The Academic Job Search Handbook
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Chapter 3

Becoming a Job Candidate: The Timetable for Your Search

It is important to begin to prepare for your job search well before you finish your dissertation; in many fields it is also important to time the search to coincide with the completion of your dissertation. Many scientists, on the other hand, are competitive on the tenure-track market only after a few to several years of postdoctoral research. Think about your job search, your participation in scholarly organizations, and the completion of your dissertation or postdoctoral research as a unified whole. Most faculty members will advise you not to take a tenure-track position before your dissertation is completed. A strong logic informs that view. In a tight job market, candidates who have completed their degrees are likely to be chosen over those who have not. In addition, once you have accepted a position, you will gain tenure as a result of research done as a junior faculty member. If you begin your research by completing the dissertation, you will already be late by the tenure clock, and in the position of a student with several incompletes, who can never catch up with current work.

Funding considerations may force you to look for paid employment before your dissertation is completed. If this is the case, discuss the situation with faculty members in your department and choose the employment most conducive to finishing the dissertation.

Use the timetable below to plan your job search while completing your dissertation and participating in scholarly activities. Each suggested step is discussed in detail elsewhere in this book. If, by chance, you read it thinking, “I wish I had done some of these things last year,” don’t despair! Fill in the gaps as best you can. Certainly many people obtain positions without having conducted the “perfect” job search. However, if you see gaps in your preparation and do not do as well as you hope in the job market this year, you may find much more success if you go on the market again next year after better preparation.
Timetable for Applying for Jobs That Begin in September

Two Years Before

- Make sure all members of your dissertation committee are selected. Consider getting a December degree, which enables you to apply with "degree in hand." (Foreign nationals, however, should consider the visa implications of this timing.) Learn about conference dates and locations. Plan to attend and, if feasible, to give a presentation. Learn deadlines for submitting papers.
- Learn about all the important sources of job listings in your field. In some disciplines the job listings of one scholarly association cover almost everything. In other fields there may be multiple sources.
- Explore Internet resources and bookmark useful sites.
- Give thought to your long-range goals and consider the kinds of jobs you will wish to apply for. If your plans will have an impact on a spouse or partner, begin to talk with that person about geographic locations you will both consider acceptable.
- If you have the opportunity to do so, start to sit in on the talks and interviews of job candidates in your department. Think about what they do that does and doesn't work well. If your department allows students to review candidates' application materials, take advantage of this opportunity to see a large collection of them.
- Identify any relevant postdocs for which you may want to apply and learn their deadlines.
- If you are already in a postdoctoral position, you will want to seek a tenure-track position when you feel your research record is strong enough. Once you've decided you're ready to put yourself on the market, see "Fall, Twelve Months Before" below.
- Think about developing a backup plan. If it includes seeking nonacademic positions, start to educate yourself about the options. Two excellent resources are *Outside the Ivory Tower: A Guide for Academics Considering Alternative Careers* by Margaret Newhouse and *Nontraditional Careers in Science* by Karen Young Kreeger.

Summer, Fifteen Months Before

- Make sure your dissertation will be finished no later than the summer before the job begins, and preferably earlier. In many cases, hiring departments will not consider a candidate without a Ph.D. in hand.
- Discuss your plans with your advisor or postdoctoral supervisor and any others in the department who may be interested. If they don't think you will be ready to go on the market until the following year, consider their point of view very seriously. If you begin a new position and have not yet completed your dissertation, you will start off behind schedule in terms of the "tenure clock."
- Renew contacts with faculty members whom you may know at other institutions, letting them know of your progress and that you will be on the market soon.
- If you haven't already done so, set up a credentials file at your campus career center. Get letters of recommendation now from those with whom you will have no further significant contact.
- Collect all the materials you have that you might want to use or refer to as part of an application and make sure you can find them. Your collection could include reprints, copies of letters of commendation, newspaper articles about something you have done, syllabi you have prepared, and notes about things you want to remember to stress in a cover letter.
- Prepare your vita.
- If you think a Web site would enhance a candidacy in your field, develop one.
- Begin to prepare the additional written materials you will need in your search. You may be asked to provide an employer with an abstract or the first chapter of your dissertation; a research paper; a brief statement of your research plans or teaching philosophy; "evidence of successful teaching"; and sample syllabi.
- You may also be asked for a copy of your transcript. Be sure you know how to order it and how long it takes to fill a request.
- Consider giving a paper at a major conference in your field or submitting an article or articles to major journals in your field. Find out deadlines for calls for papers.
- If you will be applying for individual postdoctoral funding, obtain and begin to prepare postdoc applications. If you will be applying to work on someone's research grant, start to network with potential principal investigators.
- Think about what resources you will need to do your research as a faculty member. Begin to research ways of funding them. You may be asked about these issues in an interview.
- If you are also considering non-academic options, be aware that timetables for non-academic employment are different from academic ones, and usually more flexible. If an academic position is your first choice, concentrate on that search at this time.
Fall, Twelve Months Before

