

The Job Search Process for Assistant Professors in Recreation and Leisure Studies Programs

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Abstract

There has been significant research on the job search process in other academic disciplines aimed at a better understanding of the job search process for assistant professors, as well as the desired competencies of assistant professor applicant. In the recreation and leisure studies discipline, however, there has been no examination of the job search process for assistant professor positions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the criteria used to make assistant professor hiring decisions, as well as to gain a comprehensive understanding of the job search process itself. This research was aimed at gaining knowledge that could help doctoral students to understand the job search process and the competencies that will be expected from search committees during the screening process.

Descriptive and reliability analyses were conducted on the results of a questionnaire mailed to search committee chairpersons from institutions that had advertised an assistant professor position in recreation or leisure studies during the 2001-2002 academic year (N=23). The findings indicate that students need to be involved in teaching, research, and professional service during their doctoral studies as search committees desire proven skills prior to the first academic appointment. Though the expectation varied based on the institution's Carnegie Classification, all institutions desire exposure to each of these areas, and during the interview process will be required to demonstrate these skills through teaching and research presentations.

Keywords: academe job search, assistant professor, faculty appointments, recreation, leisure

Introduction

How do search committees distinguish between the applicants and the varying degrees of experience and training? How does one decipher between a candidate with a strong research background and another candidate with proven teaching ability? How are search committees synthesizing the diversity of skills, experience, and backgrounds represented in the typical applicant pool? Are universities classified by the Carnegie Foundation as Doctoral/Research-Extensive more likely to consider an applicant with a

strong research background, or do they seek a candidate that will best complement the department at which they are employed? Do they look for the best overall candidate, one with the best combination of experience and training, or someone with practical experience in that particular field? In order to answer these and other questions, it is necessary to examine the research that has been conducted in the area of academe job search, and determine how the existing body of research can lead to a better understanding of the job search process for assistant professors.

Each year, institutions of all classifications and sizes recruit, select, and appoint new assistant professors. Many of these individuals have either just completed a doctorate or plan to have it completed by the time that the appointment begins. Several studies have been conducted to examine the necessary competencies of individuals seeking their first academic appointment. Though the research is limited in this area, researchers have examined this issue from a variety of perspectives. The paper will summarize, based on empirical research, the desired competencies necessary to obtain an academic position, as well as considerations for the applicant during both the screening and interview stages of the job search process.

Review of Literature

According to Orr (1993), a candidate that is foreign born or has the ability to communicate in a variety of languages is very desirable in the field of economics. Ehrenberg (1999) also studied the prospects for those seeking academic appointments in economics. The mean age for individuals pursuing assistant professor appointments in economics is 32 years of age mainly because of the necessity of having significant professional experience in economics. Candidates in this field were advised to gain as much professional experience as possible in order to receive serious consideration for an academic appointment because the individuals with the most professional experience were ultimately those selected for the position. In this particular field of study, these professional experiences are much desired due to the proven ability of these experiences to enhance both teaching and research in economics.

Iyer and Clark's (1999) study of academic positions in the field of accounting found communication skills were deemed the most important factors for all types of schools other than doctoral institutions. In addition, non-accredited schools in accounting placed a great deal of emphasis on the teaching presentation during the interview while doctoral granting institutions did not rate teaching as high as research. It is important to note that all institutions in this study ranked communication and interpersonal skills very high. This is obviously of great importance to an individual seeking an appointment in the accounting field.

In 1998, Kim, Mencken, and Woolcock found that academic positions in sociology were highly competitive and students seeking appointments in this area needed to work very hard as doctoral students in order to adequately prepare for the highly competitive

job market. The authors suggested that faculty play a significant role in this and encouraged faculty to include students in the systematic preparation in pedagogy and classroom management. Other important considerations for future Ph.D.'s in sociology were to develop strong methodological and analytical skills, as well as ability to effectively communicate their ideas to future consumers.

