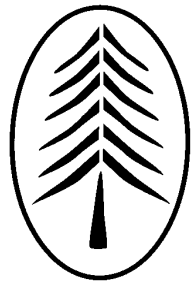


Applying for an Academic Position



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Applying for an Academic Position

Roger Sloboda, Dean of Graduate Studies and Mikki Hebl, (recently hired) Assistant Professor of Psychology at Rice University offer their advice on applying for an academic position.

Roger Sloboda's notes on job searching:

Here are the general steps the bio dept at Dartmouth takes when conducting a search in the area of cell and molecular biology. Note, though, that each search committee is a new entity and could, therefore, change the way things operate from that outlined here. But this will at least provide you with a feel for the way we have done things in the recent past.

I. An ad for the position is placed in *Science* and perhaps *Cell* early in the fall, around the beginning of October.

The aim here is to announce the position early, so that the screening of applications can be completed before the end of the year and people can be invited for interviews starting in early January. Because the fall term begins around the third week in September, the faculty meeting at which the text of the advertisement is discussed and agreed upon by the department does not normally occur before the end of September (usually, permission from the Dean of Faculty to conduct the search has been granted sometime prior to this, usually the spring or summer). The job ad will likely say something like “application review will begin on 1 November and continue until the position is filled.” The reason it is worded this way and not, for example, as “applications must be received by 1 November” or something similar is that by the rules under which we operate the latter format does not allow us to look at any applications that are not complete by the rigid deadline of 1 November. At least, that is how Dartmouth operates. Other schools may not work this way. So if you see a job ad you are interested in after a rigid ‘application due’ deadline, you could simply send in an application anyway, or at least call to see if applications are still being accepted.

For a given job in cell and molecular biology at the beginning assistant professor level, the bio dept receives about 350 applications. The job ad will ask for a CV, publications, names of at least three references (but no letters at this point), a statement of past and future research interests, and a statement of teaching interests. Of these, roughly 50% are non competitive from the start: the non-competitive applications are guilty of one or more of the following:

- a. too senior for the job
- b. absolutely no background for the job
- c. no track record in research
- d. no postdoc experience (we require two years minimum)

- e. no continuity in career (unexplained gaps in cv between bachelors and present)

II. Initial screen of applications takes place

The initial screen will begin on the date indicated in the ad, in the example above this would be 1 November. The applications are reviewed in groups of about 50 at a time, and this can take anywhere from two to three weeks, depending on the time the committee members have to devote to the process. With the rolling deadline, new applications are arriving (they are numbered in order of receipt and reviewed in that order) while the committee begins to review those already on file. Thus, the review may start with 150 applications on file, and by the time the first read through has occurred, this number will reach about 350. Surprisingly, applications can continue to dribble in for months. After a while, say by early December for a 1 November review start, we stop looking at applications, the assumption being that those really interested will have applied by then.

This initial review includes a read through of each application by at least two committee members who must concur on the disposition of the application. If not, it is discussed by the whole committee. The readers are looking to see that the application is in fact commensurate with our requirements, in the broadest possible sense. That is, if the job is to teach biochemistry, then the applicant must have had at least a biochemistry course as an undergraduate, and must be doing research that can be broadly classified in this area. At this stage of the review this could include a lot of areas of biology. For example, a person working on mitosis or protein targeting or characterizing the activity of an enzyme all might be considered capable of teaching biochemistry at this stage. Those that clearly are not capable for obvious reasons are removed from the pool at this stage.

III. Rescreen of applicants with respect to area of research

Now, the entire committee looks more closely at each remaining application and, based on the research background of the individual, decides whether to keep the application or reject it. Parameters for this decision will include (but may not be limited to) the following:

- a. is the research intellectually interesting?
- b. is the research complimentary to that ongoing in our department in particular or Dartmouth in general?
- c. is the research topic of sufficient novelty and originality that it can attract outside funding?
- d. does the project have enough to it that it can involve graduate students in long term thesis projects and undergraduates in relatively shorter term projects?
- e. do the techniques the applicant has familiarity with compliment existing faculty and bring new expertise to Dartmouth?

An application need not meet all these criteria, although it must meet 'some' and 'some' in this instance is difficult to quantify. It depends a bit on the way the committee's discussion goes. The committee need not be unanimous at this stage. If a few people want to keep an application alive, it is given the benefit of the doubt. This stage usually brings the number of

applications to about 50, and now the chair of the committee will send letters to each applicant's references asking for detailed letters of recommendation.

