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Issue: Sept 2002

Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics*



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On the Market: Strategies for the Successful Job Candidate*

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After debating whether to go on the job market, I finally decided to make that move. After only four years of graduate school, I knew that I was hitting the market early. Still, members of my committee were confident that I would obtain my doctorate in time to assume an academic position the following year. After all, I had taken my preliminary exams, written and defended my prospectus, as well as completed the last of my coursework in one single semester. Did I really need the time off? My committee had faith in me. Why shouldn't I? Hence, I began by gathering my teaching evaluations, drafting my job letter, updating my curriculum vita, and searching for job announcements in hopes of securing an academic position before the end of my fifth year. In this article I describe that process. I offer practical and sound advice about developing a dossier that will get job candidates noticed, including suggestions for both the telephone and campus interviews.

Since the on the market experience has much to do with the credentials of candidates, I will start by telling you a little about myself. I am an African-American woman who graduated from Purdue University in 2001 with a Ph.D. in Political Science. My research areas include African-American public opinion and political behavior, black feminist thought and critical race theory, survey research, and quantitative methodology. I have strong preparation in quantitative techniques and data analysis, which makes me especially well qualified to teach quantitative methods. My dissertation, *Black Feminist Consciousness: An Empirical Analysis of the Simultaneous Effects of Race and Gender on Political Behavior*, uses several methodological approaches to construct a full measure of black feminist consciousness and to explore its development among African-American women and men. Besides this,

I am the recipient of numerous awards, fellowships, and grants. Having taught an introductory course for American politics and African-American political history, I had developed a curriculum, written and delivered lectures, and prepared and graded exams. My teaching evaluations indicate that I display a clear understanding of course topics, exhibit enthusiasm when teaching, motivate my students to do their best work, and promote a classroom environment where students feel free to express their views. Finally, I had presented papers at five conferences, received two best-paper awards, and published a book review in *Social Science Quarterly*.

I decided early that I would apply to both large research universities and small liberal arts colleges. While I had a preference for the South, to be closer to my immediate family, I applied to schools across the United States. In addition, I applied for several postdoctoral and visiting-professor appointments, as well as the APSA Congressional Fellowship Program. I was particularly interested in minority-politics positions, and job descriptions indicating a specialty in race or gender politics. I frequently reviewed the *Personnel Service Newsletter* and *E-Jobs* as well as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Black Issues in Higher Education*. I searched for jobs in political science, African-American studies, and women's studies, because appointments are sometimes split between disciplinary department and academic program.

Even before applying for jobs, I had my advisors look over my curriculum vita. Prior to updating my vita, I searched the Internet for examples. I visited the web sites of those political science departments that featured their placement candidates, namely The Ohio State University and University of Michigan. The standard vita highlighted the candidate's educational background citing degrees earned and the years in which they were received, and included the title and abstract of the dissertation. The advisor and other members of the committee were noted. While most candidates had presented at conferences and acquired teaching experience, few had more than one or two book chapters or articles in press. Even fewer had

received research grants and academic awards. Service seemed to be null and void.

Once I revised my vita, I began writing the job letter. Again, members of my committee read the job letter and provided their comments. In the introductory paragraph, I identified myself as a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Purdue University, expecting to defend my dissertation in the spring of 2001. I proceeded to mention that my dissertation research, other graduate training, and research experiences had prepared me to teach and conduct research in specific subfields within the discipline. In the subsequent paragraph I discussed in detail my dissertation research, both in terms of substance and methods. I followed with a paragraph discussing my teaching experiences and courses taught. Here, I also mentioned those more specialized courses that I wanted to teach (e.g., women and politics, black feminist thought, and African-American politics). I ended with a clear statement of my teaching philosophy and commitment to service, emphasizing my record of academic, professional, and community service that extended beyond the classroom.

After I completed the job letter and curriculum vita, I began to work on my teaching portfolio. It contained a statement of my teaching philosophy, sample syllabi, a statistical summary of teaching evaluations, and selected student comments. My statement of teaching philosophy discussed the various pedagogical strategies I employ. In the classroom, I ask questions challenging students to think independently and critically about the various reading assignments. Ideas are openly discussed and debated so that people might choose which ones they will endorse or reject. My exams contain essay questions that ask for evaluations that must be supported with evidence or examples. I believe essay questions to be most valuable to students because they encourage them to engage in higher thinking. Thus, I attached excerpts from exams authored by my former students. My sample syllabi came from courses I had already taught and those I would consider teaching in the future. With regard to teaching

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evaluations, I provided a statistical summary with a note explaining both the scale and mean, assuming that no one would bother to read the actual surveys with written student opinions.

In December 2000 came my first telephone interview with a small, Southern liberal arts college. The job advertisement appeared in the *Personnel Service Newsletter*, and the deadline for applications was late August. Hence, it had taken the department several months to decide on a short list. The department chair called around 11:40 A.M. on a Monday to speak with me directly, and immediately asked if I were still interested in the position. Having only one campus interview scheduled at this time, I responded affirmatively. We scheduled the telephone interview for 11:30 A.M. on a Wednesday with as many as five faculty members.

