How to Read a Faculty Job Ad

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It's no surprise that would-be academics find reading a faculty job ad to be a highly confusing experience. For one thing, there is no standard format for the description of faculty positions. Throw in the fact that institutions are creating more and more part-time positions with never-before-heard titles, and the result is a lot of perplexed young Ph.D.s.

As a new season of academic hiring gets under way, I want to offer a basic primer on how to interpret a faculty job ad, aimed at early-career scholars going on the market this fall.

Position title. This is what you'll see first as you scroll through pages and pages of online job postings. Included in the job title are two important descriptors not to be overlooked: the rank and the discipline. Let's take the latter first. The discipline tells you:

- The content you will be expected to teach and do research on.
- The breadth of the curriculum for the position — e.g., "Asian studies" is not the same as "race and ethnic studies."
- The department's academic positioning with respect to other disciplines. For example, an opening in a stand-alone Spanish department signals something very different than a job in a department of Romance languages.
- The department's ideological framings. A position in philosophy will have different intellectual framings than one in Africana philosophy.

Do a little digging so that you can fully contextualize how the job fits into the department's organizational structure.

As for the position's rank, here are common definitions that can be fudged to fit the hiring department's needs:

- Adjunct: a part-time position, working under an annual contract. Generally, adjuncts are expected to teach courses but not conduct research or (at least not officially) advise students.
- Lecturer: a default title for someone who does not teach full-time, does not have a terminal degree in the field, and/or is not on the tenure track.
- Instructor: a part-time or full-time teaching job that is not on the tenure track. You'll often see advertisements for an "adjunct instructor" or a "full-time instructor."
- Visiting professor: a one-year or multiyear job, full-time or part-time, but definitely not on the tenure track. New Ph.D.s can spend several years working in visiting positions before landing a tenure-track job (if, in fact, they do).
- Clinical professor/professor of practice: A position either on or off the tenure track that focuses on practical instruction of students working toward a specific professional credential (e.g., law, teaching, social work).
- Assistant professor: the entry-level rank on the tenure track. Faculty members usually retain the assistant-professor title until they are awarded tenure (in their sixth or seventh year on the job).
- Associate professor: the middle faculty rank on the tenure track. Often comes with tenure, but not necessarily. Some tenured faculty members never advance beyond this rank and hold the title of "associate professor" for the remainder of their careers.
- Full professor: the highest faculty rank on the tenure track. Roughly 23 percent of academics in the United States are full professors.

- Open-rank: a job ad that lists a position as open-rank means that the search committee will consider applicants across career stages. However, the committee may well have an ideal rank in mind. The position might also be listed as open-rank because the administration wants to be convinced of the candidate's value to the institution before approving a specific salary level.

Position status. By that, I mean whether the position is full-time or part-time, tenure-track or nontenure-track, and exempt or nonexempt. Sometimes the ad will also tell you the contract length (nine-month, 10-month, or 12-month). All of those terms can be tricky to understand if you are new to academe or if you are moving to an institution that is very unlike your previous one. But even for those of us who think we know, a review of the jargon can't hurt.

- Full-time: For a faculty position, that doesn't mean you work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, 12 months a year. Nor does it necessarily mean you are eligible for benefits. What it does mean is that you (more than likely) have a salaried position. While the IRS considers full-time to be at least 30 hours a week, institutions are smudging requirements to avoid paying benefits and salaries. During your initial interview for the job, be sure to inquire about whether it qualifies for full-time status.
- Part-time: That word can mean *a lot* of different things in a job ad. But one thing it almost always means: You are considered an independent contractor, paid per course.
- Tenure-track versus nontenure-track: The biggest difference between the two is that tenure-track employees have implied long-term contracts (six or seven years) with standard review periods along the path to tenure. Nontenure-track positions can also have long-term contracts and standard review periods but without the expectation of tenure.
- Exempt versus nonexempt: Essentially, institutions don't have to pay overtime to employees who work in positions that are "exempt" from the requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Most *full-time* faculty positions are exempt.
- Term of contract: This is pretty self-explanatory, but the takeaway is that your contract term is different than your pay term. Some schools allow you to spread a nine-month salary over 12 months. If that is not the case, be aware that you will have to do some budgeting to cover the "off" months.