- Finalize your vita. (You may need to update it a few times during the year.) Complete additional supporting written materials.
- Arrange for letters of recommendation to be written by everyone who will support your search. Your advisor will probably update his or her letter as your dissertation progresses through its final stages.
- Find out whether jobs in your field typically require "teaching portfolios." Most fields don’t, but if yours does, begin to prepare one. If you’re in an art or design field, prepare the slides and portfolios you’ll be asked to submit with applications. Don’t forget to include samples of your students’ work.
- Keep working on your dissertation or research project!
- Attend any programs on the academic job search that may be offered on campus or at conferences.
- Watch carefully for job listings and apply for everything that interests you. The first cover letters you write may take longer to compose than subsequent ones.
- Continue to keep in close touch with your advisor and other recommenders.
- Consider making a few direct inquiries at departments that particularly interest you (what you are most likely to discover in this way are non-tenure-track positions), if you can define reasonable criteria for selecting the departments.
- Review the literature in your field and subfield in preparation for interviews.
- Check to see that letters of application have been received by the departments to which you apply.
- Apply for postdocs.
- Investigate sources of funding for your research so that you can discuss your plans with hiring institutions.
- Plan ways to maintain your perspective and sense of humor during what can be a trying time. Consider exercise, having fun, seeking out campus resources, supporting others who are going through the same thing, and nurturing your own support network.

Eight Months Before

- Interviewers will ask you about your long-range research plans. Even if you are so immersed in your dissertation that you can’t see beyond it at the moment, take time to give some thought to where your research will lead.

Six Months Before

- Many conferences are held now. It is important to attend them and take advantage of the opportunity they provide for the formal and informal exchange of information.
- Prepare carefully for each interview. If you give a presentation as part of an interview day on campus, practice it in advance. Remember to send thank-you notes after each interview.
- Continue to look, apply, and interview for positions.
- This may well be a stressful time. Plan to take some breaks for activities or events that you consider relaxing and renewing.

- Continue to apply and interview for positions, although most openings will have been announced by now.
- You may begin to get offers. If you feel you need more time to make a decision about an offer, don’t hesitate to ask for it. You will, however, have to abide by whatever time frame you and the employer agree on for your decision. You don’t need to be totally open with everyone at this stage, but you must be completely honest. When you do accept a position, consider your acceptance a binding commitment.
- If the offers you want are not coming in, don’t think that you must take absolutely any job that is offered to you, whether you want it or not. The job market will come around again next year. Talk with your advisor and others about the best way to position yourself for next year’s market, if necessary. You can also keep watching for one-year appointments, which are often announced later than tenure-track positions.
- After you have accepted a job, take time to thank everyone who has been helpful to you in the process.
Chapter 4
Deciding Where and When to Apply

Before you begin a job search, think about what kind of job you want and whether you are currently prepared to compete successfully for it. Study job ads to see what different types of institutions seem to require and use the information to help plan your next steps. If, realistically, you don’t yet seem qualified to compete successfully for the jobs you really want, consider whether a postdoctoral position or fellowship, additional teaching experience, or anything else will position you for a successful search.

It’s important to think about both your priorities and your realistic chances of achieving your goals. Even in a tight market where you feel options are limited, it’s still useful to keep your sights on what you really want. The more articulate you can be about your plans and goals, the easier it will be for you to communicate with your advisor and others who will assist you in your job search, to prepare for interviewing, and to assess job offers.