IV. Next, the pool is narrowed down to 20-25 applicants

At this stage of the review, the information included in the letters is now considered, and also, perhaps as importantly, personal interests on the part of committee members can come into play. Who would make the best colleague for me? For simplicity, let's say there are now 48 still active applications. Each committee member will review all 48, assigning a score of 1, 2, or 3 to each application, three being the worst, one the best. In addition, each committee member is only allowed to vote 16 one's, 16 two's and 16 three's, and no fractional numbers (2.5, 1.5, etc.) are allowed. These votes are submitted to the department secretary before the next meeting of the committee, who enters them into an Excel spreadsheet and totals the score for each applicant. The job at this stage is to narrow the pool to about 20-25 applications. This is done by taking the top (i. e. least scoring) applications down to the required number. But all applicants are discussed individually. If someone voted a 1 and no one else did, the committee will discuss why the person gave so-and-so a one etc. Similarly, if someone got all 1's and a 3, the same discussion will take place. At the end of this meeting, let's say the pool is down to 24.

V. The committee asks for general comments from any interested department members

Now the other members of the department are actively invited to review the folders (department members are free to do this really at any stage of the process, but it is at this point that the committee meets with any other interested faculty to get their input). The committee is usually composed of 5-6 members, and so inviting other interested faculty (i. e. those in the same area of the department as the appointment, e. g. cell and molecular biology, about which I am speaking here) usually increases this number to about 8-9. The 1, 2, 3 vote occurs again, and each person votes eight 1's, eight 2's, etc. which are tabulated, and then the candidates are discussed again, this time by the 'expanded' committee. Sometimes a half dozen applications rise clearly to the top (i. e. they receive scores of about 10 or so). Other times, the outcome is not so clear. In these cases, the discussion gets very precise, and the +/- of each candidate is discussed until some consensus arises as to the application's disposition. Perhaps the publication record might have looked strong to the committee initially, but a faculty member who knows the field will indicate something, based on his/her knowledge, that the committee did not notice, and this will decide the fate of the application.

At this meeting (and sometimes it takes 2-3 such meetings) the group tries to narrow the field to 6-7 interviewees and 2-3 alternates. When the top 6-7 have been identified, the list has to be approved by both the Affirmative Action Officer of the College and by the Associate Dean of Faculty for the Sciences. Once approved, the candidates are called in December and invited to campus for an interview.

VI. The interview

Interviews are scheduled for the month of January. Candidates arrive the afternoon/evening of one day, and then spend the next 1.5 days interviewing. Thus, they arrive Sunday for a Monday/Tuesday visit and leave Tuesday or they arrive Wednesday for a Thursday/Friday visit, and leave Friday. The interview includes:

- a. breakfast with perhaps the search committee chair
- b. 45 minute meetings throughout the day with faculty members
- c. a research seminar, usually at noon of the first day
- d. dinner with the search committee
- e. a 'chalk talk' the following morning with just the faculty, at which the candidate presents his/her thoughts on his/her research program and responds to questions
- f. lunch with the graduate students
- g. somewhere in here is a meeting with the chair about lab space, renovations, and teaching assignments
- h. also, there is a meeting with the associate dean for the sciences, who discusses salary, fringe benefits, startup money, etc.

Each candidate is given their schedule and information about the graduate program, the College, and Hanover prior to their trip. Thus, they will have had the opportunity to and indeed should have done a little homework about the people they will be meeting.

During the interview, the department tries to assess whether the candidate will be a good teacher (was the seminar great or just so-so), will be a good colleague (was he/she interested in my work, offering ideas, comments, and suggestions, etc. during our talk), and will have a research program that is vigorous and alive (were the ideas at the chalk talk tractable, fundable, publishable, etc.).

VII. The decision

Next the search committee meets after all the candidates have been interviewed and tries to decide the best person. Even at this stage some candidates shoot themselves in the foot. Obvious red flags are arrogance, and inability to explain their work, a poor seminar, an indication that they will teach, but are really not looking forward to it, etc. It is the job of the committee to make a recommendation to the department, who then votes on that recommendation. Thus the committee will come to the department prepared to tell the department why we should hire this candidate, and why we should not hire those candidates.

