

APPLYING FOR A FACULTY POSITION

Searches for full-time faculty positions at North American colleges or universities frequently elicit fifty to two hundred applications. From that pool, institutions will usually invite three or four candidates to on-campus interviews. Of those finalists, one candidate will end up being hired, unless the search is canceled, postponed, reopened, or extended. In other words, even for positions where you are extremely well qualified, there is a very small chance that you will receive an interview, and an even slimmer chance that you'll be offered a contract. That is the reality of applying for an academic job today. But the picture is not as bleak as it seems. There are actually several ways of improving the odds that a search committee will give your application high priority and that you will be granted a telephone interview or even a chance to visit the campus as one of the finalists.

Decide Where to Apply

The first factor you should consider when applying for faculty positions is which specific positions to apply for. Many applicants are not selective. They blanket institutions with generic-looking applications for any jobs they can find in their field. Because they do not address the issues that are most important to that institution, their applications are overlooked by search committees. So, the first thing you should do when applying for a job is to focus your energies on those positions for which you are most suitable, carefully crafting applications tailored to those announcements. The precise method you use to select these positions will be different depending on whether you are a graduate student looking for an initial full-time position, an established faculty member hoping to find a better opportunity, or a senior faculty member looking for the greater challenge of an extremely prestigious appointment. If you are relatively inexperienced, you should not narrow your job search too restrictively, taking a chance on a number of institutions that *could* be a good fit and keeping

an open mind about the regions of the country in which you are willing to work. The important question for you to consider is “Is this position a proper match for my qualifications?” not “Is this position located in my ideal part of the world?” If you are more established as a faculty member, however, you can afford to focus your search a great deal; you may end up being surprised by the number of telephone interviews and campus visits you are asked to make, and it can be difficult to balance your job search with your current responsibilities. Moreover, experienced faculty members are less likely to be searching for just any job than to be interested in a particular type of job, and this kind of search requires great selectivity.

Regardless of whether you are just starting out or far more experienced, there is one essential principle that you should always keep in mind:

Never apply for any faculty position that you have no intention of taking if it is offered.

Faculty searches are expensive and time consuming, both for candidates and for the institution. Even if you have your travel expenses paid, you will need to spend time away from your current duties, incur at least some expense because of dry-cleaning costs or additions to your wardrobe, and be called on to prepare new copies of your curriculum vitae, course materials, and evidence of scholarship. The institution will be investing significant expense and personnel time on you, and you will leave a very poor impression if it appears that you were never serious about the position in the first place. Academia is a surprisingly small world, and people at one institution often know their colleagues elsewhere. A poor reputation that you establish in one search can “follow” you when you interview for another position that you really want.

As you consider which jobs to apply for, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this position at an appropriate level for someone with my experience and in a discipline that is closely related to my background and training?
- Can I make a persuasive case to someone who does not know me that this position is suitable for someone with my credentials?
- Can I realistically see myself accepting this position, giving it my best effort, and taking all the steps necessary to succeed in this position?

Sometimes people who are about to conduct a job search wonder whether it is ever appropriate to apply to an institution that has not already posted a vacancy. The truthful answer is that although there is probably no great harm in applying to an institution that has not advertised a position in your field, there is also probably no great benefit to be gained from doing so. Academic institutions cannot afford to create new positions whenever interesting applications come their way. The announcement of a vacant position occurs only after an extended and sometimes highly politicized process. By sending an application to a college or university and asking to be kept in mind for future positions, you are unlikely to have any real effect on your chances of being hired. At best, you may encounter an institution that has a need in your area for a part-time instructor or a semester-long sabbatical replacement. More commonly, however, you will simply receive a response stating that no vacancies are currently available and your application materials will be discarded.

Prepare Your Application Materials Carefully

Because nearly every successful application for a full-time faculty position has been submitted in response to an advertised search, where do you learn about current vacancies in your field? The answer to that question depends on your specific academic discipline. In many fields there are professional associations that publish listings of current positions and usually even offer job placement services. The associations may also post announcements for positions on their websites or in publications specific to each discipline. In other fields, scholars tend to rely on advertisements that appear in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Published weekly, each issue of the *Chronicle* covers a broad range of academic and administrative issues while also including a large section of advertisements for academic positions. The *Chronicle's* website (www.chronicle.com) provides access to many of these job listings, as well as the opportunity to sign up for weekly updates of newly advertised positions in your field. These updates may be customized so that you only receive announcements containing certain key words (such as “Asian history” or “assistant professor”) or concerning positions in certain parts of the country.