Understanding the Market

You must know something about the job market before you begin your search. The more informed you are the better your search will be. The experience of graduate students a few years ahead of you in your department provides a very limited knowledge base. You need to do additional research to be conversant with the following:

- What is the hiring outlook in your discipline?
- What is the hiring outlook in your field of research?
- How broad is the market in your field? Opportunities may exist outside traditional departmental definitions. For example, although your degree is from an arts and sciences department, might you seek a position in a professional school (such as business, government, communications)? Would a short-term experience, such as a postdoctoral appointment, increase your long-term options? Are you in a field, such as biomedical science, where a postdoc is all but required?
- How great is the competition for positions in your field at prestigious institutions? What is realistically required should you choose to compete for them? For example, would several publications in major journals be required?
- If you are in a highly specialized field, when and where are openings anticipated?

There are several ways you can obtain this information. Read articles in The Chronicle of Higher Education. Contact your scholarly association (see Appendix 1) for reports it may have produced about the market. Check to see whether your campus career center or graduate dean’s office has records of the jobs taken by new Ph.D.s from your school. Talk with students in your department who are on the market or recent graduates who have new faculty positions. Above all, talk regularly with your department chair, advisor, and other faculty members about the job market in your field.

Deciding Where to Apply

Institutional Characteristics

Are you willing or eager to consider jobs at:

- A public or private institution?
- A large university or a small four-year teaching college or community college?
- A school with a distinctive institutional personality, such as a women’s college, an institution with a strong religious affiliation, or a school offering an “innovative curriculum”?
- An institution that emphasizes research over teaching or one that emphasizes teaching over research? A competitive job market has enabled institutions that formerly emphasized only one of these things to require both; however, “teaching” and “research” institutions still may be distinguished from each other.
- A place that demands or offers heavy involvement in the life of the school (usually a teaching college) or one in which your major identification will be with your department?
- A highly selective institution or one that prides itself on offering educational opportunities to a broad section of the community?
Planning and Timing Your Search

- An institution where the faculty is unionized or one where individual salaries are market-driven?
- An institution that compensates new faculty members with salary or one that compensates them with prestige?
- A U.S. institution or one in another country?
- A for-profit university?

Departmental Characteristics

Do you prefer:

- Many colleagues in your field of research or an opportunity to be the inhouse expert in your field?
- Opportunity to and expectation that you will socialize with others in the department or an atmosphere that encourages solely professional involvement?
- An emphasis on graduate or on undergraduate teaching?
- A department in which you would be the first person of your social background ever hired, or one in which you feel most people are like you?
- A department with a specific orientation ("traditional," "radical," "applied") or one whose faculty members take a variety of approaches?
- A department where teaching occurs mainly in seminars or one where classes are primarily large lectures?
- A department that emphasizes research or one that emphasizes teaching? Think about what kind of facilities you need to carry out your own research plans.
- A department with a hierarchical structure or one that emphasizes participatory decision making?

Geographic Considerations

- Is it important to you to be in a rural, small city, suburban, or urban environment?
- Does your research require resources that are available in limited geographic locations?
- Can you work and live comfortably in any region of the country?
- Will you need to limit the geographic range of your search, or find an institution near an airport, because of personal considerations, such as the career plans of a partner, a child's education, or the need to be near a relative who is ill?

Additional Personal Considerations

Additional idiosyncratic personal considerations may be important in your job search. Even if you are the only candidate in the world who will choose one position over another because it will give you the most opportunity and time to use your pilot's license, take this preference into consideration if it is important to you.

How Competitive Are You?

Be realistic in evaluating the type of institution where you will be able and willing to do what is necessary to attain tenure.

- In some fields, it is very important to be able to obtain funding for your research. Do you feel willing and able to do this?
- Are you able to resist pressure from your own departmental culture to apply only to certain kinds of institutions?
- What balance do you want to strike between career-related features and nonprofessional aspects of a job? For example, would you take a position at a highly prestigious institution at which you would need to work nearly all your waking hours in order to have a reasonable chance of obtaining tenure?
- Do you see a discrepancy between your ability and willingness to perform in your first job and your ability to obtain it? For example, are you highly productive in research and publication and very awkward in oral presentations and conversations? In that case, work to improve your job-hunting skills instead of letting them limit your job search, because your job-hunting ability can always improve if you are willing to give it practice and attention. On the other hand, if you interview extremely well but seriously doubt your ability or willingness to perform the level of research required to get tenure, don't talk yourself into a job whose demands you may not want or be able to meet. The tenure clock usually starts the minute you accept a tenure-track position. If you feel you will be unable to do what will be required to achieve tenure, you will surely face another, possibly more difficult, job search down the road.
If You Are Applying for Postdocs