VIII. The offer

The choice of the department then again has to be approved by the Affirmative Action Officer and by the Associate Dean of Faculty for the Sciences. At Dartmouth, it is the Associate Dean who actually makes the offer, although the department chair will call the candidate and tell him/her that he/she will be getting an official call from the Associate Dean. The Associate Dean will, in a phone conversation followed by a letter, set out the salary and fringe benefits the candidate will receive, and indicate that teaching will be commensurate with normal department

duties. The actual teaching assignment is done by the chair. In our department, the senior faculty do most of the teaching for the first year or two in the courses a new hire is assigned so as to give the person a chance to get their lab and research up and running, research grants written, etc. The Associate Dean will also ask the candidate for a list of things required to get their lab up and running (equipment, supplies, etc.) and based on this and the money available will provide what are called 'start up' funds. These funds are perhaps the most important part of a job offer in the sciences (salary and fringe benefits are more or less fixed here at Dartmouth, and there is not too much negotiation that goes on, certainly with fringe benefits, and only perhaps a wee bit [a thousand or two] with salary), and so perhaps a few words about start up funds are in order here.

A word about start up funds: In the sciences, these are provided to start up a lab. At Dartmouth, the going rate in cell and molecular biology is about \$250,000, which is VERY competitive nationally. This money can be used for equipment, supplies, salaries, computers, graduate stipends, etc. In addition, Dartmouth provides a new lab fully renovated to the candidate's specifications. For a 1000-1200 square foot lab, this can amount to an additional cost of about \$200 per square foot, thus making the actual 'investment' by Dartmouth in a new hire of about a half a million dollars. But beware. At Dartmouth, you would have complete control over how those startup funds are expended and how your lab is renovated. This is not true at other places, and so you should be absolutely sure of the details. For example, you might only be allowed to use the funds to buy equipment (not supplies or technician salaries), or perhaps you may have to use a considerable portion of your startup funds to renovate your lab space. Still other places may require the chair's approval of any expenditures, and the chair may only want you purchasing large items of equipment that benefit the entire department (like an autoclave or a glassware washer, etc.). So, be sure you know the details of the start-up funds and the rules governing their expenditure (is the start up account good for three years, like it is at Dartmouth, or only one year, or perhaps only six months?).

Now, back to the offer. The letter from the Associate Dean will not come until you have submitted your start-up requirements, as the amount being provided will be included in the letter. The letter will also have a time frame for response of about two weeks. This is highly flexible depending on a few things. In our department, we compete with the big gun universities for the people we want to hire. More often than not, a candidate will call the chair and say something to the effect like "I have a few more interviews to go on before I can decide" or "I'm waiting to hear from MIT and Stanford before I can decide." If we really, really want this person, AND if we want the person more than any of the other candidates we interviewed, we will let the deadline slide. However, if our second choice was almost equal to our first choice, and we are afraid that if we wait too long we may lose not only our first choice but also our second, and perhaps even our third, we may say "sorry, the deadline is firm," and if the person does not respond to it, we then go to the next on the list.

Finally, in our department, after we decide on the person whom we wish to hire, we almost always offer them the option of coming back to Dartmouth for a second visit, bringing spouse, significant other, and children etc. This is done at department expense and is a recruiting tool that we employ because first impressions sometimes get reinforced (or, if the weather were particularly bad during the interview, first impressions of Dartmouth can get corrected!). All this

(second visit, start up give and take, etc.), letting the deadline slide, etc. can often (and usually does) extend things into early April before a final acceptance of an offer is made. Once, things went until late May. This is why we find it essential that we begin the process as early as possible in the fall.

Advice on getting an academic position.

Mikki Hebl, Ph.D., Dartmouth College, 1997.

Mikki Hebl is a native of Pardeeville, Wisconsin. She received her B.A. from Smith College in 1991, her M.S. in psychology from Texas A&M University in 1993, and her Ph.D. in psychology from Dartmouth College in 1997. During the 1997-1998 year, she remained at Dartmouth College as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department.

Over a three-month period, Mikki applied to over 100 academic jobs in the U.S. and in European countries. These jobs ranged from small colleges to big universities, and from small psychology departments to sociology departments to business schools.

She received job offers at both her #1 choice (Davidson College in Davidson, NC), and her #2 choice (Rice University in Houston, TX), and turned down interviews and offers at other places. She eventually chose to accept the job at Rice University and will begin this fall as a professor in their Industrial/Organizational Psychology Program.

Mikki offers firsthand advice on getting the (academic) job you always dreamed of and she have organized them into five main points:

I. Apply Widely.

You will need to submit four documents for any faculty position: 1) Cover Letter
2) Curriculum Vitae 3) Statement of your teaching philosophy 4) Description of your research interests.

Most openings in academics received on the order of 100-400 applications. You are trying to be that one individual out of 100+. The more applications you send out, the better your chances are of being that one, at least at some school.