Once you learn of a position that has been announced, read the job description carefully. It is tempting, particularly in an initial job search, to use the mail merge function of your word processor and create a hundred or more application letters that are identical except for the name and address of the institution. These are precisely the letters that are least

likely to attract the attention of a search committee. Remember that your letter will probably be one of fifty to two hundred. For this reason, a generic letter will simply be less effective than a letter that takes into consideration the specific focus of the position as stated in the advertisement and that has been directed toward that particular program's individual needs and situation. Read the advertisement for language that distinguishes it from other positions. For instance, if an institution states in its advertisement that it is "part of a multicampus environment," try to address that distinctive feature in your letter. If your undergraduate or graduate institution maintained several campuses, mention that you are familiar with and appreciate such a learning environment. If you don't have any direct experience that you can cite, mention that you would enjoy the rich complexity of being part of a multicampus environment. The key factor is to relate in some fashion to whatever is unique about the advertisement. Institutions are charged per word for these position announcements, and they rarely waste verbiage on factors that are not important to them.

Here is an example of how to read an advertisement for an academic position. Although the language has been drawn from actual postings, the sample below is a composite with phrasing drawn from many different advertisements. The institution is fictitious, and the discipline is highly unlikely, to say the least.

Necrology: Tenure-track position at the rank of assistant or associate professor. A Ph.D. in necrology, obituary studies, or a closely related field is required by the starting date of the position, August 10, [YEAR]. Applicants should have demonstrated a commitment to research and graduate-level teaching. Duties will include supervision of internships and theses, instruction in an area closely related to the applicant's specialty, and service to the department's graduate program. The successful applicant will be expected to seek external funding for professional activities. Applicants should send a cover letter, curriculum vitae, three letters of reference, and a representative sample of refereed research (such as an article, book chapter, or book) to: C. U. Layter, Chair, Department of Necrology, Research One University, Mapleton, Verhampshire, 05555. Application materials may also be submitted electronically (PDF, Microsoft Word document, RTE, or plain text) by sending them as email attachments to culayter@researchone.edu. Review of applications will begin on October 15, [YEAR], and will continue until the position is filled. Research One University is an Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity Employer.

As you read ads like this one, use a highlighter to identify phrases that speak about the level of teaching that is involved, the balance of responsibilities between instruction and research, the institution's commitment to diversity, the importance of technology for teaching or doing research, and other phrases that may not appear in notices for similar positions. These phrases probably refer to matters of special importance to the institution or search committee, and it is wise to speak directly about them in your letter. If you did so in the case of our sample ad, you might observe the following:

- The ad specifically states that the position is available “at the rank of assistant or associate professor.” Applicants are thus likely to include, not simply recent graduates, but also those who have already earned promotion and tenure. For this position, it will be even more important than usual for you to demonstrate that you are the “best fit” for this position and have credentials that precisely match what the committee is looking for.
- The ad repeatedly mentions research and graduate teaching as important responsibilities. A letter of application that fails to address these areas in a prominent manner will be less likely to be successful. If the advertisement had said (as many do), “Applicants should have a strong commitment to undergraduate teaching and service to nonmajors,” the entire focus of your letter would be different.
- When job responsibilities are mentioned in an advertisement, it can be helpful to the committee reviewing the letter if you tie your experience directly to those duties, rather than forcing readers to make assumptions based on information contained in the curriculum vitae. Ask yourself: What does this reader really want to know and how can I make it easier for the reader to discover it?
- The items that applicants are required to submit can tell you a great deal about what the search committee is expecting of the successful applicant. Almost all searches require a cover letter, résumé, and letters of recommendation. But what additional items are required? In the sample ad, evidence of refereed research is requested. This requirement not only reiterates the research-oriented nature of this position, but also suggests that applicants without strong records of refereed research are highly unlikely to be considered after the initial screening.
- The successful applicant will be expected to seek external funding for professional activities. This statement can mean several things: it could suggest that although research is expected, the required

resources are not provided because of funding problems at the school; or it could mean that applicants with grant-writing experience may be preferred. Investigate further, either through the website or people who may know the institution, to discover which of these possibilities is more likely. In either case, if you do have evidence that you can write grants successfully or have engaged in sponsored research, emphasize it in your letter.

