opening.

Julie: Most administrative positions require candidates to submit a résumé (not a CV) as well as a cover letter and a list of three references (with contact information). That list can be tricky for doctoral students whose advisers may not be supportive of a nonfaculty job search. The first two items, however are very much within a candidate's control.

In addition to hiring staff members ourselves, Jenny and I have seen the application materials submitted by doctoral

students for administrative jobs. The No. 1 mistake we see — failing to read the job description closely and consider what the office is really looking for — has probably kept many qualified candidates from getting interviews.

Jenny: Consider the following excerpts from two administrative job ads. Many doctoral students and recent Ph.D.s have experience and/or familiarity with these requirements and should have little trouble talking about them in a cover letter and on a résumé — as well as, eventually, in person:

- "Requirements include a bachelor's and master's degree and professional employment/experience with college students in an advising, mentoring, or leadership role. Candidates must demonstrate professional oral and written communication skills, excellent interpersonal skills, strong organizational and project management skills, strong public speaking skills and proficiency with computer software."
- "The ideal candidate will have supervisory experience; an ability to articulate a comprehensive knowledge of the issues, trends and best practices in student conduct; and, a demonstrated skill set in developing and sustaining collaborative and culturally inclusive relationships with students, faculty, and staff."

We cannot stress enough the importance of framing your experience in the context of the job description. So how might you do that?

Take one of the qualifications listed above — "strong public speaking skills." At first read, you may think that sounds vague and hard to respond to. So start by listing all of the moments and contexts in which you had to speak in public — teaching, conference presentations, departmental talks, volunteer work for causes you are passionate about. Think about the facets of each event: What was the purpose of it? How many people were there? How was the event marketed? Was it a success, and did it meet its goals?

Select the event that you feel was both most successful and most relevant to the job you're applying for. What made the event successful? Then write a short narrative you can include in a cover letter, such as: "I have over five years experience in public speaking, gained both in the classroom and out of it. Some of the presentations I've most enjoyed creating have been those I've done for the XYZ Foundation, which seeks to help lower-income students understand the college application process. In that work, I regularly spoke to groups, both large and small, of high-school juniors, seniors, and their parents. My goal was to help them understand the often challenging application process, to empower them to ask questions on their own, and to prepare them to attend college. I would bring that experience in helping students manage their college transition to the role of assistant dean of the first-year experience."

Julie: Next, start to reorganize your CV into a résumé. You'll want to both shorten your CV, and reorganize it so that the experience most relevant to the job opening is at the top. (Take a look at our 2013 column, ["From CV to One-Page Résumé."](#))

You may be able to make a couple versions of your résumé that you target to different types of administrative jobs, but you'll probably have to revisit this, and rethink your cover letter for each new position. While that sounds difficult and time-consuming, you'll find that Application No. 20 will be much easier to write than Application No. 1.

Jenny: In recent decades, more degree programs have been created in various aspects of higher-education administration. Some of your competition for administrative jobs will be candidates with master's degrees in education with a focus on higher education. So it's not as easy as it used to be for a Ph.D. with little work experience to obtain an administrative position. But that doesn't mean you can't be a strong candidate for an administrative job if you have framed your work experience specifically to the opening, so the employer can see and understand how you might fit the job.

Julie: This is also where networking helps. As we say so often, talk with people who are doing the administrative work that interests you. Learn what they or their supervisors look for when they hire. Think about both the work experience and skills you have, and be able to talk about them in relation to the kind of job you want.

There are a wide variety of administrative positions in academe, and as they require different skills and backgrounds, not all of those jobs will be right for you. But you won't find out which are without exploring and networking. In our next column, we'll begin a series of profiles of different administrative career fields in which Ph.D.s often find satisfying careers.