

How the Jobs Crisis Has Transformed Faculty Hiring

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By Jonathan Kramnick

This fall I will again be the job-placement officer for my department — a position I have held more often than not for almost 20 years, in three different English departments. The role of the job-placement officer is to guide graduate students through the painstaking, drawn-out, and nerve-racking process of applying for positions in their field: from deciphering ads and preparing materials to interviewing with committees and, in the happy event, negotiating offers with chairs and deans.

Every part of this process is highly specific, shaped by codes that are nowhere spelled out or written down. Moreover, every part varies from to discipline to discipline, whether subtly or dramatically. Applying for jobs as, say, a political scientist is different from applying for jobs as a literary scholar. The language of the chemists is indecipherable to those who speak historian.

For those reasons, the person holding the placement position really has to be a tenured faculty member with recent experience serving on hiring committees and an up-to-date sense of his or her field. In the last few years, however, a number of businesses have emerged to sell job advice to a captive and anxious market of graduate students and early career Ph.D.s. Don't buy what they're peddling. Any advice from outside your field is basically useless. Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise.

While my advice is relevant only for people in English or related literary disciplines, my experiences with the transforming patterns and practices of hiring over the past two decades might be of interest to anyone with a stake in higher education. Much has changed during that time.

Most obviously, and as everyone knows, the number of tenure-track jobs has precipitously declined. Immediately after the economic crash of 2008, colleges and universities slowed all hiring to a standstill. In the years that followed, hiring picked up in some professional and STEM fields, but English and the rest of the humanities never recovered.

We are now 10 years into a jobs crisis that shows no sign of abating. I won't belabor the numbers or the causes here. For my present purposes, it is enough to say that the implosion of the market colors everything — from the morale of students worried about their future to the habits of search committees enjoying a buyers' market.

Discussion of that foundering labor market is now common currency for everyone interested in the present and future state of the humanities, but less often noticed are the broad cultural and institutional shifts that have accompanied the crisis. With the deepening crunch have come important changes in the timing and technology of hiring, the kinds of jobs that departments advertise for, and the structure through which early careers move. The jobs crisis, it seems, has been both brought on and shaped by a larger transformation in academic life.

In the weeks that follow, I'll explore different facets of that transformation up close and offer advice where I can. Each one is an important and under-discussed feature of our present moment. Here is a thumbnail sketch:

The hiring season is much longer than it once was, and it now stretches over several platforms. In English and foreign languages, there used to be a single job list that appeared in print in mid-October with minor supplements added later in the year. Application deadlines fell between November and mid-December, and hiring concluded by March.

Today that job list has gone digital, appears earlier with frequent updates, and has several major rivals. So while there are fewer jobs to be had, they appear at all points during the year.

What is more, hiring committees as a rule used to interview candidates at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association, held between Christmas and New Year's. Now with the advent of Skype and other forms of video technology, committees are increasingly bypassing the MLA convention (itself held in early January) and interviewing candidates remotely at all points between September and April.

In other words, a once-uniform timeline between advertisements and offers has come undone.

Candidates don't know where they are with one job when they are being considered for another. Hiring committees and their respective administrations cannot count on a consensus schedule among rivals, or that a position unfilled one year will be advertised the next. The

result in individual cases can be unpleasant or even chaotic. Writ large, there is a sense of things never-ending. All job-market talk, all the time.

While the mood is glum across the board, the fallout varies. Some sectors of the discipline have undeniably fared better than others. The overall decline of tenure-track jobs in English has happened concurrently with new hiring in emerging subfields, especially in the areas of global Anglophone literature and of various ethnic American literatures.

Given fewer positions to fill, departments understandably prefer to hire in subfields where they have no one, rather than in ones that are already well stocked, or where they think student demand is headed, rather than where they believe it has already peaked. That's been the case even when it comes to replacing retiring professors.

So the overall decline in job numbers only tells part of the story. Internal to the discipline — in ways not recorded by MLA job-market statistics — some subfields are having a much harder time than others.

The market is fragmenting. Just as there used to be only one job list, there used to be only one kind of cover letter. Graduate students and recent Ph.D.s answered ads by presenting themselves as if they were about to join the kind of institution where they had received their degree. Research came first in the letter and took up most of the space. The tone was of a kind of august generality. Candidates spoke to a field that subsumed any particular department's curriculum and mission into larger and more abstract concerns.

That basic template may still be appropriate for many jobs, but some institutions fortunate enough to hire have become much more demanding about what they expect to see in a candidate's job application. They want tailored cover letters. They want candidates to comment directly on their institution's particular students and individual mission and to supply evidence of successful teaching and a commitment to diversity. They demand all that because they can. This is a buyers' market after all.

But the demand also comes from the same pressure facing candidates. When all hiring is scarce, the burden to get the right person for your specific institution — someone who will "fit" and who won't leave (and thus threaten the department's ability to retain the line) — just ratchets up.

So to the never-ending job market now go variegated and tailored cover letters and other application materials. The time that this requires of candidates is immeasurably greater than it used to be.

Career narratives have changed. The ideal beginning of an academic career in the literary humanities used to be five to seven years in a doctoral program and then a tenure-track job. Postdocs were mainly a thing of the sciences and visiting positions rare. Since 2008, all of that has been upended.

Partly as a response to the labor crisis, universities and granting agencies have created a whole new class of postdoctoral fellowships in the humanities. At the same time,

administrations reluctant to billet a permanent line for a professor of English have become more generous with short-term or visiting positions, sometimes on renewable bases. Graduate students have often already completed their degrees a year or more before finding one of those perches. Finally, the expectation that one ought not to go back on the market too soon after landing a tenure-track job has weakened or eroded.

The result has been dramatic and several fold.

Early careers are now always on the move, lighting down in a city or an institution for a year or two before moving on. The window between a doctorate and the start of a tenure-track job has elongated in some cases to nearly the length of time that assistant professors spend on the tenure track before they go up for promotion. The candidate pool for any given tenure-track job will range from fifth-year ABDs to scholars nearly a decade out from their doctorate. At the same time, productive careers have begun to percolate in renewable positions that sit outside the tenure system entirely. Behind all of this lies a shift of lifestyle fundamentally altering academic life.

My goal in the columns ahead will be to explore in detail these shifts as part of the everyday costs and contexts of the way that the profession hires in straitened times. If we better understand these costs and contexts, we might also discover ways of navigating and improving them.

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