In a study conducted by Sheehan (1999), 137 applicant files were examined to determine how a search committee at a doctoral granting institution made a selection to hire a social psychology faculty member. The search committee used the following criteria to rank the candidates: teaching experience, research record, service contributions, and letters of recommendation. The candidate ultimately hired for this position had an earned doctorate in social psychology (only 40% of the applicants had an earned doctorate), with two years in a postdoctoral position in health psychology. When hired, this individual had taught eight different courses and had eight refereed articles and five non-refereed articles, to go along with eight conference presentations.

Sheehan, McDevitt, and Ross (1998) also conducted a study in which the criteria used to select an assistant professor in psychology were examined. It was determined that departments of psychology developed and utilized position-specific criteria to review applicant files and interview performance that emphasized fit between a candidate's background and the position requirements. Search committees placed a large emphasis on teaching experience, particularly experience with courses specified in the position description. Research experience was also very important.

Rand and Ellsworth (1979) surveyed 163 department chairs, examining the job search process for educational psychologists. Out of the twenty possible criteria given to the department chairs, the most important factors were the specialty area of the candidate, whether or not the applicant was in possession of a doctorate, publication record, evidence of teaching, and recommendations from colleagues.

When a position is formally announced, any number of items could be requested from an individual interested in pursuing the position. How an individual responds to the application is critical during this process. According to Anderson (2001), the academic job application consists of five primary components: cover letter, curriculum vitae, research history and plan, teaching experience and philosophy, and letters of recommendation. This is not an exhaustive list, as other institutions may request supplemental items such as transcripts, copies of published manuscripts, portfolios, and teaching evaluations. Lampman and Johnson (1995) suggested that supplemental items should always be submitted, whether requested or not, while other research has advised applicants to only send materials that were specifically requested. Iacono (1981) suggested sending copies of papers written, teaching evaluations, and extra letters of recommendation. Essentially, an applicant must determine on a case-by-case basis if and how supplemental materials could enhance his or her application packet.

Personalizing each application is very important to receiving strong consideration for a position. The majority of applications in the Lampman and Johnson study did not individualize their paperwork and often failed to identify the position for which they were applying. Additionally, many applications contained typographical errors, poor grammar, listed the wrong university, and had the improper address of the search committee. Generic cover letters and vitas (considered to be a sign of computerized times) can only result in a poor assessment of an application packet.

If an application has a positive impression on the search committee and the individual is invited to campus for an interview for a position, it is clearly not the time to become overly confident, in fact, there is even more that one needs to consider. Anderson (2001) suggests that prior to leaving for the interview, one must conduct research on the institution. Know the names of the professors, their research areas, what the program offers, and how many students are enrolled in the program. According to Iacono (1981) various meetings and functions are designed to determine if you are a "fit" in the department. One could be expected to have individual meetings with the search committee, individual meetings with the faculty and/or with students, conduct a research presentation, teach a class, meet with the Dean, and have all meals with a faculty or committee representative. Each search is different, and ideally, the candidate will be given an itinerary of the events that will take place during the interview. How many days will the interview last? Who will pay for the interview visit? What formal presentations will be required upon arriving to campus? The answer to these and many other questions cannot be uniformly answered. Each committee, even within the same area of academic emphasis, may have very different requirements depending on the mission of that particular academic institution. A candidate must not assume what may be required of them, but instead, treat each interview as the completely separate process that it is, and expect anything.

In the field of recreation and leisure, this study is aimed at determining what some of the typical requirements and expectations may be in an attempt to help graduate students prepare themselves for the academic job search process. Additionally, this research will help faculty to understand what is required of doctoral students upon completion of their degree, with the hope that faculty will allow students the opportunity for involvement in such areas. Some may be offered graduate assistantships that provide invaluable exposure to research projects while others may be appointed as an associate instructor and spend most of their appointment teaching undergraduate courses. As of now, students in recreation and leisure studies do not know specifically what experiences are deemed the most valuable, and an examination of the criteria used by search committees could encourage doctoral students to seek out a diverse array of experiences during their program. If nothing else, students could better realize what is expected from them during the job search process. Additionally, one could discover the expectation of various types of universities (Carnegie Classifications) for which they may be interested in working after completing a Ph.D.

