

Thoughts on the Faculty Hiring Process for Illinois Graduate Students

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Fighting Illinni:

I am sorry not to be with you for this event. I would have enjoyed the experience and I am happy to try to be of help knowing full well that it was the help of many that I needed and received when I was in graduate school and finishing up.

Some long and some short answers to some of the questions I received.

What is the one thing you wish you had known when you first entered the job market for primarily undergraduate institutions.

I wish that I had had, at that point, more experience with being utterly devoted to teaching including having tried more innovative approaches in the classroom and with students that I could draw from in the interview and once I got the job. I knew that there was a greater focus on teaching in primarily UG institutions versus R1 Research Universities like Illinois and my alma mater, Purdue. However, knowing this as a simple fact and truly understanding and fully appreciating what this devotion to undergraduate teaching looked like was at that point beyond me. I had attended a huge state university (UCLA) as an undergraduate myself and so I did not have any experience with a small college or university.

The differences are profound. For example, I am hard pressed to name even a few of the professors I had as an undergraduate but I would venture to say that if you randomly selected an alumnae of either of the two liberal arts colleges where I have taught and worked (Wabash College and Monmouth College) forty years out I can guarantee they will be able to quickly name half of those they had and likely more. I had no professor more than once, yet at a small college it is common to have a professor in your major for 3, 4 and perhaps 5 courses. The sheer time and quality of the faculty student interaction has a profound impact. Of course some students still hide and resist the relationship and learning but most students do not.

I was not able to share, in the interview, much by way of innovative teaching techniques I had tried. I wish I could have shared several, those that worked and those that didn't and what I thought about each. I was prepared to talk about my research and scholarly projects and plans. While I was prepared to say "I have taught x, y, and z and I am ready to teach a, b, and c in addition) I was not ready to say much to demonstrate the seriousness with which I took teaching nor the reflection and learning I had done related to it.. I had taught mostly public speaking and I had not done much that was creative with it. I had been focused on the dissertation, which is understandable.

From your experience, what makes an application really stand out in a positive way or almost immediately be discarded?

Some of this is straightforward such as a completed degree is better than not and a candidate who can demonstrate they are close or have a realistic plan to finish by X date is stronger than one who does not.

Also realize that when they can search committees do use qualifications, particularly in the subfield, to differentiate candidates. Someone who has taught a course or more in the subfield is stronger than someone who has not. Someone who has published or presented a paper at a convention in the subfield is stronger than someone who has not. Some with relatively more teaching and scholarly experience is stronger than someone with less.

Where it gets interesting is when we imagine a pile of vitas with candidates who are roughly equal on these straightforward measures. And, as you might guess, here is where you can, with some work and reflection, help yourself a great deal. Getting an article published or teaching a course is typically a relatively long term prospect, meaning months. However, with a few hours spent searching a school and departmental website you can craft a significantly improved cover letter that could set you apart from the crowd. Don't forget the sage rule of attraction, "we like those who like us!" So, see if you can find aspects of the department or school that you genuinely like and then take some time to consider why that is so and how you can express that in a clear and concise manner. Note: Every sentence past two single spaced pages in a cover letter better be darn good! You might also find aspects of the school or department that you find interesting and would like to be a part of or learn from. Don't force it, but rather take the time to do the research and consider what you find interesting or valuable and explain why. If the school or department has invested into a particular general education program (like freshman seminars) or undergraduate research or internships then it is simply a fact that as they hire new faculty members they will need to have this in mind to insure the continuance of those ventures.

What experiences in graduate school best prepare individuals to be excellent candidates for teaching positions at undergraduate universities?

It is true that teaching several different courses is a plus. For one reason you never know when a committee might look at the list of courses you have taught and say, "hey, this person has also taught X course, that would help the year after next when Y colleague goes on sabbatical."

But, that said, I also believe the quality of the teaching experiences you have had and your ability to reflect on those experiences and describe them is important as well. This is where having tried various pedagogical approaches, attended seminars and workshops on teaching, and attempts at innovation come in. For ideas I would encourage you to watch for workshops on campus on teaching or conferences. Try to come away with a handful of ideas to try and see how they work for you.

How do you prepare for your first semester of teaching right after getting an academic position at an undergraduate institution, especially if you are teaching subjects you aren't terribly familiar with?

The first year of teaching at a new institution, if you do it well, is going to take nearly every minute of every day from you. Plan to focus completely on teaching and becoming a member of the community (e.g., attending lectures, some athletic events, workshops, etc.). Obviously, if you are still working on a dissertation, this will be difficult and tricky. If you can, plan to slow your pace on the dissertation enough to still do well in teaching and at least a bit of community time but obviously this is tricky because finishing the dissertation is absolutely critical as well.

With subjects you are unfamiliar with be sure to work with the chair on minimizing the number of these you have early on. I recall that during my first five years at Wabash I taught a new course nearly every semester for the first five years except for two of those semesters. That was invigorating, but difficult. I would try to avoid two new preps in the same semester at all costs!

What sort of path leads to a Dean position?

Like most pits of despair this one starts with a slight slip of the foot on the edge and then a fall and then an unstoppable slide to the bottom, a Dean's position!

Less sarcastically, it likely starts with good work on faculty committees, both inside and outside of one's department. Then a leadership role in a department like serving as chair. Then perhaps a broader role such as Director of an Honors program or a division.

How does one obtain tenure at these types of schools?

My experience and sense is that it involves the same elements at all good institutions; it is just that the balance is weighted one way or another. The elements are excellence in teaching, productivity in scholarship, and effectiveness in service.

Then at an R1 institution the scholarship part is the *sin qua non* and the other two are examined and important but subsidiary to scholarship. At undergraduate only institutions excellence in teaching is the *sin qua non*, some scholarship is required but the amount varies, and effectiveness in service and willingness to serve is required.