In preparation for the telephone interview, I located the actual job announcement and downloaded the department's web site. Then, I became familiar with the names of individual faculty and their research interests. Next, I drafted a list of questions that I expected faculty at a small, liberal arts college to ask about my teaching philosophy, dissertation research, graduate training, and courses taught (e.g., What is your dream course? How do you motivate your students? How do you feel about your role as a mentor and advisor to students?). Finally, I drafted a list of questions that I would expect the faculty to answer about their department, students, tenure, and promotion (e.g., How would you describe your students? What is the teaching load? How is teaching/research evaluated? Is there a teacher-training program? How large are typical classes?).

In January 2001 came my first campus interview with a large research university in the Northeast. Its job announcement also appeared in the *Personnel Service Newsletter*, and its deadline for applications was October 16. Prior to the campus interview, I asked that my job talk be scheduled early in the visit. I inquired about the time allotted for my talk (30–40 minutes) and my audience (faculty and graduate students). Then, I asked whether a teaching demonstration would be expected on my part. The answer was no. Since this was an African-American politics position, I requested that I be taken to the African-American Cultural Center in order to speak with the director and perhaps get a sense of campus climate for racial minorities. I also requested to meet and speak with

faculty of color. All of these requests were met. I was particularly impressed with the department's ability to recruit a number of African-American faculty willing to attend my job talk and meet with me informally during my visit.

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In preparation for the campus interview, I located the actual job announcement and I downloaded the department's web site. I became familiar with the names of individual faculty members and their research interests. I drafted a list of questions that I expected faculty at a research university to ask about my teaching philosophy, dissertation research, graduate training, and courses taught (e.g., What are your future research plans? What contribution does your dissertation make to the field? Where do you intend to publish your work?). I drafted another list of questions that I expected the faculty at this research university to answer about the department, students, tenure, and promotion (e.g., Would I be teaching primarily undergraduates or graduate students? What are the requirements for tenure and promotion? Is there money available for research?). Finally, I gave a practice job talk that was attended by faculty and graduate students from my department.

The practice job talk was an invaluable experience. I was carefully instructed on how to present important hypotheses and data more effectively, persuade my audience that the arguments and evidence presented were innovative, and keep observers interested and engaged in the topic. The specialists and individuals present at this practice job talk asked me a mix of questions that ranged in difficulty, which prepared me for questions raised at campus interviews. Above all, I knew that it would be important for me to exhibit confidence and poise in delivery, avoiding the look of being the least bit flustered or frustrated. This meant that I would talk rather than read, stand up as opposed to sit down, move around versus stand still, vary the pitch of my voice and avoid the sleep-inducing monotone, maintain eye contact at all times, and finish within the time allowed.

Before the end of my on-the-market experience, I had been interviewed by three research universities that ranged in location from the Northeast to the South, as well as the aforementioned small, Southern liberal arts college. Each interview had been for a tenure-track position as an assistant professor. While I anxiously awaited a phone call with their respective decisions, I was offered a post-doc from a major research university as well as an interview with the Congressional Fellowship Program. In the end, I was put in a position where I had to turn down the post-doc and accept a tenure-track position.

The next phase of this experience involved negotiation. I was determined to negotiate hard. I have a personal rule of never accepting the first offer when offers are usually made on the assumption that negotiation will occur. Thus, I began gathering information. First, I found out the salary range for those assistant professors working at the university by contacting their human relations department and inquiring about the salary for the average assistant professor. Second, I found out the salary range for those assistant professors working in the actual department by contacting the reference desk at their library. Third, I assessed the cost of living. Fourth, I came up with a list of "perks" I had planned to ask for and provided my major advisor with a copy. He indicated what items on this list were acceptable and gave me solid advice on how to frame the discussion. Finally, I drafted the script and rehearsed the part.

Of course, I started out by expressing enthusiasm for the position. To break the ice, I posed a few general questions about health care, retirement, and housing. Then I inquired about salary. While I maintained a professional demeanor, I was firm and deliberate in my inquiry about various forms of compensation. My major advisor had been instrumental in coaching me. I was to ask for a higher salary, request a book budget, a reduced teaching load, summer stipend, and new computer, among other things. I was instructed on how to justify my requests. While one advisor cautioned me and warned me not to ask for too much, I figured the worst thing I could be told was no. Since I had been told that women and people of color are less likely to negotiate, I was determined to negotiate so as not to put myself at a professional disadvantage. Needless to say, things worked out for me.

I conclude with some simple advice. Hit the market early when the Ph.D. is

certain and when you see a job that has your name written on it. While I was reluctant at first, I completed four chapters within three to four months, surpassing my own expectations. My dissertation committee proved to know me better than I knew myself. I graduated in August 2001 with the doctorate in political science, just in time to start the next phase of my life as an assistant professor.

As a candidate on the academic job market, register with E-Jobs placement service sometime in the middle of June. This APSA-sponsored placement service available on line is specifically designed for employers and candidates to learn about and communicate with each other before traveling to APSA's Annual Meeting. Candidates can review all relevant information (including starting salary, appointment range, and areas of

specialty) about available jobs at no cost. The service is free to first-time candidates who register for the meeting and complete the placement registration form, which asks that candidates provide details about their education, training, professional experience, special skills, and type of position desired. Without question, it was a great service to me as I embarked upon the academic job market.

Note

*I would like to thank Rosalee A. Clawson and Manjusha Gupte for encouraging me to write this article. I would also like to thank

Rosalee A. Clawson, James A. McCann, and William R. Shaffer for their "on the market" advice.