

The Job Market: Waiting for the Day

chroniclevitae.com/news/1993-the-job-market-waiting-for-the-day



February 6, 2018

Image: iStock

For academics, November through March are perhaps the most emotionally taxing months of the year. Not only are we dealing with holiday stress while preparing for the end of one semester and the start of another, we also have an omnipresent and oppressive awareness of the faculty job market.

Somehow higher education has chosen the winter months — when seasonal affective disorders are most pronounced — as the perfect moment to decide the professional fate of thousands of Ph.D.s.

Brief check-ins with friends who are on the tenure-track market this year (some for the second or third time) underscore the fact that the academic waiting game produces unhealthy amounts of anxiety. Our conversations are almost fully occupied by speculation about if and when they will hear back from a certain search committee.

As someone who has been through this process on both sides of the hiring table, I can share some of the advice I offered to friends. There is really nothing you can do to speed up the search committee's progress, but you should avoid doing some things that might jeopardize your candidacy — or worse, your emotional well-being.

Don't email the committee once a week. The holiday season puts the hiring process on hold — sometimes well into January. So if you had an interview before winter break, you probably won't hear back from the committee until classes resume. And even then, you may not hear immediately.

There are a lot of administrative hurdles that must be overcome before arranging campus visits and certainly before offering someone a position. Be patient and know that the search committee wants a decision just as quickly as you do. Frequent inquiries do nothing to speed the process, and may irritate the very people you are trying to impress with your collegiality.

Resist your wiki urges. This might seem impossible, but do what you can to resist, or at least limit, how often you check the job wikis, email lists, and any other online sources that allegedly have up-to-date information about faculty hiring. Similarly, if you have friends or colleagues who applied for the same position as you did, don't ask what they've heard.

All that does is lead to more anxiety, not to mention inaccurate information. Until you receive a definitive communication from the search-committee chair, assume the position is still open. First-choice candidates sometimes decline the offer (and really, who cares if you aren't the first choice?). Another candidate's visit may have been delayed, thus pushing the overall timeline back. Deans and provosts don't always approve of the committee's top candidate, so time is spent coming to a resolution. A myriad of things can be going on behind the scenes, so the point is: Don't believe everything you read online.

About the only thing applicants can do is send thank-you emails to members of the search committee *immediately* after both the initial interview and the campus visit. In two sentences, thank them for their time and, if possible, mention a particular conversation you had so that they know the email is individualized.

That won't give you any information about the search, but it might give the committee useful information about you. Indeed, on two of the five faculty searches I've been on, the committee chair resisted hiring candidates who did not send thank-you emails after their campus visits, so it certainly can't hurt.

But after that, it's really out of your hands. The best way to stop staring at your email and jumping every time the phone rings is to submit and forget. Try to focus on the professional and personal commitments within your control.

Keep writing. Not only will work take your attention off of the search, it can also make you a stronger candidate for future job opportunities, or in some cases, the current one.

Twice now I've witnessed a tie vote between two candidates be broken when one of them published a new article during the search while the other's CV remained stagnant. It really can — and does — come down to small details, so don't view your candidacy on a shortlist as a time to pause in your professional trajectory.

Be prepared for a last-minute invite. I was also on a committee that ended up doing second interviews with half of the initial interviewees because we couldn't agree on whom to invite to the campus. The candidates didn't have much warning: We sent an email asking if we could speak to them the following day.

While the second interview was not as formal or as scripted as the first, I would argue that it was more difficult for candidates because they could not anticipate the types of questions we might ask. Those interviews were illuminating because they demonstrated who was self-assured and competent enough to have a casual conversation about their scholarship and teaching without weeks of preparation.

Consider the alternatives. The job you are waiting to hear about is not the only good fit for you. Too often we as academics restrict our opportunities because of a myopic view of professional success. We spend years in graduate school being told that the only way to have a great career is to get a tenure-track job at an R1 immediately after graduate school (or in some fields, immediately after a two-year postdoc). Then win tenure, become a full professor, and move into administration. While that is certainly a path, it is becoming an uncommon one.

The secondary faculty market emerges between January and April when institutions often post positions for visiting faculty members (sometimes for two- or three-year terms), lecturers, postdocs, and grant-funded jobs. Spring is also a good time to begin exploring fellowship opportunities for the following year (most applications are due between June and December). You might also consider positions teaching abroad or at a teaching-focused college.

For the brave few who are willing to leave the idea of being a professor behind, a doctorate is an asset at research and policy institutes, consulting companies, engineering firms, and dozens of other nonacademic entities. If you want to retain some ties to academe, consider working at a federal agency like the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or the National Endowment for the Arts (keeping in mind, of course, that this is a politically stressful time for those agencies).

The point is: A faculty role is not the be-all and end-all for Ph.D.s. Having a back-up plan helps reduce the anxiety that comes from disappointment on the tenure-track market.

Pause and reflect. Use the time while you wait to do a professional inventory. Writing teaching and research statements, giving job talks, making new professional connections, and visiting campuses are all good prompts for self-reflection.

Ask yourself: Why do I want this job? How will this job enhance my life? What knowledge and skills will I gain from this position? Sometimes you fall under the grass-is-greener sway, and it takes crossing the lawn to see that perhaps your yard is better after all. A big-name institution, a large salary, or a team of TAs to help with grading all sound great, but is that what you need to feel happy at work?

When first-choice candidates turn down positions, it's often because — after going through the process — they realize that their current job is a better fit than they thought. So while the search committee is deciding how well you fit the institution, you should be determining how well the institution fits you.

Do a little self-care. Behind all of the aforementioned suggestions lies self-care. Although productivity will occupy your mind and perhaps make you feel more confident about your career prospects, I want to be clear that relying solely on work to ease your anxiety about work is neither healthy nor effective.

Just as you do when you submit an article or a book proposal, you should celebrate your success. At a time when even small colleges have more than 200 applicants for a tenure-track opening, getting a first-round interview or a campus visit is certainly an accomplishment. Take yourself out to dinner, get a massage, hang out with friends, or binge watch your favorite TV show.

Incorporate self-care into your daily schedule, even if it's only 30 minutes a day. Exercise and meditation are common activities for high-strung academics, but listening to music, arts and crafts, and cooking have all been shown to reduce stress. Any activity that calms your mind and body will help improve your ability to manage the anxiety and stress of a job search.

And few things are more stressful than five strangers holding the fate of your career in their hands.