How long should your application letter be? Most search firms will tell you that an application letter should fit on a single side of one page or, at most, should extend to the first quarter of a second page. This advice is probably excellent for individuals who are applying for presidencies or other positions where trustees are likely to play a significant role in the selection process; trustees and members of advisory boards tend to come from nonacademic backgrounds where extremely brief application letters are the norm. But this rule can be slightly less rigid for faculty positions. A good letter of application for a faculty position will be roughly two or three pages in length, single-spaced with an additional space between each paragraph. You will need that much space to relate your personal experience and academic preparation to the requirements and preferences of the position. Feel free to quote statements from the advertisement as a way of demonstrating how well you fit the requirements for the position. For instance, you might write:

Dear Dr. Irvine and Members of the Search Committee,

Please consider my application for the tenure-track position in malinger-
ing that was listed in the September 3rd issue of *Careers for Pro-
crastinators*. Your announcement states that the University of
Minnesconsin is seeking a scholar with a terminal degree in Procrasti-
nation Studies, peer-reviewed articles in a field closely related to vacil-
lation or obstructionism, and a minimum of three years' undergraduate
teaching experience in such courses as Introduction to Postponement.
I will be receiving my Ph.D. in Procrastination from the University of
Southwest North Dakota next May with a dissertation on . . .

To make it easier for members of the search committee to discover your accomplishments as they assess each application, you might even consider placing five or six of your most important achievements in a bulleted list or using boldfaced type to attract attention to one or two extremely important items. Take care not to overuse these devices in a letter, however, as their impact diminishes when they appear too often in the same letter.

Before mailing your application, read it over at least two or three times. If possible, have a friend review it as well. Even a single typographical error may be sufficient to have your application rejected. Particularly annoying to search committee members are errors in which their names or the name of the institution is wrong. (When applying to the University of Minnesconsin, you do not, for instance, want to refer to the institution accidentally as Minnesconsin State University, as the two schools may be bitter rivals. And take care not to refer to “Dr. Irvine” as “Dr. Irwin”; the good doctor has probably had his or her last name misspelled for years and may well be annoyed by it.) Be certain that your letter is free of grammatical errors, that the hard copy is printed on letterhead or plain white paper (which makes better copies if your materials must be reproduced for other members of the search committee), and that your packet of materials includes a current copy of your curriculum vitae in a suitable form for review by individuals outside of your current institution. (On the different forms that your curriculum vitae may take, see Chapter 31, “Creating an Effective Curriculum Vitae.”)

When enclosing supporting materials, be sure to submit all items requested by the search committee, and only those items. If you don’t include every item requested, your application may be rejected out of hand. At the very least, you’ll have made the process harder for those reviewing your application who may need to contact you repeatedly for additional materials or who may assume that you were not interested enough to complete your application. At the same time, be sure to send only the items requested by the committee. Inundating reviewers with books, DVDs, course syllabi, student evaluations, and other items that they do not yet need can create a storage problem for the search, make you seem overeager or unable to follow directions, and do nothing at all to help advance your application. Increasingly, institutions are asking that applications be completed electronically. This process may consist of having to complete an online form (which can require repeating much of the material that is already in your curriculum vitae) or of attaching documents to an email message. If you are sending documents in machine-readable form, make certain that they are in a format that is easily viewed at most institutions. The safest forms to use in most cases are Microsoft Word documents, Rich Text Format (RTF), or Portable Document Format (PDF). Even when using these formats, however, there are certain considerations to keep in mind. If you are using a very new version of Microsoft Word, the document that you create may not be readable by earlier versions of the program. If this is a possibility because you have

recently upgraded your software, consider saving your document in an earlier version of Word or converting it to RTF. Also, if your document uses highly unusual fonts, it is best to send it as a PDF file rather than in its original form: if the original document is viewed on a computer that does not have your font installed, your materials could look unattractive or seem scrambled. When in doubt, restrict yourself to fonts in the Times family, Courier, Georgia, Helvetica, Monaco, and Verdana; these fonts come preinstalled on most computers.