Qualifications. This is the meat of any job ad. A few years ago, a columnist for *The Chronicle*explored the differences between "required" and "preferred" qualifications. But here is a review:

- Required/minimum: Consider these qualifications to be prerequisites for the position — things like the terminal degree for the position (Ph.D., Ed.D., M.F.A.), the degree field (e.g., statistics, organismal biology, etc.), and the minimum amount of relevant experience. The search committee will rely on them heavily to winnow out candidates. If you don't meet most of the minimum requirements posted in the ad, you are likely to be thrown out of the applicant pool. My best advice is to not apply for positions unless you meet at least 85 percent of the required qualifications.
- Preferred/Desired: The skills and experience on the "preferred" list of qualifications represents the ideal person for the position. Oftentimes, search committees will list a preferred research methodology or topical area, or mention courses they hope you've taught before. Even if you only meet some of these desired traits, you probably should apply — because you have no way of knowing how the search committee will prioritize them.

Key phrases. Having written a few job ads, I know that the language can be unclear and confusing, but I promise you, there are nuances involved in these different terms. (You can read more about "career lingo" here.) Among the most common ones you'll see:

- "Demonstrated," "evidence of," and/or "established record of": Any of those phrases mean the department wants you to include — and emphasize — concrete evidence of your accomplishments, such as course evaluations, publication numbers/venues, awards, grants, and invited talks.
- "Potential to": If the ad mentions some aspect of the job in which it hopes candidates have potential, you can show how you might achieve that in your cover letter and in any requested statements. How do you plan to meet that potential? What have you done toward those goals?
- "Experience in/with": Your experience in a particular area required or desired by the department should be evident on your CV, but go one step further and highlight it too, in your cover letter, noting the breadth and depth of your experience.
- "Commitment to": Showing commitment to some aspect of teaching or research can be hard to do in an application package. Providing evidence of your accomplishments in a particular domain will send that message to some degree. But you should also emphasize your passion by describing how you intend to integrate whatever they are asking about into your teaching and research. If possible, subtly embed relevant goals throughout your application (in your cover letter, teaching statement, diversity statement, etc.).

Application deadline. Sometimes this is a definitive date, but other times the job ad will say "open until filled." That phrase, roughly translated, means: "Apply sooner rather than later because as soon as we find six to eight viable candidates, we will move forward to phone interviews. If you wait too long, we won't get around to reading your application until three months from now — and only if none of those early applicants work out."

Other considerations. While all of the aforementioned are the nuts and bolts of interpreting a job posting, you should also take note of other details, such as:

- Where is the position being advertised? Institutions pay to advertise jobs in certain venues for a specific period of time. You can tell a lot about the institution's hiring priorities by how many places it advertises the opening and by the target audience of those venues.
- How does the job ad describe the department and the institution? In these descriptions, hiring officials reveal what they think is most important for you to know about their campus. Your cover letter should explicitly describe how well you fit the institutional descriptions in the ad (e.g., if the college describes itself as faith-based, be sure to mention your religious values).
- What are you required to submit in the application package? That list can provide insights into what the search committee will prioritize during its initial evaluation. Teaching-focused colleges will ask for course evaluations and a teaching statement. Research-focused universities often request a sample publication. When preparing your application, spend extra time on those components because they are what the search committee is paying the most attention to in the first round.

The reality is that the academic market shifts a lot. One year you may be a good fit for 11 jobs; the following year you may be a strong candidate for only two openings. It can feel like feast or famine (and mostly famine). But applying to jobs for which you are unqualified (just because you need a job) will likely result in professional dissatisfaction. On the flip side, no job will be a perfect match. As long as you carefully interpret each posting, you should have no problem figuring out which positions are best for you and giving it your best shot.

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