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Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Getting and Keeping a Job at a Private Liberal Arts College, but Your Graduate Advisor Didn't Tell You

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The irony was so striking that it could not be lost on anyone. Sitting before us was a soon-to-be-minted Ph.D. candidate whom we all liked tremendously, and who had an incredibly strong academic record, both in research and teaching. Yet, as our panel read his letter of application and CV, which were displayed on an overhead projector, and as we discussed them in progressively greater detail and honesty, we found several aspects of his materials off-putting. Why did he phrase something THIS way, another THAT way, we asked him? Sometimes his decisions were driven by a concern he need not have had; other times he was being advised by his graduate department. We ended by agreeing that although he SHOULD have been given a job interview, our hypothetical search process might have passed him over for inclusion on our short list.

Perhaps this disconnection reflects a collective failing on our part as evaluators of job application files, but more likely it reflects that many graduate students and recent graduates are not sufficiently aware of the culture and norms of a teaching-focused liberal arts college to frame their applications in the most appealing manner. This problem probably extends to knowledge about the interview, the job talk and classroom presentation, and the first few years of a new job. It was to address this problem that the Undergraduate Education Section of APSA sponsored its short course on faculty positions at teaching-focused liberal arts colleges at the 2001 APSA Annual Meeting in San Francisco. William Hudson of Providence College and Grant Reeher of Syracuse University organized and chaired the course which featured a diverse panel of liberal arts college faculty with extensive recent experience in hiring and evaluating junior colleagues (names and affiliations are listed above). Despite the diversity of their institutions, the panelists were in agreement about several key issues relating to the following areas: research, teaching, service, balance, and strategies for success.

One misconception about liberal arts colleges that surfaced early in the session involved expectations about research. Several course attendees reported being advised to down-play their research aspirations when applying to primarily teaching institutions, because "they will only be interested in how you teach." Not true. Although teaching is obviously a high priority at liberal arts colleges, quality research is valued too. No one should expect to receive tenure or be promoted

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without publishing and being professionally active. Liberal arts colleges are no longer looking for Mr. Chips. Although they may give credit for a broader range of professional activity than a singular focus on publishing peer reviewed articles, including giving papers, chairing panels, and serving as discussant, a research agenda is a central part of an academic career for liberal arts faculty. Not only is research important in obtaining tenure, but it informs and enlightens our teaching. Rather than eschewing research, we embrace it. Most of our institutions provide generous support to attend conferences and to support our research efforts.

Research at a liberal arts institution, however,

needs to be framed within the context of the institution. Most of our institutions embrace the undergraduate research concept; if your research agenda is so highly specialized or narrow that you can't find a way to employ undergraduates as assistants, then that agenda may need to be modified. When discussing your research agenda with prospective colleagues, note that virtually none of them will be specialists in your field. At liberal arts colleges, all of the department members vote on a new hire and actively participate in the decision—don't make the mistake of thinking that you only have to impress the people in your field. Moreover, you will have to speak to faculty in disciplines other than political science—and their opinions count as well.

These disparate faculty will, however, have one thing in common: a commitment to excellent teaching. Liberal arts colleges seek those who have the potential to become luminous teachers—passionate about their subjects, committed to the liberal arts project, and enthusiastic in their ability to convey sophisticated ideas in ways that enlighten, inform, and inspire students. But most liberal arts faculty are aware that there are many ways to achieve teaching excellence. Good teachers recognize that there is no modal teaching method in political science. If the college you are applying to requires a statement of teaching philosophy, keep in mind that your audience is likely to include faculty who employ a variety of different pedagogical techniques and approaches. Do not make the error of telling the faculty what you think they want to hear about teaching. Vague cliches such as creating "a student-centered classroom," or encouraging "active learning" and "in-depth analysis" are likely to cause many faculty to brand you either as naïve or arrogant. Consider instead using your statement of teaching philosophy to

discuss a teaching failure that led you to adjust your approach in ways that produced better results. All liberal arts faculty have experienced failure in the classroom. They will be more impressed by evidence of your ability to respond flexibly and effectively to failure than by implausible claims of a pristine record of teaching accomplishment.

