

The New Realities of the Academic Job Market: Taking Your Fate Into Your Hands

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As you are no doubt aware, the financial crisis has had a significant impact on higher education throughout the United States. I have been discussing with friends around the country at different types of universities how this will play out on the ground. Nearly unanimously, they report significant budget cuts and some report that their universities will be hiring fewer tenure-stream faculty members over the next few years. The long anticipated boom of job openings sparked by a wave of faculty retirements has stalled, and you face a very challenging environment.

Students in programs like ours also face a double impact. Coming from a program with less prestige and name recognition, you will now be competing for jobs with graduates of high prestige programs who previously never would have considered applying for positions at the directional universities, MA institutions, satellite campuses, and liberal arts colleges where our students have traditionally been so successful.

In this memo, I lay out a series of strategies for you that will give you some marginal but possibly crucial advantages on the academic job market. It's likely that you have heard a lot of this in piecemeal fashion over the last few years, and many of you are already doing these things. Nonetheless, I think that if you and we faculty members all adopt significantly more aggressive, proactive, interventionist approaches to placement, you will have a much better chance of being one of the lucky ones to land a permanent position in the coming years.

Working with Faculty and Developing Professional Credentials

I expect you to get the most out of the intellectual environment that we provide, but I also strongly encourage you to maintain some pragmatic focus on the job search process that you will face as you near the end of your graduate education.

Moving toward research focuses. From an early stage, work on developing depth and expertise in a research area, and try to identify areas that you believe will have some potential for growth in the future. I personally do not think that faculty should discourage students from studying particular areas or topics, but you should, in consultation with your faculty mentors, think about frames and approaches that will resonate in areas within the discipline that are recognizable and active.

Conference presentations. Attending conferences and presenting work benefits you by giving you experience in self presentation, possibly building a little name recognition, and possibly helping you to make connections with scholars outside UAlbany who do work in your areas. That being said, you should go to conferences with work that will display you in a good light. Next year, I intend to run a conference paper workshop in late January/early February for papers in progress and then a dry run session, but beyond this you must share your completed drafts of conference papers with your advisors or other faculty experts before you go to the conference and in enough time for you to respond to their criticisms. Do not get wrapped up in writing conference papers that do not advance your dissertation work. Further, scattered

presentations on too wide a variety of topics (i.e., drastically jumping fields) may make you look like a dilettante.

Publications. A solo publication in a well recognized peer-reviewed journal is a terrific accomplishment and will make your CV stand out. You should be talking with your advisor about mining your dissertation or MA thesis for such a piece. William Germano's *Getting it Published* is an excellent resource. While some search committees discount co-authored publications, this is still on balance well worth exploring with faculty mentors if your mentors are confident that you can place the article well. As with conference presentations, pursuing publications is wise, but only to the extent that it does not derail the dissertation to any serious degree. If you have been unable to place an article, placing a book review and a few encyclopedia entries will help to show some energy, especially if you are coming out with a short time to degree. Aside from political theory, applicants will have a very hard time catching a search committee's attention without some record of publication, and even in political theory, more candidates will be applying with proven track records of publication. Also keep in mind that publications tend to weigh more heavily than conference presentations with most search committees.

The Dissertation Process

Ideally, you would go on the market with a nearly completed, elegantly written dissertation that carves out an interesting problem and solves it in sophisticated ways. Further, your dissertation would take you no longer than about two or three years to develop from the prospectus defense to the final deposition. Take control of your dissertation process, and if you do not own a copy of Bolker's *Write Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes A Day*, it should move to the top of your Amazon wish list.

Prospectus phase. While your prospectus does not have to be perfect, dissertation proposals should be very detailed and complete. Be advised that prospectuses often must go through multiple drafts before defense, and you should be communicating actively with your chair and committee about your progress. Your problem should be both well defined and significant from a marketability standpoint. You should head into the field with a firm timeline and plan for collecting data, and you should hash out with your committee any potential issues with data gathering (including IRB) before going out into the field. During the prospectus defense, you should also get a clear sense from your committee regarding individuals' preferences for reading chapters piecemeal or reviewing entire dissertation drafts.

Writing up. When you are planning ahead for the market, write up a chapter situating your project in the relevant literature and at least one of the middle chapters of the dissertation that demonstrates how your project works concretely before you assemble a market package. These elements are critical to demonstrate to hiring committees that your dissertation is concrete enough to warrant looking at you seriously. These chapters should be prepared enough in advance to get feedback from your entire committee and address these comments before you send out your job files. You must technically edit your writing samples carefully, if necessary seeking the services of a professional editor.

You should maintain close contact with your chair as you are writing up. Your chair and committee should be responding to your drafts in a timely fashion. This is easier if you provide your readers with deadlines (i.e., "Dear committee, I intend to send you chapters 4 and 5 on

April 10 and would appreciate receiving your feedback by graduation.”). Be aware that many faculty are harder to reach over the summer and during breaks. Avoid placing your committee in an impossible situation by dumping entire drafts on them at the last minute. Plan to circulate a full draft of your dissertation in time to allow for approximately *two complete revisions* of the entire manuscript prior to the planned defense date. Degrees will not be awarded on a rushed basis due to a student’s need or desire to finish in a particular term. But keep in mind that, all else being equal, after about seven years, time to degree becomes a problem, and after ten years, it becomes a major problem.

