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 of 2008-2010 had a significant impact on higher education throughout the United States. I have discussed the long-term effects with friends around the country at different types of universities. Many universities are going through fundamental restructuring, limiting their tenure-track hiring plans and delaying the replacement of departing or retiring faculty members with tenure-stream faculty. While the tenure-track market hit bottom a few years ago and is still rebounding, few academics with whom I am acquainted think that their institutions have come out of the crisis with plans to add significant numbers of lines to their existing ranks in the humanities and social sciences. Further, the faculty they hire will, more than ever, need to justify their presence on the tenure track either through their ability to attract and retain the undergraduate students whose tuition dollars are increasingly providing the fundamental financial support, even at state institutions, or through their ability to compete successfully for external grants that bring indirecs back to the university. These pressures are increasing as well at a time when the federal funding environment is highly uncertain.

Students in programs like ours also face a double impact. Coming from a program with less prestige and name recognition, you will 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. Second, the competition for R1 jobs is exceptionally fierce, as people who believe they were underplaced in the lean years or who tried to ride out the economic downturn in postdoctoral placements are still looking to move up. I emphasize, though, that this information should spur you to take a highly proactive approach. It is not a reason for you to panic or despair.

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 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. If you do not behave proactively, you run the risk of not landing a tenure-track position, and every year that goes by after you’ve earned your Ph.D. decreases your chances on the market unless you work hard to keep yourself marketable. I also encourage you to look carefully at institutions’ financial situations before accepting a tenure-track job; while most of us are happy to see you accept any tenure-track position that you see as a good fit for your interests, we don’t want you starting your careers in precarious institutions.

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. Different fields and subspecialties vary significantly in the number of positions that tend to be listed annually, and in the number of applicants these positions tend to attract. If your work allows you to apply credibly across fields, that can be a good thing, but keep in mind that such attempts must be credible (coming from the person who’s seen too many public law applications from people telling me that Congress makes laws and their dissertations are on Congress, so . . .).

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 you areas. That being said, you should go to conferences with advanced work that will display you in a good light. The department usually offers opportunities for graduate students to practice presenting their work before going to a conference, 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, and do not present work on which you have not received positive feedback from a faculty member.** Further, scattered presentations on too wide a variety of topics (i.e., drastically jumping fields) may make you look like a dilettante.

Anything that you present at a conference should be ready to go out the door to a peer-reviewed journal within a month or so of your return from the conference. Make proposals with this standard in mind, write your papers with this goal, and then follow through. There is **no significant value that exceeds the cost** in terms of time in presenting at a conference if you do not plan to submit your paper to a journal afterward.

**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. Even in political theory, more candidates are applying with proven track records of publication. This is increasingly an issue in a time when many job seekers received their Ph.D.s a year or two previously and have used their time since graduating to build a publication record. Publications weigh a lot more heavily than conference presentations with most search committees, and once you have defended your prospectus and gotten into data collection for your dissertation, getting something published should rise quickly on your list of priorities.

**Grants and postdoctoral fellowships.** While no one is expecting you to land a six-figure grant while you are in graduate school, you should look for smaller solid prospects. The NSF political science program and law and society program are highly competitive, but worth considering, and several smaller grant programs are worth the effort of developing a good application. Consult with your advisor and committee to locate grants and to develop a competitive application. Matt Ingram has been running workshops to help with NSF, so if that is a possibility for you, you should definitely attend. You should also locate and apply for postdoctoral fellowships during the time you are on the job market – landing such a fellowship can help you to secure the time and resources to improve your dissertation significantly and develop new scholarly networks. Just be sure to pay close
attention to the duties associated with postdocs. Some universities are creating highly teaching
intensive positions and labeling them postdoctoral teaching fellowships to justify paying a lower rate
than they would for a visiting assistant professor position.

**Teaching credentials.** Most UAlbany grad students will have the opportunity to teach
independently before going on the job market, which will give you an advantage over applicants who
do not have this experience. Make the most of it! You must be proactive in seeking advice in
designing a good syllabus and teaching it effectively and well. Your advisor should be a good
resource, but you should also consult with other faculty members who have taught the same class or
similar classes in recent years. The department is developing a broader package of teaching resources
geard toward graduate students and ITLAL runs numerous workshops, but you must take on the
primary responsibility for building a strong empirical case that you can be an effective teacher.
Gaining online teaching or blended learning experience is also a plus. Again, the capacity to attract
and retain students is increasingly going to be a factor that hiring universities will consider in their
reviews of applicants, and a strong teaching record can help you to make that case.