- Why are you choosing to do a postdoc? Is your field one where postdoc experience is usually required?
- Do you want to use your postdoctoral experience to increase your expertise in your dissertation area or to broaden your background?
- Will you do your postdoc in a large, top research institution or in a smaller school?
- What qualities do you plan to look for in the supervisor who will serve as your mentor? How do you plan to assess those qualities?
- What type of facilities and other resources are required for the type of research you want to do?
- How will you distinguish between the postdoctoral positions which amount to little more than serving as ill-paid research assistants and those which provide a strong basis for an independent scientific career?

When to Look

Because most jobs are advertised about a year before they are to begin, you will probably start your job search while you are still finishing your dissertation. Be realistic about when you will finish. It is crucial that you discuss with your advisor when to begin the search, because he or she will be knowledgeable about the advisability of being a candidate with an unfinished dissertation as opposed to one with the degree in hand. That is the most important factor in determining when to start looking.

On the other hand, if you are in a field with very few annual openings, and a good job is announced before you are entirely ready to apply, you and your advisor may decide that it is a good idea for you to accelerate your search. If you are in the first year of a postdoc with a two-year commitment and the perfect job opportunity comes along, you’re in a difficult situation. You probably must discuss it with your supervisor, at least by the time you’re invited for an interview, at which point the person will almost certainly find out about your application.

If it looks as if you will finish in a year in which very few openings are available, plan to search for good interim opportunities while you conduct the academic job search. Many postdoctoral and other fellowship opportunities, like academic positions, have very early deadlines for application. Don’t wait until you find you have no job offers before you apply. Some faculty positions will continue to be listed throughout the academic year, so while you must begin your search early, it may continue over several months.

If you are an international student, you should find out if there are visa considerations that might affect the timing of your search and the date when you might prefer to have your degree awarded. Start working on this task early to avoid problems or delays that might prevent an institution from offering you a job later on, or that might compromise your ability to remain long-term in the United States if that is your desire. If your campus has an office that offers good visa and immigration advising, use it. If not, consult a reputable immigration attorney.

Discussing Your Plans with Others

Sharing your thoughts with your advisor, department placement chair, and others who will work with you in your search can help these individuals act effectively on your behalf. Conversation with them can help you clarify your own thinking as it evolves. Honest faculty feedback about how realistic your choices are can be enormously helpful to you. The best way for you to elicit it is to ask for candor, assuring those you ask that your feelings will not be hurt by what you hear. Needless to say, respond in a way that does not cause someone to regret his or her candor.

In talking to others, whether faculty members or peers, keep your own priorities clearly in mind, and use your own judgment. Consider, for instance, your feelings about raising research funds. In some fields, such as the sciences and engineering, you must do so successfully and repeatedly to achieve tenure at a major research institution. If you have a realistic chance of obtaining a position at a major research institution, but privately feel that meeting the research demands necessary to get tenure there will consign you to years of prolonged misery, then it may be wise for you to look at another type of institution.

Perhaps your graduate work has only recently begun to take off because you were meeting personal obligations that you are now convinced will be lighter. In that case you may want to try for jobs that your advisor feels are beyond your reach, even if you need to take a postdoctoral position in the interim to strengthen your credentials. If you are a natural risk-taker convinced that a small but growing department may be the source of some of the most exciting work in your field, you may choose to ignore the cautions of more conservative friends who say, “Yes, but who’s ever heard of it?”

Following your own instincts as to what you will find satisfying is easy if your goals are similar to those of the people around you. It is often more difficult if you want to follow a path that seems foreign to your advisor and most of the students in your department. In that case, use their skepticism as a prod to make sure that you get as much information as possible so that you make informed decisions. If you want to do something non-
traditional, be able to explain your decision to others so they can support your search.
Balance this skepticism, however, with the enthusiasm of people who are doing what you would like to do, even if they are at other institutions and you have to seek them out. In the end, it is your career and your life, and you are most likely to be satisfied with both if you shape them according to your own priorities and values.