Methods

Development of the Instrument

During the 2000-2001 academic year, a pilot questionnaire was developed using standard considerations such as professional experience, scholarly activity, presentation/service experience, and teaching. In order to establish content validity for the instrument, the questionnaire was submitted to a panel of experts for review in order to gain valuable information derived from their experiences as chairpersons of search and screen committees. Additionally, their expertise in screening assistant professor applicants would assure that each item that is typically used to screen applicants was included in the instrument. Feedback was also sought from newly appointed assistant professors (those who applied for assistant professor positions during the 1999-2000 academic year) in the recreation field in an attempt to implement key components of their actual job search experiences, including the interview activities that had been required of them during their search.

Procedures

During the 2000-2001 academic year, a pilot study was conducted. Each academic institution (N=28) that advertised for an assistant professor position in the field of recreation or leisure studies was mailed a questionnaire. Specifically, the questionnaire was mailed to the chairperson of the search and screen committee. Of the 28 questionnaires mailed, 19 usable surveys were ultimately received. Based on consistent comments from those that completed the survey, two questions were revised prior to conducting the study during the 2001-2002 academic year. Only minor revisions were necessary as reliability analysis of the pilot study yielded an alpha coefficient of .80, which is a good measure of internal consistency.

The final instrument developed for this study had a combination of multiple choice questions related to the desired competencies and experiences of candidates that received strong consideration for the position, as well as questions that inquired about the interview process itself. Respondents were asked to rate several key areas identified by the panel of experts on a 5 point Likert scale (1 being very important, 5 being not important). A total of 45 questions (19 scaled items and 26 multiple choice items) were used in this study. Of the 34 surveys that were mailed, 23 institutions completed and returned the survey (67.6% response rate).

Results

Of the 23 respondents, 14% of the committee chairpersons had the rank of assistant professor, 50% were associate professors, 27% were full professors, and 4% of the search committee chairpersons sampled in this study were assistant or associate deans of their respective schools or colleges. In addition to academic rank, 36% of those responding also served as departmental chairpersons. Over 70% of the search and screen committee

chairpersons had a rank of associate professor or higher, giving the results of the questionnaire the perspective of experienced faculty members with knowledge of what is generally necessary to be a successful faculty member.

The Carnegie Classification of the institution is also a very important consideration, as the desired competencies of incoming faculty might be different among various classifications. Of those that responded to the questionnaire, 45% were from Doctoral/Research-Extensive institutions, 20% Doctoral/Research-Intensive, 15% Masters Colleges and universities I, 10% Masters Colleges and universities II, and 10% Baccalaureate Colleges- Liberal Arts. Sixty-five percent of respondents were from doctoral granting institutions.

Background Information

The average number of applicants for the assistant professor positions varied (M = 16), as did the area of emphasis for which the position could be best described. The area of emphasis that best described the position vacancy in this study were: generalist (35%), outdoor recreation (13%), park and recreation management (17%), sport management (13%), therapeutic recreation (4%), tourism (13%), and other (4%). During this particular academic year, having a park and recreation or generalist background would have been desired, but it is expected that position classification would be different year to year.

It was also deemed important to understand why the position was available, and how long the process would take (from the time the position was first advertised until someone was hired). In this study, 30% of the respondents indicated that the position was available because a faculty member had retired, 40% indicated that it was a newly created position, and another 30% indicated that the previous faculty member had resigned.

The search took much longer for some than others. Thirty-one percent of the positions took three to four months from start to finish, 52% lasted between five and six months, 13% required seven to eight months, and only one institution took longer than eight months. Though some positions were filled in less than four months, a majority of positions took longer (69% took five or more months). A candidate seeking an assistant professor position should be prepared for a relatively long, yet unpredictable time frame when seeking their first appointment.

In order to receive consideration for a tenure-track faculty position, it is obviously important for an individual to have or be working towards a doctoral degree. Some institutions will hire faculty with the understanding that they will eventually complete the doctorate, while others will require that the doctorate be in hand prior to beginning their appointment. Sixty-five percent of those that responded desired an earned doctorate, while 22% would consider a doctoral candidate having completed all requirements with the exception of the dissertation (ABD). A very small percentage (13%) of the search committee chairpersons indicated that an individual working on doctoral coursework

would receive serious consideration. The clear preference of search committee chairpersons was for candidates to have an earned doctorate, but being a doctoral candidate (ABD) would result in some consideration.

