

Navigating the Transition to Liberal Arts Academia

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Interested in a faculty position at a liberal arts college?

- 🌐 Is a liberal arts environment “your thing”?
- 🌐 How to find job opportunities
- 🌐 Putting together a competitive application
- 🌐 The interviewing process & finding your best fit



What IS a liberal arts college?



- Focus on broad skills: thinking and writing
- Undergraduate focus (mostly B.A./B.S.)
- Excellence in teaching is emphasized
- Population and class size is small
- Residential/community atmosphere
- Top ranked: Williams, Amherst, Middlebury, Swarthmore, Pomona, Bowdoin, Wellesley, Carleton

Job Description

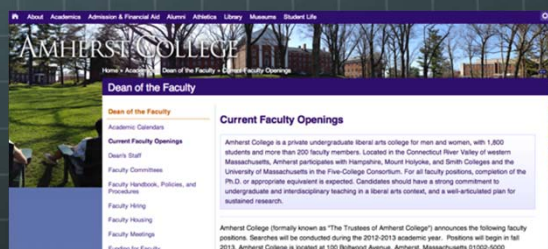
- Teaching
 - you have to love it
 - love undergrads
 - constant improvement and development
- Research (“modest but productive”)
 - with your students!!
 - **varies substantially by school
- Service (department, college, community)

What ARE you getting into?

- Teaching load: up to 8 h lab, 10 h classroom / week
- Office hours: up to 8 h / week
- You create your curriculum, write every assignment, and grade everything yourself
- Advise 10-30 students
- No technicians; regular student turnover; work with students who have little or no experience
- Service to dept, college, community
- Summers are full of research on a shoestring budget
- Little/no time for external funding
- ...and the salary?

Starting the Job Hunt

- Put your application materials together ASAP!
- Jobs posted on an ongoing basis, but they peak late summer/early fall (in most cases)
- Great resources:
 - Chronicle of Higher Education
 - HigherEd Jobs
 - Search your favorite schools' HR pages



Putting Together an Application: Do Your Homework

- Visit the college's website (general, HR, departmental)
 - What is this college about?
 - Who are the faculty (and how many)?
 - Do you want to live there?
- Email *the contact person* if you need clarifications

The Application



- Standard components:
 - Cover letter
 - C.V. : thoughtfully constructed for liberal arts positions
 - Teaching “philosophy” or statement
 - Research plan: undergrad-appropriate
 - Recommendation letters (3-4)
 - at least one from someone who can speak to your ability to teach!!!

The Application



- Nonstandard components:
 - Writing sample or recent publications
 - Teaching portfolio or evidence of teaching success
 - Equipment needs/cost list (request for start-up funding)
 - Diversity statement
 - Transcripts (undergrad, graduate)
 - Online forms and menus

The Crucial Cover Letter

- The first point of contact: make it good!
- Customize it to each college
- Tell them *why you want to teach there*
- Put it on professional letterhead
- Efficient bits about your training (greatest hits only)
- Include all names of references and your contact info at closing

Suggestions for a Solid Teaching Statement

- Give the readers a sense of what it's like to take a class from you in the present tense
- Use specific examples (many, variety)
 - when things went well
 - when you learned a lesson from failure
- Emphasize diversity in your experiences (lab vs. lecture; class size; freshmen vs. seniors; etc.)
- Get examples from others and have others read yours to offer impressions
- Check out "Scientific Teaching" by Jo Handelsman

The Research Proposal

- Clear: you are speaking to a MUCH more general audience than you're probably used to
- Concise: we read these at midnight, don't ramble
- Cheap/feasible: don't propose \$25,000 experiments that are Biosafety Level 4
- Address any potential pitfalls, provide options
 - avoid radioactivity, dependence on others
- Organize it with headings
- Mention key collaborations
- Make it abundantly clear how undergrads will be involved with your research



Phone/Skype Interview

- Have resources at your fingertips
- Dress professionally
- Be prepared for the call to be early or late
- Be in a place with good reception and no interruptions
- Pause to think about your responses
- Don't... get defensive/argue; say "I don't know"
- Prepare to answer questions about anything
 - why liberal arts?
 - more about teaching or research (clarifications, equipment needs)
 - hole/weakness in your resume
- Prepare to ASK good questions (prep 10!)



The Campus Visit

- Usually 2 days
- Usually only 2-4 candidates invited
- Research talk (~40 minutes; start at undergrad level)
- Possibly teach a class
- Meet the faculty members, students, staff
- Look around the town
- Two-sided: you're looking at them too!!



Questions to be Considered



- What is the teaching load?
 - Service courses?
 - Lab teaching?
- What are the tenure expectations?
- Do faculty members travel to conferences?
- Does this college have the resources for you to meet tenure/promotion expectations?
- Is this a department that you feel you could fit into?

The Art of Negotiation

- Never accept your initial offer (and don't ask for one at the interview!)
- Do not expect to get a significant amount more than the initial offer.
- You will likely be speaking to a Dean of Faculty or dept. chair.
- Prepare ahead of time by making an organized list and practicing.
- It's easier to negotiate one-time payouts (start-up, moving expenses) than salary.
- Sometimes salaries are non-negotiable.
- Have carefully itemized list of start-up equipment needed to run 2-3 years in lab
 - ask what a typical startup package is BEFORE you write your equipment list or start negotiations (can you work there??)
 - consult with dept to ensure you're not requesting things they already have
 - send it to them ahead of the negotiation conversation
- Be creative in your requests
- Be respectful of the school's timeline



Top 10 Mistakes I Have Seen/Heard

1. Typos in the COVER LETTER
2. Missing required components
3. A research plan (or C.V.) for an R1 school; crazy equipment requests
4. Little or no previous teaching experience/no obvious interest in teaching
5. Application without qualifications (e.g. no postdoc experience)
6. Application to a place where s/he has no intention of living
7. Conveyance of utter indifference during visit
8. TMI during visit
9. Not sending thank yous/sending thank you note to the wrong person
10. Applying to liberal arts jobs as a “backup plan”

The Best (Hardest) Job Ever