Chapter 5
The Importance of Advisors and Professional Networks

A job search may feel like a lonely enterprise, but it is always conducted within the context of a web of social relationships. You work within a discipline with its own language, conventions, and structure of communication. Your own research has undoubtedly been strengthened by communication with other people; in some fields it has been conducted as part of a team. You are leaving a department with one social structure and culture to enter another. You will be explicitly recommended by several people, and those who are considering your candidacy may hear about you from others.

Whether you find these facts reassuring or alarming, by taking account of them as early as possible in your graduate career, you can strengthen your prospects in the job market. If you have not paid sufficient attention to them until now, it is not too late to focus on them. Networking is crucial, not only to get a job, but also to succeed at it and at your research. Some candidates are put off by the potentially exploitative aspect of networking, as well they should be. The goal is not to use people in a one-way exchange, but to engage in a mutually beneficial relationship.

During graduate study it’s critical that you change your self-concept from that of a “student” who primarily learns from others to that of a “colleague” who is actively engaged in his or her chosen discipline. If you view yourself merely as a job-hunting student, you will see networking as a petitionary activity, be hesitant to contact people, and perhaps run the risk of being bothersome. If you view yourself as an active member of your discipline, you will view networking more appropriately as an exchange of information, contact people confidently, and usually make them happy that they got to know you.
Advisors and Mentors

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of an advisor in an academic career. When you enter the job market, and perhaps for years, you will often be viewed as "X's student," while your success is an important element in your advisor's professional reputation. In some fields, your postdoctoral supervisor is also extremely important. If your advisor or supervisor is well known in the market you want to enter, thinks highly of you, spends time with you, is savvy about the employment market, and is enthusiastically supportive of your job search, you will be likely to think highly of the importance of the advisor's role. Your first job search may well go more smoothly because you will be able to discuss your goals with your advisor, who will in turn perhaps make phone calls that will pave the way to interviews.

While such a situation is generally enviable, you may also need to make a particular effort to distinguish between your own goals and your mentor's goals for you, if you feel they differ. Making choices that are disappointing to the advisor will be particularly difficult. You also may rely too heavily on your advisor's intervention and fail to master job-hunting skills as thoroughly as does someone who gets less assistance. If you are blessed with such an advisor, make a particular effort to learn from that person how best to make efforts in your own behalf. If you are doing postdoctoral research, your current supervisor can play a role in your search similar to that of an advisor. However, in addition to supporting your career development, a postdoctoral supervisor is also often dependent on your work to complete research. It may not be realistic to expect that person to enthusiastically support you for a position which would take you away before you completed the time you'd committed to the postdoctoral position.

You may have a less-than-ideal advising relationship. Perhaps your advisor is not particularly well known, brilliant but unskilled at interacting with other people, so formal and distant that you are honestly unsure what he or she thinks about your work, or, in fact, disappointed in your work and not hesitant to tell you so. Whatever the characteristics of this real human being, you can probably improve the relationship, profit from the individual's greatest strengths, and, if necessary, find additional mentors.

If things are not going well between you and your advisor, your natural tendency may be to avoid talking with him or her. Resist this temptation! It is only through interaction that you can identify problems and attempt to address them. Arrange regular meetings to discuss your work, come well prepared for them, ask for as much feedback as you can get, take your advisor's suggestions, and make sure he or she sees that you have done so.

If you sense that your advisor is not happy with what you are doing, but is not telling you why, ask more directly for feedback. You may learn that in fact there is no problem, or you may identify an issue you can address. View the immediate problem as an opportunity to learn more about how to manage conflict successfully, since you will encounter it again and again throughout your career.

Even though advisors have considerable power, it is not unlimited. Most will respect you more if you think independently, respectfully express disagreement when it exists, present your ideas persuasively, and generally act as if you accept responsibility for your own career.

Most advisors act responsibly, a few abuse their power. The latter are most likely to victimize those who are unwilling to challenge inappropriate treatment. If you honestly believe you are being treated unfairly or inappropriately, begin by learning what the norms for acceptable behavior are. For example, your advisor may be crediting your work appropriately according to standards in your field while you may feel it is being "stolen." You can ask questions of other faculty members and graduate students, see whether your institution has formal policies and guidelines governing the relationship between advisors and students, consult publications of your professional association, and use library and Internet resources to understand how your experience fits into the general scheme of things. If you determine that you truly are being treated unfairly, it is usually better, although not risk-free, to seek fairer treatment, preferably with extreme deliberation and the guidance and support of a senior person who understands your department well.