All job candidates recognize that they must often stretch their credentials to fit a job description. But the amount of stretching required by liberal arts colleges may put some junior faculty in traction. This will be most evident in your teaching load. You certainly will be asked to teach courses in areas outside of your specialization, and particularly in small departments, you will be asked to teach courses outside of your subdiscipline. One of our panelists reported that his department requires every faculty member to teach its Introduction to American Politics course. While this may be a daunting prospect for comparativists accustomed to lecturing on the European Union's position on grain subsidies, it would be a mistake for such candidates to brandish their specialized training like a talisman to ward off this kind of undesirable teaching responsibility. You must market yourself as a generalist if you are both to get and keep a job at a liberal arts college.

This marketing effort should include your job talk. Do not assume that you can export the job talk you prepared for a research university to a liberal arts college. A detailed discussion of your dissertation's abstruse theoretical framework and high-octane quantitative methods may impress the faculty at a research university but may lose you the position at a liberal arts institution. The faculty at liberal arts colleges will use your job talk to assess your potential as a scholar, to gauge your effectiveness as a teacher, and to determine whether you will be a colleague capable of conversing with non-specialists. Because the job talk serves such protean purposes at a liberal arts college, it is essential to get specific directions from the search committee chair about the department's expectations for your talk. Who will be in attendance? Will it be an "informal talk" over a brown bag lunch or a formal lecture? If you are making an in-class presentation, what is the level of the class? Is it possible to obtain a copy of the course syllabus?

Related to this kind of reconnaissance is the equally necessary task of learning beforehand about the specific culture and history of the institution you will be visiting, and being sensitive to that culture and history during your visit. Individual liberal arts colleges are far less generic than research institutions. Applicants to Providence College, for example, should be familiar not just with the Catholic affiliation of the college, but also with its affiliation with the Dominican Order of Preachers. Applicants to Furman University should know about the school's distinctive Southern culture, and its past Baptist association.

Your contact with students during your on-campus interview will not be confined to your job talk. You will likely be asked to meet with a group of students over a meal or at a reception. Do not treat these occasions as

opportunities to relax. While a strong performance during the student interview is unlikely to win you the job, a weak performance can torpedo your chances. Faculty will be interested in finding out if you are capable of interacting with students in an affable yet respectful manner. Student reports of condescension, haughtiness, or disdain will cause the faculty to dismiss your potential as a teacher and an advisor. Indeed, the

panelists related several stories of otherwise strong candidates who were vetoed by students.

Faculty take seriously students' comments about candidates because new faculty spend much of their time managing student demands. Advising is an extraordinarily important activity at liberal arts colleges, and exemplary advising involves more than knowing the University's rules and regulations and offering advice on next term's courses. Good advisors are listening posts for an array of issues and are advocates for students

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in departmental and college affairs. Students will expect you to respond to questions about their course work, their career goals, their cocurricular commitments, and even their personal lives. While solving students' problems can be gratifying, it can also absorb much of the time and energy young faculty need in order to meet their other professional responsibilities and to build a rewarding private life. Young faculty must develop strategies for carving out space for their scholarship, their families, and their sanity. Working at home or in a carrel in a library a few days a week, eating lunch away from your desk, and committing yourself to writing a conference paper each semester are possible ways to create this space.

Liberal arts colleges are not for everyone. Job candidates who aspire to a prodigious scholarly output, prefer not to converse and work with colleagues outside of their field, and find teaching a chore should not apply. But for those candidates who seek a balance between teaching and research, enjoy conversing and working with an eclectic array of colleagues, and cannot suppress a smile when they elicit an "I get it" from a formerly confused undergraduate, there is no better job. The opportunity to emphasize teaching, research, and university and community service in a close community was the very thing that attracted many of us to a career at a liberal arts institution. We hope our APSA short course assisted and inspired participants to seek one too.