Don't be overly discriminatory. Don't be overly discriminatory in where you are applying, particularly if this discrimination is based on the name game only or some half-baked notion that you probably wouldn't like the school since you haven't heard too much about it or don't really like the state or region in which it is located. That is, don't turn up your nose at schools because they are not Ivy League schools or maybe Big-Ten schools, because they are in Wisconsin and "who would want to live in the Midwest?", or because they are not on your top 25 lists of places to which you would like to go. Apply to the jobs that are being advertised. Go on the interviews at as many places as you can. You may find that the perfect job is awaiting you at a place you never considered before. And, even if the job is not perfect, you at least got interview practice,

know better what to expect at places you do want, and can always turn down the offer should you get it.

Take a chance if the job description isn't exactly you. If you read a job description and it doesn't quite fit what you do but you love the department, the school, or the area, apply anyway. Often times, there is a good 5-8 months that go by between the time that the school offers the position and the time that the school makes a hire. During this period, sometimes needs change. In addition, if your candidacy is impressive enough and the department has some leeway, they may alter the position to accommodate you. This doesn't always happen but it can. And it happened to me.

Market yourself. Be creative in marketing yourself for jobs that are not necessarily 100% what you do. For instance, I received my training in social psychology. I applied to business schools, organizational behavioral departments, social psychology positions, industrial/organizational positions, social cognitive positions, and general psychology positions. Again, you can always reject them if you decide in the end that the job does not suit you. But stretch yourself and cast yourself in new ways. This does NOT mean that you should lie about your experiences or stretch them in inaccurate ways; rather, it means that you should not be bound to viewing and selling yourself narrowly. Be open to seeing yourself in all the possible positions that you possibly can.

Nonacademic routes. Apply for non-academic jobs too. This is sometimes the harder course because it requires lots of initiative--you need to go out and market yourself even more rather than sitting and reading a list of potential academic listings. But do it. Just get out there and do it. See what's out there and what might interest you. Keep in mind that there are way too many good people trying to get way too few academic jobs. Consider the other possibilities by sending out job applications to a variety of settings.

Pure numbers. Finally, pure numbers helps your case. The more you apply to, the better your chances are for hearing from at least one place. I applied to 114 academic jobs. Most academicians I talked to thought that this was taking the job market quite seriously. But I wanted a job badly and I don't regret the time I spent applying to all those schools. Once you apply to a huge number and get your CV in order, get a few different versions of personal statements, get your reprints ready, etc., you will find that the cost and work of sending out an additional 20-30 applications is really not a major ordeal. The first 25 applications are the ordeal!

II. Use your contacts.

In academics, as in other careers and as in life in general, contacts can be extremely important and helpful. I realize this piece of advice sounds very obvious but I really believe that too few people actually use their contacts to the fullest. This does not mean bugging people unnecessarily or acting obnoxiously rather, it means inquiring and being an information seeker. Helping yourself out by getting in touch with those folks who can in turn, help you.

Your advisor and committee members. Find out where your advisor's closest mentors, friends, and students are...ask your committee members where their closest contacts are. Do they know of any positions that will be advertised in the near future? Do they have an "in" anywhere? Where did they get their degrees? Who thinks very positively of them and where are those folks situated?

Conferences. This is one of the very important reasons for going to conferences as a graduate student. Meet the people in your area. Talk to those people who have openings at their schools. Make yourself known. Obviously, this requires great tact -- those folks are at conferences to learn, present research, and see their academic friends. So they do not want to be weighed down by graduate students trying to find jobs; however, they do not mind being asked questions (particularly ones that show knowledge about the research program, school, etc.) so make the contact.

Write or call. During the process, if you learn that someone you know well or vaguely know is at the school to which you are applying, contact them. Get the lowdown or an insight that you can. Tell them, "you might not remember me but we met once at a conference," or "yes, we know each other through...so and so." I e-mailed a person after he did not show up at a conference and told him "I looked for you and could not find you--I really wanted to talk to you about your position." He e-mailed me back and we initiated a nice series of e-mail exchanges. I eventually interviewed at his school.

III. Once you get one offer, use that offer.

Call other schools. Once you get an offer in your hand, you can begin to call other schools and let them know that you are really interested in their position and would like to hear since you have an offer(s). This should be done with some care...the point of doing this is that you are in some way trying to differentiate yourself from the 100+ other applicants and one way of doing this is by letting them know you are a hot commodity. Other schools want you. And yet, you have an allegiance to the school you are calling and want them to know that. In this way, you are adding information that is positive to your file. I advise talking to the head of the search committee and not the secretary. I also advise using your offers carefully as it can backfire. Obviously you don't want to approach a big research university and let them know that you have a small teaching school job offer in your hand. And although you don't have to disclose to them where your offer is, they may ask, particularly if they indeed are interested in you.