Whatever your relationship with your advisor, it is helpful to have as many senior people as possible interested in your success. Take advantage of every opportunity to talk to and get to know other faculty members in your department. Ask them for opinions, perspective, and feedback in areas where you genuinely value their expertise. It is not necessary or desirable to think of this interaction in terms of flattery. Research enterprises flourish on the exchange of ideas. Don't hesitate to develop mentors at other institutions as well.

Your peers in the department offer another valuable source of perspective and lifelong contacts. Be realistic about the extent to which you will be competing with them in the job market; many candidates overestimate it. By and large, you have different strengths and interests. You will be far more successful if you exchange information and ideas with other students than if you avoid interaction for fear of somehow giving them a competitive edge. Beware, however, of becoming too involved in ex-
changing job-hunt horror stories. Every department has its share; some are apocryphal, and overindulgence in listening to and recounting them blurs your perspective.

The farther along you are in your academic career, the more important it is that you have established an independent network of colleagues and peers. If you are going on the market again several years after earning your final degree, some of your most important recommendations may come from outside your degree-granting department. However, if you've lost touch with faculty members there, before you begin a search is a good time to reconnect.

**Professional Associations**

Ideally, even in the early years of graduate study, you have begun to develop membership in professional networks that extend beyond your department and university. Whatever your field, there is at least one, if not several, scholarly or professional associations devoted to the exchange of ideas. Conferences, electronic discussion lists and newsgroups, publications, and local and regional meetings are the most common means of exchange. Because of the importance of these organizations, they will be referred to again and again throughout this handbook. If you don't know those that are important in your field, ask faculty members in your department.

Calls for papers are probably posted in your department, announced through print and electronic vehicles of your scholarly association, and listed in additional scholarly resources on the Internet. You can also consult the "Deadlines" section of The Chronicle of Higher Education for such notices. If you feel that publications in major journals or presentations at national conventions are slightly beyond your reach at this point, look for regional or local meetings of national organizations and respectable but less prestigious journals. Attend as many presentations as you can. In addition to learning and gaining ideas from the material presented, you can see how others present their work and form your own conclusions about the most effective way to communicate ideas.

**Individual Contacts**

If you are interested in the work of someone at another institution, whether you learn of it through a conference, a publication, or word of mouth, it is appropriate to approach that person, by phone, mail, or e-mail, for a further exchange of ideas. Share your comments; send a copy of a related paper or a reprint of an article you wrote. Ask questions. Suggest a meeting at a conference you both will be attending. It goes without saying that your comments and questions should be sincere and intelligent. Given that, however, by taking the initiative you greatly expand the range of intellectual resources upon which you can draw and develop a broad network of professional contacts with whom you can remain in touch throughout your career.

In between meetings, many electronic listservs and newsgroups function as ongoing professional forums with conversation similar to what may be found in the breaks between presentations at conferences. Your thoughtful participation in relevant groups gives you an opportunity to cause a large number of people to recognize your name in a positive way, not a bad thing when you consider that yours may be one of hundreds in a pile of applications.

As for years reputations have been made by work people publish, so can they be made or destroyed by communications posted to the Internet. The Internet is faster. Journal referees will prevent you from publishing anything that is libelous, outrageous, or just plain stupid. The Internet offers no such protection. When you communicate on the Net, consider that your potential audience is literally worldwide, that you reach it instantly, and that your communication is probably archived. Look yourself up on a powerful search engine to see what potential employers may already know about you. You may also have concern for not precipitously putting out work that you later plan to publish, given how easy it is to appropriate material from the Web. Include a copyright statement on all documents you post.

Observers of people's responses to electronic communication have frequently noted that it tends to flow across normal hierarchical boundaries. If you find even very senior individuals who actively contribute to electronic newsgroups or who are avid users of electronic mail, you may find this a comfortable way to communicate with them, particularly after you have taken the time to become familiar with their work.

You impoverish your own work if you do not take advantage of the multiplicity of forums for the exchange of ideas and of the personal give-and-take that turns a good piece of work into an excellent one. While you should not do so for this reason alone, as you establish your own network of communication, you also expand the range of people who are interested in your success in the job market.
At some point in the screening process for nearly every job, and frequently as part of your initial application, you will be asked to ensure that letters supporting your candidacy reach the hiring department. The number requested varies, but three is typical. Since letters require the cooperation of others, allow yourself plenty of time to obtain them.