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. There is no advantage whatsoever to conducting a prospectus defense before your
proposal is in excellent shape. A strong prospectus can also form the foundation for good grant
proposals.

**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 for you 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. A poorly written chapter will eliminate you from consideration at many
universities, even if your ideas, research design, and execution are flawless.

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, and be sure to address your committee’s
feedback fully before submitting a revision. 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 in terms of your marketability, and after ten years, it becomes a major problem. If you anticipate major delays in your writing process as a result of external factors, discuss with your advisor and the graduate director the possibility of taking a leave of absence from the program.

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. Pay attention to the ad language and notice what an institution identifies as minimum qualifications and desired extras. If your dissertation crosses fields or disciplines, work with your advisor to identify alternative markets. In some cases, this may include markets outside of political science.

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 the middle of August 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 (i.e., ideally one full month) 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 having gone through multiple drafts or beyond. The department will not support applications for tenure-track positions for students who have not yet achieved candidacy. 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; you are simply wasting time and energy that is better spent on the dissertation. The strongest candidates will be those who have just completed and defended their dissertations and those who are close enough to a defense that they and their committees can discuss in detail precisely what the dissertation’s findings and implications are (i.e., a full, solid draft has been reviewed by the entire committee). How do you know if you’re ready? A good rule of thumb is that your advisor can report specifically the major findings of your dissertation and can honestly say with a 95% confidence rate when your defense will take place, plus or minus one month. That means within spitting distance, people. Hiring committees can easily tell the difference between “probably next May but almost certainly by August” and “the defense is scheduled for May 15, 2017.”

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., and you should plan to seek visiting positions or postdoctoral placements after the tenure-track search season has ended. 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. This implies of course that once you have completed your degree, if you have not yet landed a position, you should be actively building your publication record unless you are seeking a community college position (in which case you should be attending as many teaching workshops as
you can and doing other things to demonstrate your engagement with teaching).

Polishing the package. Professor Chen and I will vet the job packets of students who opt to send us 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. If you do, your application is guaranteed not to make it through the first cut. 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.

A reminder about how our process works: Cheng Chen will write 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 Sheena Loughlin and Cheng Chen in a timely fashion (i.e., with at least two weeks’ notice) where you would like to have your letters sent. For this process to work effectively, you must request your letters in time for Professor Chen to use them to construct the introductory letter. If you have different sets of letters for different types of positions, be sure to inform Sheena which letters you are requesting for each position. Some advisors may wish to send individual letters to searches on your behalf; if your advisor wants to do this for you, be sure to get information to your advisor in a timely and organized fashion. It is also your responsibility to keep on top of the wildly variable systems through which different institutions solicit and file letters of recommendation and to ensure that your recommenders get any individual links they may need to deposit letters on your behalf. Organized, prompt communication with your recommenders is imperative, and you need to pay attention to ensure that you are getting confirmation by the deadlines that your letters are in.

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

A New Note of Caution about Sealing the Deal

Usually, if an institution is healthy enough to run a tenure-track search, it’s healthy enough for the position to be stable for at least the term of your initial contract. I do recommend, however, that before you sign on the dotted line, you take two important precautions. First, search for the (nonprofit) institution’s public IRS Form 990 and review it to ensure that the institution is not saddled with an unreasonable amount of debt and that its assets and endowment do not set off warning bells. Second, search quickly on Inside Higher Ed for stories so that you can be sure that things are not in a bad way. Red flags would include elimination of majors, drastic cuts to staff, major conflicts between union/faculty and administration (including votes of no confidence), and/or significant and unexplained revolving doors in the upper administration. Usually if the university’s Board of Trustees is in the news, this is not a good sign. If you do find signs of trouble, bring them to
your advisor’s attention immediately. Many of us have back channel connections to faculty at other institutions, and we can help you to figure out if there really is something seriously awry.

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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 and Cheng Chen know as soon as possible, and we can work on your package. Further, we can schedule a practice talk for you on short notice; faculty are usually quite willing to attend and provide critical feedback. 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)

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)

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; continue to eat healthy food and exercise regularly

- [ ] (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)