Continue interviewing at other places. You probably will be restricted from visiting all schools to which interviews will be extended, particularly if you apply to such a wide number. However, try to go on as many interviews as you possibly can endure. To quote a cliché, you simply "do not know the book by the cover" and need to visit and try on places before ruling many of them in or out. So try to be discriminatory even after you have that first offer in hand. It is appropriate, of course, to be making mental lists of your top choices and these are the places you should call to let them know.

Do not irk folks. Let them know you are getting offers at other places but direct it in the context of, "I am telling you this because I am really interested in your school."

IV. Don't take rejection personally.

Try to remain light-hearted. Undoubtedly, if you apply to such a wide number of schools, you are going to get lots of rejections. Do NOT take it personally. I received over 75 rejection letters. Make a game of it. "Oh, today I got three rejection letters and let me decide which letter was the nicest rejection" or "Which of these schools would I like to reject back" or "Okay, my children will not be getting their education at those institutions." Take the whole thing lightly by remembering the number of talented people that are sending applicants in along with yours.

Remember the match is critical. Not only are they looking for someone in your general field (e.g., biology, psychology), but they are looking for a specialty within that field (e.g., marine biology, clinical psychology). And not only a specialty, but a specific line of research (e.g., aquatic marine life of the octopus, schizophrenia in brain-damaged populations). And not only are they looking for that, but they might also be in want of a person who brings a specific perspective, who has a very specific sort of training, who has a certain sort of personality, who will fit into the pre-existing structure, who can live in the academic community, etc... This is where luck comes into the equation. You have to believe that sooner or later, your match will come through. But don't take the mismatches to heart.

There is not a hierarchy of rejections. Just because a less competitive school rejected you does not mean that a very competitive school will do so too. Just because a big research university rejected you does not mean that a teaching liberal arts college will reject you. Just because one liberal arts college rejected you does not mean that another, very similar one will reject you also. There is no sense to be made of why some schools like you and some do not. Odd -- very odd -- things happen when search committees get together and begin to look through applications, trying to widdle 300 down to 5. And take heart, schools I have never heard of before the application process rejected me outright and yet, I received offers, interviews, and shortlist status's at places at which I NEVER dreamed I would be competitive.

V. If you don't find anything you really, really like, consider remaining at Dartmouth another year, doing a postdoc, or writing for a research grant.

This will give you the opportunity to take a shot at a whole new job market--each year, they greatly differ and the mismatches you experienced last year may be replaced with a lot of matches this year. You will have the opportunity to get more publications, spend a year thinking more clearly about what you want and how to get there, think about non-academic routes or possibilities, potentially get a little teaching experience (either at Dartmouth or in the area), and spend yet another year in the haven of Dartmouth College.

VI. Final free association of comments:

I really believe the cover letter makes a difference - explain WHY you are interested in their position and WHY you believe you would be a good match. Take time to write a really convincing personal statement that represents you well--but take time to adapt it to fit the

program as well...find the common links between what you hold to be self-evident and what the schools are looking for.

On the Interview - You are ALWAYS on. It's exhausting. Go to every interview that you can. Every one until you are exhausted or have accepted a position. Practice phone interviews. Get your friends to pick up on your annoying verbal ticks and habits and rid yourself of them. Practice questions, answers, and good eye contact. KNOW up front that you will screw up during your interview in some small or big way---do not worry about that--worry about how you bounce back. And bounce back.

If you desire to be at a teaching institution, consider putting together a **Teaching Portfolio**. Ask your advisors to let you guest lecture. Get students to fill out evaluations from your guest lecture. Use your laboratory mentoring experiences to frame your teaching experiences. Consider getting experience teaching. Info on teaching portfolios available at: Anker Publishing Company, Inc. 176 Ballville Road, P.O. Box 249, Bolton, MA, 01740.

Get lots of different advice from different sorts of people. You will develop your own opinions about applications, the job market, strategies for applying. It's like running a marathon--everyone has their own idea about how best to train. But get people's feedback and use it to create your own strategy.

Good luck. Finding a job is tough. But I believe what's even harder is knowing what you want to do. So if you know what you want to do, then the majority of your battle is already fought. Find that thing that lights you up and makes you work really hard and successfully.