Choosing Your Recommenders and Asking for Letters

The choice of recommenders is important and merits careful thought. Your dissertation advisor, of course, and anyone else with whom you have worked closely will be your first and second letter writers. In choosing additional recommenders find someone who can talk about your teaching as well as a senior researcher in your field. Most of your letters will probably be from your own department, but it is also acceptable to ask for letters from scholars outside your institution, if they are very familiar with your work.

Of course it is helpful to have a letter from someone who is widely known in your field, but do not ask people to write on your behalf unless they really know your work. If you are applying for postdocs or for positions at top research institutions, letters will primarily speak to your strength as a researcher.

If you are applying for jobs that emphasize teaching, you will probably see some ads that require “evidence of excellence in teaching.” Faculty generally agree that letters from students you have taught are not convincing on their own. One way to respond to this type of request is to ask the recommender who knows your teaching best to write a letter addressing your teaching. Give this person copies of student evaluations of your teaching, if you have them. He or she can incorporate overall numeric standings (perhaps giving a context for them, such as the departmental and school average scores), quotes from students’ comments, and his or her own assessment based on first-hand observation.

In some professional fields, such as business and architecture, a letter from a former employer or consulting client may be helpful, especially for a school that values interaction with practitioners.

Ask for letters as much in advance as possible. Faculty members receive many requests for them. Phrase your request in such a way that if someone does not feel comfortable writing for you, he or she can gracefully decline. A tactful approach might be, “I'd appreciate a recommendation from you if you feel you know my work well enough to recommend me.” If there is someone who must serve as a recommender, such as an advisor, about whose opinion of your work you are in doubt, you may want to ask that person to discuss with you frankly the types of institutions for which he or she can enthusiastically support your candidacy.

While you should never take for granted that someone will recommend you with enthusiasm, don't feel you are imposing on faculty by asking them to be recommenders. The success of its students in the job market is one of the ways by which a graduate department is evaluated, and advisors with highly successful students enhance their own reputations. Therefore, when someone can honestly write a strong recommendation for you, it's in that person's interest to do so.

Discuss your plans with those who agree to write for you. Recommendations are most effective when they describe you as well-suited to a particular goal. If appropriate, remind the person who will recommend you of your work and experience. Provide him or her with your vita, a copy of a paper you wrote, a dissertation chapter, a statement of your research goals, or anything else that would be helpful.

Phone Calls

Sometimes a search committee, seeking what they feel will be a more candid evaluation, will call one or more of your recommenders. This is particularly likely to be the case when the recommender is known to someone at the hiring institution. Since letters of recommendation are almost uniformly positive, a spontaneous enthusiastic response to a potential employer's phone call is very helpful to you.

On the other hand, if the person who is called is totally surprised that you are applying to the institution that is calling, the call probably does not help your case. Thus, it is very important to keep recommenders apprised of every step of your job search. You can ask them to reassure those who call about any aspects of your candidacy that you believe schools may find problematic. For example, if you are married to someone who is gen-
unequely willing to move to the location where you take a job, your recommender can reinforce your statement that this is true if an employer raises the subject. (While such inquiries on the part of an employer are not legal, they certainly can occur.)

Also be aware that people whose names you have not given as recommenders may be called or e-mailed “off the record” by someone on a search committee. This is particularly likely to be the case if you’ve obviously worked closely with someone well known to a person in the hiring department. So if there’s someone with whom you’ve worked closely whose name you are not giving as a reference, pay as much attention to that relationship as you do to those with your official recommenders.

Handling Negative Evaluations

Unfortunately, sometimes the difficult situation arises in which someone who would normally be expected to be supportive of your job search, such as an advisor, is not. Perhaps he or she is disappointed by the goals you have set, or believes they are unrealistic. Perhaps he or she genuinely does not believe you are as strong as other advisees in the past and does not want to compromise a reputation by giving you a recommendation stronger than he or she believes you deserve. Perhaps the person is retaliating for your resistance to some form of harassment. Perhaps you are merely the victim of hostility generated in another area of the person’s life.

Whatever the cause, this situation is always difficult. Most likely you hear of it from someone else who reports to you what has been said in a letter or conversation. Perhaps you feel (rightly or wrongly) that, where you might expect to find support, you are encountering an obstacle. Several approaches are available to you, none totally risk-free, but all, on balance, more likely to be productive than is suffering in silence.