Be Distinctive Without Appearing Idiosyncratic

As you review the draft of your application letter, consider the tone of what you have said. Your goal should be to give your potential colleagues as clear as possible an impression of your personality without coming across as either quirky or eccentric. Adopt a formal and polite tone. Eliminate all traces of slang or casual speech. Avoid contractions. Applicants for positions will sometimes attempt to distinguish themselves from other candidates through expressions that are designed to catch the reader's eye, particularly in opening lines. ("Hi! You don't know it yet, but I'm your new organic chemist." Or "If you're like most members of search committees, you're probably pretty bored of reading applications by now. Well, this is one that you'll *want* to read.") Such a strategy is far more likely to backfire than to be successful. The reader will probably assume that you are at best unprofessional, at worst an unstable person of the type that the department definitely does not need and immediately move your application to the bottom of the stack. In a similar way, language that sounds too self-congratulatory, such as "I am highly qualified for this position," often alienates members of the search committee. Reviewers often feel that if an applicant has to state that he or she is highly qualified, then the strength of those credentials must not be immediately apparent from the supporting materials.

Applicants have a very short time to make an impression on a search committee. After all, if a particular position attracts two hundred applicants, it would take each member of the search committee more than sixteen hours to read the applications, even if he or she only spent five minutes on each set of materials. It is not uncommon for members of a very large committee to glance at each packet of materials for less than a minute before deciding whether to give that candidate greater scrutiny. For this reason, you want your application to stand out without coming across as glib, peculiar, or overly egotistical. The best tone to take in an

application letter is professional, informative, and accessible. Help the reviewers in any way that you can. For instance, search committees frequently wonder which of their advertising efforts brought them the greatest response, so it is often good to open your letter by mentioning how you learned that the position was available. If you reread the opening to the sample letter of application cited earlier, you'll see that it conveys a great deal of information in a very limited space, demonstrates respect for the reader, and adopts an appropriate tone of professionalism. The audience for your letter is likely to consist primarily of faculty members in your discipline with perhaps a representative or two from outside the department. You can expect your readers to be fairly knowledgeable about your academic area; defining relatively common terms in use by your discipline is thus unnecessary and may even appear condescending to members of the search committee. However, expressions that are likely to be unique to the institution where you are now, such as course numbers, should be explained. You cannot assume that your reader will understand what "PSC 2454" refers to in your current course load unless you also provide the name of the course. Similarly, a reference to your current president, dean, or department chair may not lead to recognition outside of your institution; always identify these individuals both by full name and title.

Because you are talking about yourself and your accomplishments in your letter, you will find that you are using a large number of first-person pronouns. Search committees understand that this practice is inevitable, and they will not regard the number of times you refer to your achievements as a sign of egoism. Even so, you might try varying your sentence structure so that you do not have an overabundance of sentences beginning with "I." For instance, rather than saying:

I have been successful in increasing the number of majors in our program by working with the departmental curriculum committee to align our courses more closely with industry standards, thus improving our job placement rate. I was also selected by the students as Professor of the Year in [YEAR], and I receive student course evaluations that are regularly either at or near the top of our department.

Consider saying:

As a member of our departmental curriculum committee, I have been successful in increasing the number of majors in our program by working to align our courses more closely with industry standards, thus improving our job placement rate. The students also selected me as

Professor of the Year in [YEAR], and my student course evaluations are regularly either at or near the top of our department.

The content is the same in both of these cases, but the more varied sentence structure causes the second phrasing to seem less pompous or self-serving.

Use Your Application Letter to Your Benefit

All too often applicants use their cover letters merely to restate the same information that is already found in their résumés. Doing so wastes a valuable opportunity to supply additional details and suggests to your readers that your achievements are so sparse that you can only cite the same accomplishments over and over. Rather than restating that you received a nomination for Professor of the Year, use your letter to expand on why you were nominated. Give your readers insight that they cannot gain from your curriculum vitae: what are your values, your plans for the future, and your distinctive qualities? If you already list the courses that you taught in your résumé, use your letter to discuss your teaching philosophy or how you were able to communicate effectively in small classes (or large classes, distance learning courses, seminars, practica, graduate courses, or a combination of teaching environments). If your curriculum vitae already records your presentations, publications, and grants received, use your letter to discuss why these were significant accomplishments. What is the best contribution that you have made thus far to scholarship, and why might that contribution be important to your new institution? If you have postdoctoral or professional experience, provide some information about how those opportunities have helped prepare you for the position for which you're applying. Your curriculum vitae should effectively make the case that you are a fully qualified candidate for the position. You can use your letter then to explain what sets you apart from all the other fully qualified candidates and why you would be an interesting, supportive, and collegial addition to the program.