Interview Process

Only 10% of the respondents indicated that additional letters of recommendation were necessary, while only 20% preferred extra copies of the candidate's vita. Fifty percent, however, indicated that a personal portfolio that included samples of work was preferred. Twenty-eight percent requested copies of teaching evaluations, and only 9% indicated that copies of published articles were of importance. Only three respondents indicated that bringing supplemental items was not desirable.

As a result of 50% of respondents indicating an interest in a personal portfolio, it seems advisable for a candidate visiting a campus for an interview to assemble a packet of information to include copies of teaching evaluations, a copy of an article(s) that was published, or any other items that may be related to the position. Whether it is required or not, the personal portfolio may be the only distinguishable difference between two equally qualified candidates, and clearly is something that search committees consider.

An on-campus interview can last anywhere between one and five days. Twenty-three percent of the institutions conducted one-day interviews, while 64% indicated that the interview process lasted two days. An additional 13% had either three or four day interviews (9% and 4% respectively). Individuals that visit campus should have a reasonable idea as to how long the interview process will take as 96% of the respondents indicated that they provide the candidate with an itinerary of events in advance. Though the applicant will likely be advised as to how expenses will be handled, it is likely that the institution will pay for the on-campus visit, as 96% of the respondents indicated that they paid all travel expenses.

It is also typical for a faculty candidate to conduct a public presentation as part of the interview process. Since the nature of a faculty position could involve any combination of teaching and research, it is customary for a candidate to teach a class, conduct a research presentation, or in some cases both. Twenty-six percent of the respondents indicated that the candidate was required to teach a class on an assigned topic, 21% taught a class on a topic of their choice, and 9% indicated that candidate neither taught a class nor conducted a research presentation. A very large percentage (78%) did, however, require that the candidate conduct a research presentation during the interview. The candidate, upon receiving the itinerary should determine what public presentations will be required, though it is likely that the search committee chair will make this known while discussing and arranging the interview. Because of a large number of individuals indicating that a research presentation was required, it is clear that an assistant professor candidate should be prepared to give a presentation on his or her scholarly activities and research agenda.

Hiring Preferences and Considerations

Many factors play a role in deciding whom to hire for a faculty position. Teaching experience, publication record or research potential, professional background, institution at which an individual obtained degrees, quality of references, and how an individual “matches” with the faculty as a whole may all play a part in the decision process.

Seventy-three percent of respondents rated collegiate teaching experience as either very important or important (36.5% each). Though 22% were ambivalent, only 5% indicated that it was only “somewhat important” and no one believed that collegiate teaching experience was “not important.” Respondents were also asked to indicate how much teaching experience would result in a candidate receiving strong consideration. Thirteen percent of respondents indicated that a part-time teaching role as a graduate assistant or associate instructor was acceptable, while an additional 65% of the respondents preferred that the candidate have at least 1-2 years of collegiate teaching experience in a lead instructor role. Though some respondents preferred 3-4 years of teaching experience (13%), most did not have an expectation of beyond 4 years (only 4%). Only one respondent indicated that teaching experience was not at all important. Though having the opportunity to teach as a graduate student would result in some consideration, having the opportunity to teach in a lead instructor role significantly increases the amount of consideration that an applicant will receive in regard to teaching experience.

As technology continues to modernize, the opportunities for academic institutions to implement technology in teaching and research have drastically increased. When asked to rate computer/technological skills on a scale of importance, 53% of respondents considered computer skills to be important, while an additional 14% considered it to be very important. The remaining 33% were ambivalent or only considered computer skills to be somewhat important. In an attempt to better define the ratings, respondents were asked to indicate the minimum amount of computer skills that they preferred the candidates to possess. No respondent indicated that computer skills were not necessary, but 13% did respond that computer skills were not evaluated as a part of the search and screen process. Only 4% of the respondents were satisfied with basic computer skills (basic email usage and word processing), while 79% indicated that the minimum amount of computer and technological skills was considered the ability to perform a majority of the existing computer applications. An additional 4% preferred candidates to have an extremely thorough knowledge of all common computer applications and have the ability to train others. The results suggest that in order for a candidate to have the preferred computer skills, they must have at a minimum possess better than average knowledge of computer programs beyond that of basic email and word processing.