Direct Conversation

If you are dealing with a reasonable person who honestly does not think highly of your abilities, at least in relation to the arena in which you have chosen to compete, direct conversation may be productive. For example, you might begin by saying, “I know that you think I’m overreaching in some of my applications. Could you give me examples of institutions for which you could honestly be supportive of my candidacy?” It is helpful for you to remind yourself that no one has an obligation to strongly recommend a candidate against his or her better judgment. Even if the person’s assessment of you is incorrect, he or she does have the right to an opinion.

Advice

If you can find a knowledgeable person of whom to ask advice, it can be very helpful. In choosing someone in whom to confide, consider that person’s judgment, experience, and willingness to keep your communication confidential. Individuals outside your department may be particularly helpful in the latter regard. Counselors in university counseling offices and career centers have a professional obligation to keep conversations confidential. So do campus ombudsmen, affirmative action officers, and staff members of other organizations, such as women’s centers, chartered to protect the interests of members of a particular group. However, only personal counselors are legally able to hold reports of sexual harassment in confidence.

While such professionals may make a good sounding board, they are unlikely to know enough about the personalities of people in your department to be able to give you very specific advice. Another faculty member in the department is in the best position to suggest how you may strengthen your position with whoever is obstructing your search or, on occasion, to tactfully intervene. Also consider your dean’s office. Frequently, it is structured so that an associate dean is responsible for graduate education. A good associate dean is a great place to start when a student has a real problem with an advisor. He or she will know the personalities of the people in the department and the standards and dynamics of the school, and may be helpful if he or she also has a reputation for keeping conversations in confidence.

Intervention

The best antidote to a negative or lukewarm evaluation is a positive one. Those who strongly support your candidacy can write particularly enthusiastic letters or make phone calls on your behalf. Conceivably they can, if willing, suggest to hiring institutions that one of your recommenders is misjudging you. However, be extremely careful about an offer to do this on your behalf. Often any attempt to contradict criticism merely strengthens the hiring committee’s impression that there must be something behind the controversy.

It is usually safer for your advocates merely to express enthusiasm for your candidacy, leaving employers free to form their own conclusions. Recommendations from those outside your department who know your work can be particularly helpful in this regard, as they obviously represent a different perspective.
Campus Credentials Services

Your campus career center may offer you the valuable opportunity to keep a file of letters of recommendation which you can update easily and which are always immediately available. If it is the policy of your department to write new letters for each job a student applies for, you may want to have at least a backup file with the credentials service. Faculty go on sabbatical, get sick, or become extra busy and are not available to write customized letters for every job.

If you maintain a file of letters of recommendation, federal law gives you the option of maintaining nonconfidential letters to which you may have access. Generally these letters are not considered as credible as confidential ones.

Choosing the Recommendations to Send with an Application

Whatever you place on file, strengthen your presentation for a job by sending recommendations selectively. Even if your file contains many recommendations, don’t send them all. Three or four strong letters are usually all you need. You may choose different subsets of recommendations depending upon the job’s requirements.

Chapter 8

Learning About Openings

Once you have decided what kinds of jobs to pursue, there are several resources you can use to ensure that you learn about all the opportunities that might interest you.

Scholarly Associations

Every discipline has a scholarly association that serves its members in many ways. The association functions as the recorder and critic of scholarship in the discipline by producing one or more scholarly journals of refereed articles. It normally also holds a conference, usually on an annual basis, where the most recent research in the field is presented. There are many forms of conference presentation. Individual scholars, both Ph.D.s and advanced graduate students, present papers they have prepared for the conference; groups of scholars participate in panel discussions; and individuals or research teams participate in poster sessions or other small group discussions of their work. Such conferences or conventions provide an opportunity for formal and informal communication on research and are crucial for keeping the discipline dynamic. Scholarly associations also provide several job-related services.

Job Listings

Sometimes as part of a journal, but more often as a separate bulletin and on a Web site, most scholarly associations regularly publish a listing of postdoctoral and tenure-track academic job openings. When an academic department has an opening, it is customary to advertise the position in an association job bank, in print or online. The institution pays the association a fee to place the advertisement.

In many cases, the job listings are available to members only. However,