Applications

In figuring out the application process with your chair and committee, be sure to address the following issues.

Selecting jobs for which to apply. Be realistic. This advice cuts in multiple directions. First and foremost, students should be applying broadly for the next few years, since jobs are likely to be few and far between. If you are committed to landing a tenure-track job, do not establish major geographic limits on your searches (i.e., only big cities, only the northeast, or, deity forbid, only New York state). On the other hand, read ads carefully and target your applications to positions for which you can argue a good fit. If your dissertation crosses fields or disciplines, work with your advisor to identify alternative markets.

Timing of applications. In terms of the market, you should be ready to go on the market – you should have assembled a finished package including having all letters of recommendation in the department’s file – by about September 1 to take advantage of early searches. This means that the bulk of the preparation must take place before the fall term begins. Market letters require significant lead time for the writers. While APSA placement interviews are rarely make or break, they can be good opportunities for you to practice self presentation skills and polish short presentations of your dissertation topics. You should be going out on the market with a majority of the dissertation written or beyond. Students who have not achieved candidacy should only be on the market in extraordinary circumstances. Most students should not go on the market if their dissertation research is incomplete or if they have written up no more than the introduction and the literature review. In terms of the realities of the market, you should expect to on the academic job market for 2-3 years after the receipt of the Ph.D. Be sure to ask your letter writers to refresh your letters annually, and provide them with updated information about your activities in a timely fashion.

Polishing the package. I will vet the job packets of students who opt to send me their drafts. It’s more important, however, for you to get feedback from people in your field(s). You must write cover letters carefully and tailor them specifically to the jobs for which you are applying. Do not go out on the market with poorly organized materials that have not been proofread. All materials in the file should be meticulously polished.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are highly important in the job search process. Students should talk through the selection of recommenders with their chairs. Ensure that you will have at least one letter that addresses teaching specifically and hopefully extensively. Such a letter could

be provided by anyone who's had the opportunity to work with you in a teaching role or the information should be included in the chair's letter after the chair has 1) observed you in the classroom and 2) reviewed your syllabi and evaluations.

Faculty letters can also address anything about you that is likely to raise questions or red flags. If possible, get a recommender to explain long times to degree, shifts in advisor/chair, the selection of a chair that appears not to fit with the dissertation topic, a term or two of terrible teaching evaluations, or anything else that might cause concern for an arms' length evaluator.

Remember that our process is a bit different now than in the past: I will be writing a comprehensive short introductory letter for you that will go out from the department with the other letters of recommendation and your transcript. You are responsible for sending your individual cover letters and packages of materials and for informing Barbara and me in a timely fashion where you would like to have your letters sent. For this process to work effectively, I rely on you to request your letters in time for me to use them to construct the introductory letter.

I would be happy to talk through any issues you have about letters.

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I think our biggest challenge is getting you to the interview. As a department, we can help you prepare for a killer performance. If you plan to make a full market push in the fall, you should let me know as soon as possible, and we can work on your package. Further, we can schedule a practice talk for you in September, which all faculty will be strongly encouraged to attend. But we need to do everything we can to get your files to pop out of what are likely to be piles of significant size and depth. I stand ready to assist in any way that I can, and I welcome your suggestions and engagement as you move into the job search process.

JOB MARKET CHECK LIST

- Discuss going on the market; reach agreement
with your advisor that now is the appropriate time (spring)
- Meet with the DGS for market orientation (spring)
- Request letters of recommendation (spring)
- Prepare and polish CV (spring)
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- Prepare and polish at least two dissertation chapters;
prepare and polish any other writing samples (summer)
- Collect and polish syllabi; develop teaching portfolio (summer)
- Draft and polish cover letter(s) for generic job(s) (summer)
- Send package out for comments and feedback from
faculty mentors, DGS, and friends who are good
proofreaders; incorporate all feedback (summer)
- Meet with the DGS to follow up on market preparation (summer)
- Post CV to APSA's ejobs site (summer)
- Review job listings biweekly, beginning in mid August (summer)
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- Assemble list of jobs with input from your advisor (fall)
- If desired, attend APSA and do screening interviews (fall)
- Confirm that all requested letters are in at the department (fall)
- Notify Barbara and the DGS of the addresses of the jobs
to which you want letters sent at least two weeks
before the deadlines (fall)
- Send out packages at least one week before the deadlines (fall)
- Maintain your own updated flow chart of jobs for which
you have applied; flowchart should include department,
contact person, and job ad for quick reference (fall)
- Continually cultivate patience and serenity (fall)
- Schedule practice job talk; incorporate feedback received (fall)
- Prepare job market talking points (brief description of your
dissertation, brief description of your teaching expertise and
interests) for oral delivery in phone interviews or campus visits (fall)