Though the research expectation of faculty members varies based on the mission of the academic institution, part of being a faculty member involves contributing to the body of knowledge through professional publication. Entry-level assistant professors were expected to have a proven publication record or the potential to produce research.

Fifty percent considered professional publications to be very important and an additional 30% considered it to be important. It is not surprising that since approximately half of the sample are from Doctoral/Research-Extensive institutions, that this would be rated highly. The remaining 20% considered professional publications to be either somewhat important or were ambivalent (10% respectively).

In order to quantify importance, respondents were asked to identify the number of refereed and non-refereed publications desired. Nineteen percent did not expect any publications from an entry-level assistant professor, while 57% preferred that a candidate have published between one and two refereed publications. The remaining 24% had even higher expectations of the potential candidates, with 19% preferring three to five refereed publications, and 5% preferring between six and ten referred publications. As for non-refereed publications, 47% did not expect or prefer non-refereed publications, 43% desired that candidates have one or two non-refereed publications, and the remaining 10% wanted between three and five non-refereed publications. For a candidate to receive strong consideration, they will ideally have published at least one to two refereed articles during their doctoral program. Non-referred publications, based on the data, do not seem to carry the same value. Many of the respondents did not expect any non-refereed publications, but did prefer that the candidate had a number of refereed publications.

Service is also a common expectation of a tenure-track faculty appointment, whether it be serving on a committee within the university, or being actively involved in professional organizations. The degree of the service expectation, similar to research, depends on the institution. Only 10% of the respondents rated professional service to be very important. Though 47% considered professional service important, the remaining 43% were either ambivalent or considered service to only be somewhat important (16% and 27% respectively). A follow up question asked respondents to further indicate their preference of a candidate that would receive strong consideration. With a relatively high percentage of respondents indicating that service was only somewhat important, it was somewhat surprising that only 4% indicated that no professional service was necessary, as compared to being a member of several professional organizations (13%), being a member of several organizations and attend conferences and workshops regularly (52%), and having membership, attend conferences, and have committee or officer involvement in the professional organizations (31%). Though relatively few respondents rated professional service highly, a vast majority (84%) preferred that candidates, at a minimum, be very active in professional service activities.

The search and screen committee chairpersons were asked to rate the importance of candidates having professional experience. Only 20% considered professional experience to be very important, while 45% indicated that it was important. Only 10% considered professional experience to be somewhat important. In regard to the actual number of years of experience, 17% indicated that no experience was necessary, 48% preferred only one to two years of professional experience, and the remaining 35% preferred at least three to five years of professional experience. Professional experience

is an important consideration in appointing an assistant professor, but clearly does not carry the same weight as experience in teaching or research.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of an applicant's undergraduate and graduate grade point average. None of the respondents indicated that college grade point average was very important, 31% indicated that college grade point average was important, 35% were ambivalent, 26% rated it as somewhat important, and the final 9% indicated that college grade point average was not important. The results of the data would suggest that transcripts are requested to verify degrees, and that not much emphasis is placed on the grade point average in making the ultimate decision. This obviously does not suggest that an individual working towards a graduate degree should not attempt to earn good grades, but instead to suggest that grades do not carry heavy consideration.

Confirming that the degree is earned and the type of institution from which the individual earned the degree is clearly a part of the decision process. Only 9% of the respondents preferred that applicants have each of their degrees from an accredited institution, 13% preferred that they have one degree from an accredited program, 43% indicated a preference in the candidate receiving all degrees from a reputable program (not necessarily accredited), and 13% preferred that the candidate have one of their degrees from a reputable program. A relatively high percentage of respondents (22%) indicated that applicants should have all required degrees, and that the type of institution from which it was obtained was not an important consideration. A degree from an accredited program does not appear to have a great deal of impact on the decision making process, as only 22% indicated that at least one degree from an accredited institution was preferred.