Be Cautious About Following Up

Once you have submitted your letter of application, your curriculum vitae, and all the other materials requested in the position announcement, it is possible that you won't receive a response for quite some time. Most institutions do acknowledge receipt of applications, and it is not uncommon

for search committees to reply to applicants letting them know the timetable for the search and whether any of the essential pieces of a completed application (such as letters of recommendation) have not yet arrived. Many institutions will also mail you an Affirmative Action or Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) card, requesting that you self-identify your ethnic and gender information. Responding to these Affirmative Action or EEO requests is strictly voluntary. Doing so helps the institution determine whether their recruitment strategies have been successful in diversifying its applicant pool but it otherwise neither benefits your application to respond to these requests nor disadvantages your application to ignore them.

In certain cases, however, the institution may simply not acknowledge receipt of your application at all. You thus may be left wondering whether your materials arrived or were somehow lost. It could be that the institution is simply waiting until a large enough pool of applications has arrived before responding to all of them. It could be that the school does not acknowledge receipt of applications and only contacts the candidates it wishes to pursue. Or it may be that your materials never arrived. If three weeks or so pass and you still have received no word on your application, it is perfectly acceptable to send a quick and polite email message to the search chair asking whether all of your materials have in fact arrived. Other than this type of message, however, be very cautious about following up with the search committee after you have applied and before the interview process has begun. Acceptable communications with the search committee include:

- Genuine questions that you need to have answered at this stage of the search. “Did my application reach you in time for the deadline?” is an appropriate question. “What sort of start-up package will you be offering the successful candidate?” is not. Never tell a search committee that you will happen to be in their area soon and wonder if you might be able to talk with them about the position. This approach gives the appearance that you are trying to circumvent the regular search process and may well cost you the committee’s serious consideration.
- A brief and sincere thank-you note if the search committee has done something exceptional. For instance, you might thank a search committee that has waived its policy of “no electronic submissions” for you because you are out of the country and cannot be assured that an application sent through the mail would arrive by the deadline date.

- Substantive changes to your credentials. For instance, if a manuscript that was pending editorial review has now been accepted for publication, it is appropriate to send a follow-up note. If a grant application that was under review has been funded, bring this to the attention of the search committee; note, too, whether that project is tied to your current institution or can accompany you as the principal investigator. Minor additions to your curriculum vitae, such as your service as a guest lecturer in another instructor's course or the correction of a typographical error, are not important enough to warrant an addition to your application. Small changes can make you appear desperate for recognition or unable to tell the difference between a major accomplishment and a fairly routine activity.

It is important to refrain from contacting the search committee after you've applied and before it has selected candidates to interview because the committee is then in the process of selecting its most preferred candidates from what could be a very large pool. In addition to evaluating your achievements and professional qualifications, the search committee will also be considering whether you are the sort of person they want to work with. If you appear to be "nagging" or "greedy for validation" at an early stage of the search process, the committee may wonder just how time consuming and demanding you are likely to be after you are hired. Given the choice between your application and another, they may prefer the other candidate simply because you have seemed a bit too eager for their attention.

In general, you should complete the following checklist before sending an application for a faculty position to any institution:

- Am I absolutely certain that all of my application materials are completely free of typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors?
- Am I submitting all the supporting documents requested in the position announcement, and only these?
- Is my letter of application tailored specifically to the focus of this particular position?
- Does my letter convey a sense of my personality without making me seem quirky or eccentric?
- Does my letter avoid unnecessary repetition of information already in my curriculum vitae?

- Is my curriculum vitae current?
- Have I provided adequate contact information? Remember that you don't want to miss an opportunity for an interview because you are away from your office for a few days. Always provide an email address that you check at least several times each day, as well as a mobile telephone number.

If you follow these guidelines, you will not be guaranteed an interview for the position, but you will have taken all the appropriate steps to increase your likelihood of being favorably noticed by the search committee.

RESOURCES

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