

# The Professor Is In: Research First or Teaching?

[chroniclevitae.com/news/1989-the-professor-is-in-research-first-or-teaching](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1989-the-professor-is-in-research-first-or-teaching)



January 30, 2018

**I have a question about cover letters. In your blog posts and book, you stress the importance of putting research first in a cover letter for positions at research-oriented institutions, and teaching first for openings at teaching-oriented colleges. Sometimes, though, it's hard to tell which camp an institution falls under. Any advice?**

Indeed, in presenting yourself as a desirable job candidate for a particular institution, it is imperative that your application materials align you with the main focus — the main mission, if you will — of the place to which you are applying. The cover letter is the first indicator that you understand what will make you both effective and tenurable at a given institution, and search committees looking to fill a tenure-track position want to be sure they "spend" that tenure line on someone who will be successful.

And, as I wrote last fall in "4 Steps to a Strong Tenure File," the components that make up a viable tenure case differ in different settings, with research powerhouses prioritizing publications and grants and, logically enough, teaching-oriented campuses prioritizing pedagogical achievements.

In applying for jobs, sometimes it is obvious what kind of institution you are dealing with — an R1 is an R1. Research will come first at any university with a significant number of doctoral programs, while any community-college job will obviously have teaching as central to its mission. The challenge is figuring out the many institutions that fall somewhere between those two ends of the spectrum. Especially at places that don't have a widely recognizable "brand," it's not quite clear whether you should be pitching yourself as a scholar-teacher or a teacher-scholar.

When I am advising clients on their faculty job search, there are a number of "tells" I use to figure out how to frame a cover letter for one of these in-between colleges and universities.

**Tell No. 1: The phrasing of the ad itself.** That may sound obvious, but sometimes people forget or overlook this aspect of the ad, especially once job-market fatigue sets in. All job ads sound alike in certain boilerplate aspects, which is why job candidates tend to zero in on the qualifying or disqualifying particulars (Does "Ph.D. in hand" mean by the application deadline or by the start of the job? Are they looking for an Americanist or a comparativist or a medical anthropologist or someone trained in quantitative methods?).

But the boilerplate often contains a tell: What is the order in which the ad mentions research versus teaching? Some ads will say something like, "We are looking for an active scholar who will maintain scholarly currency and use it to inform their pedagogy," while others will use language like, "We are looking for someone to teach a range of required courses and electives in the major, to mentor and advise students, and to maintain an active scholarly agenda."

Mimicking the order you see in the job ad is generally a good strategy for drafting a cover letter.

Tell No. 2: The teaching load. Here is a good rule of thumb: Use your potential teaching load as a guide.

Top-ranked research universities will, on the whole, have a standard 2-2 load (meaning you would teach two courses each semester of the academic year) in the humanities and most social sciences (and a 1-2 or even a 1-1 or 1-0 in STEM fields). Those universities are obviously research-centered — so your cover letter should be, too.

A cover letter for a position with a 2-3 load and, in most cases, even with a 3-3 load, should still should put research first. Second- and third-tier research universities — i.e., many second-level state comprehensives, for example — are often what I think of as "aspirational." They are invested in trying to demand more research productivity from new hires despite lacking support for it in terms of teaching-release time or funding. They can make those demands because of the desperate conditions of the academic job market: Departments have their pick of top-tier, highly productive Ph.D.s, and feel empowered to increase their publishing expectations for new hires.

Once you see job ads that list teaching loads of 3-4 or 4-4, you can confidently put teaching first in your cover letter. Two notable exceptions are tenure-track jobs in the City University of New York system and in the California State University system.

Faculty at four-year colleges in the CUNY system have a 3-4 teaching load, yet you should put research first when writing cover letters for those institutions. The CUNY system — while serving the educational needs of the New York City population, including many first-generation college students — is strongly supportive of faculty research, even within the community-college branches of the system. Because of its location and the promise of a possible appointment to the CUNY Graduate Center, the system's colleges draw candidates with CVs

that would get them tenure at most R1 campuses. So CUNY is a community of scholars who are teachers, and they are looking for people with clear promise as scholars. Meanwhile, Cal State institutions — although they are on a quarter system with a heavy teaching load — tend to be notably invested in hiring robust scholars who are excellent pedagogues.

Across academe, many job ads will have the teaching load listed. If they don't, you can do some sleuthing via the campus course catalog (usually available online) and figure out how many courses the average faculty member teaches each year.

Tell No. 3: The scholarly record of the hiring department. Speaking of sleuthing on the campus website, you can tell a lot about the department's research expectations by looking at the scholarship of its own faculty. What kind of scholarship are they engaged in? Have they published in top journals? Are they presenting at the Big National Conference every year? How do they represent themselves on their webpages? In their faculty bios, do they start off describing their research or, first and foremost, talk about what courses they teach?

Draft your cover letter based on what you've found. While this isn't a foolproof strategy, either, the self-presentation of existing faculty is a valuable window into departmental and institutional culture.

By using all of those means — and also turning to mentors who may have further insider knowledge — you can gain a more accurate sense of the real criteria of hiring and tenure, and target your application effectively.

Karen Kelsky is a career consultant who runs the website The Professor Is In. She's been a tenured professor at two public universities (Oregon and Illinois) and has advised many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as mentored junior faculty. She answers reader questions as a contributor to Vitae.



**For more advice, order Dr. Karen's new book, [The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job](#).**

[Read More from Karen](#)