Though not unexpected, the quality of the vita was rated very highly, as all respondents indicated that these items were either very important or important (74% and 26% respectively). In addition, respondents indicated the letter of application was either very important or important (65% and 35% respectively). It is clear that a candidate must take the time and effort to prepare quality application materials, as these items are of great importance. Overall, 85% of respondents indicated that the performance at the interview was a very important factor in making the ultimate hiring decision.

Limitations

With only 34 jobs being advertised during the 2001-2002 academic year, this is a relatively small sample size, which affects the alpha reliability coefficient. A lack of internal consistency in responses could be attributed to the small sample as well as a large percentage of the sample being classified in the Doctoral/Research-Extensive Carnegie Classification. Using only the Doctoral/Research-Extensive in running reliability analysis resulted in an improvement in internal consistency ($\alpha = .80$). Though the overall alpha coefficient was .56, it is understandable that different classification of institutions would respond inconsistently to this type of questionnaire. One must account for the type of institution when interpreting the results, and in this study, 65% of subjects

are from doctoral granting institutions. The desired competencies and the components involved in the interview process are largely based on expectations from these types of institutions.

Recommendations and Implications

The profile of the ideal candidate is difficult to generalize based on the results of this study for a variety of reasons, but many factors have emerged from this study that have important implications for both the doctoral student and the faculty advisor. Assistant professor candidates should consider the following criteria:

- Assemble and submit a personal portfolio, including items related to the position vacancy, i.e. teaching evaluations, manuscripts, etc.
- Expect the interview to last two days, and that the visit will be paid for by the institution.
- Be prepared for a research presentation, and possibly in addition, be prepared to teach a class.
- An itinerary is likely to be given to the candidate in advance, so review and be prepared for any of the requirements.
- Expect the search to last between five to six months (from the time you submit your application materials until an offer is made).
- Have an earned doctorate or be prepared to demonstrate that you will have completed your degree requirements by the appointment start date.

Additionally:

- Candidates are preferred to have 1-2 years of college teaching experience in a lead instructor role.
- It will be strongly preferred for candidates to have a very sound knowledge of most computer applications.
- Candidates must have an established publication record, and ideally will have completed 1-2 refereed publications.
- 1-2 years of professional experience may be valuable.
- Candidates are preferred to be a member of, and be active in several professional organizations
- Candidates must have completed degree requirement (quality grade point average desirable, but not necessarily important).

- Candidate must possess, ideally, more than one of their degrees from a reputable program.

Students have a responsibility to seek out the experiences during their doctoral studies that will enable them the opportunity to obtain an assistant professor appointment. Though an understanding of the interview process is valuable in alleviating anxiety to the job seeker, assistant professor applicants must make every attempt to obtain teaching experience during their doctoral program, and develop a research program. Based on the results of this study, those that receive the most consideration are individuals that have had exposure to teaching and research as doctoral students and had acquired as much professional experience as possible.

Conclusion

Kim, Mencken, and Woolcock (1998) suggested that faculty play a significant role in preparing students for their first academic appointment, and strongly encouraged faculty to include students in the systematic preparation in pedagogy and classroom management. Faculty that advise doctoral students must give students the opportunity to gain classroom experience, and can assist in the development of a research program by collaborating with doctoral students on research projects. Unless faculty advisors enable students to gain this experience, they are not properly preparing them for their first academic appointment. Clearly, search and screen committees give stronger consideration to the candidates that have been given or sought these opportunities and have the proven ability in these areas. Being exclusively a full-time student is no longer an acceptable way to prepare for a career in academia. Seeking out the necessary experiences is the responsibility of the student, and when selecting a doctoral program or advisor under which to study, a student must consider the degree to which a faculty advisor and department are in support of this notion. Potential is a word that is becoming part of the past; having a proven track record is what is seemingly required today.

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