

# How To Get In The “First Pile”

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## ABSTRACT

*Pressures facing junior faculty during a tenure track job search are high and can come from a multitude of areas. It follows that professionals in this position would try to reduce uncertainty associated with securing a new employment contract. The authors offer their observations below on how to increase an applicant’s chance to succeed in an initial screening process—what is we refer to as “making the first pile”—and the interviews that follow.*

**Keywords:** job search; interview; tenure-track; applications

## INTRODUCTION

Currently in many fields, the applicants significantly outnumber the available positions (Vick & Furlong, 2009). For example, in the Management area of Business, the Academy of Management recently had 723 (521 active) profiles on its job placement site compared to only 289 positions open at the time of the fall 2010 AoM international meeting. Given the competitiveness inherent in the selection process, as well as the great variability in hiring institutions, an applicant needs to pursue every possible advantage to better position themselves in the eyes of the hiring institution.

The authors come from four different career stages to offer a number of suggestions for an academic job search. One is a full professor with 30 years of experience, and three are junior tenure-track faculty members. The first is four years into his tenure track at his first position and was hired ABD. The second is a junior faculty hired this year after several years at a different institution. The third is a new hire in his first year in his first position. Therefore, three of the four authors have been on the market within the last four years, with two of them within the last year. Additionally, three of the four authors also have served on a number of search and screen committees.

There are three main types of junior faculty job seekers: new ABD/Ph.D. candidates seeking their first position, faculty with one to six years of experience, who may or may not be facing a terminal employment decision, and tenure track faculty casually looking to improve their employment situation. Ultimately the applicant can decide on a course of action based on the options available at the time of the decision. It follows that most applicants would want to maximize their options. To do so, we provide the recommendations below which apply to each of the three types of job seekers. While the applicant’s level of stress will be different depending on whether they are casually searching, have a terminal contract that ends in a year, or do not have a position currently, it simply does not matter when it comes to following these recommendations; they will help each of the different types of searcher similarly.

## FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

There are many factors that impact an applicant’s evaluation of desired Universities to target – prestige, course load, research demands, proximity to family or a desired geographic location. When a position opens at a school meeting these criteria, an applicant should minimize simple and avoidable mistakes when applying. These mistakes can be easily avoided by following directions. Some schools use an electronic application process while others require paper applications only. It may be surprising how many email attachments get sent to schools that do not accept electronic applications. As the job applicant, it may be easier to email copies, and in this day and age, it may be surprising that the school does not accept electronic applications. However, it is important to remember that

to be considered for employment, follow the directions on how to apply to the letter (Baron, 2001). This increases the likelihood that the application will make the *first pile*.

*Hint: Some applicants wait until the end of the posting dates to send their materials. In reality, it is common for departments to start the screening as early as the applications arrive. People who wait until the end to submit may find themselves ignored, even though the posting is still “open”.*

### **RESEARCH THE INSTITUTION TO WHICH YOU ARE APPLYING**

Each school is different for a number of reasons: geographic location, research profile, history, alumni, faculty, etc. One thing, however, is consistent – each school is very proud of these characteristics, and every applicant should know why. Is the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court an alumnus? Was the main building used as a hospital during the Civil War (or the War of Northern Aggression)? Is the women’s softball team the reigning national champion? Is there a new engineering building (even if that is not your area)? Has there been recent turnover in the Chancellor’s or President’s office? An applicant should know all of those things, and an application reflecting some of that information on the cover letter makes the applicant more attractive and increases the likelihood that the application will make the *first pile* (Hieberger & Vick, 2004).

*Hint: Try to make a connection between your personal experiences and one (or more) of the areas of pride in the school. It not only signals that you did your homework, it can be a useful topic of conversation.*

### **DOUBLE-CHECK YOUR DOCUMENTS**

Prospective faculty should proofread all application materials carefully and then check them again or better, pay someone to copyedit them. Make sure all documents are current and completely error-free (Lewis & Caughman, 2006). Make sure that each and every document is targeted to the individual school or department of choice. Documents with the wrong person/college/department can quickly kill any chance of receiving the desired interview and remaining under consideration for the position. Spend time on this step – this is the only thing some very influential people will know about you until you can speak to them – don’t provide a reason to the chair or committee (or gatekeeper!) to take you out of consideration. A complete, error-free application packet makes the applicant more attractive and increases the likelihood that the application will make the *first pile*.

*Hint: Some applicants send their materials to the department’s administrative assistant and address them to Dr. So-and-So, while others sometimes send documents to faculty members of the recruitment committee, assuming they were the administrative assistant. In addition, when using a mail merge type of function to prepare materials for multiple schools, be cautious that all internal references to that school/department are accurate. In addition, follow up with your references to be sure they get submitted. Some schools will not review an applicant if they are missing any requirement, including a letter of reference.*

### **KNOW THE PLAYERS IN THE UNIVERSITY AND YOUR TARGET DEPARTMENT**

Each school has its own version of star or power players, and it may not always be obvious to outsiders. By understanding the school of interest (see #2 above), the applicant can identify the staff person associated with these ideals (Sies, 1996). What are potential colleagues’ areas of interest? With what groups are they involved? What interests outside the norm might someone have? What recent research has come from the college/department/individuals? Has anyone won any awards lately? It may be research, teaching, grant writing, outreach, research and development, art creation, or one of many other options. Often, these people are influential in the decision making process, independent of their being on the hiring committee (or not), and targeting the application message to make sure that it reflects possible synergies is one way to increase the likelihood that the application will make the *first pile*.

*Hint: Be sure to read the press releases from the school and, ideally, the area which is hiring. Use the school website to find a list of individuals in the department and search for recent research, exhibits, performances or awards.*

## INTERVIEWS AND VISITS

Congratulations on being in the *first pile*! Now it is important to leverage your place in the *first pile* to an interview, campus visit and ultimately, a written job offer. Given typical budgetary restrictions, many universities use a phone or video interview to determine which candidates will visit campus. Although there may be different technology issues (ex. ensuring a quiet, strong connection) for these interviews, the basic recommendations for successful interviewing still apply. The most important of these recommendations is that an applicant should know as much as possible about the students, faculty, department, college, and university and have questions ready for each individual with whom there is an interview. Many applicants have eliminated their chances of receiving an employment offer by demonstrating a lack of knowledge about the people involved in the interviews (Johnson, 2004). This lack of preparation is often interpreted as a lack of interest in the position.

Other important interview guidelines include dressing professionally for the visit or interview. Applicants should always opt for more traditional interview apparel even if most faculty appear in casual wear. Formal interview attire sends the message that the applicant is a professional and reduces the likelihood that he or she will be remembered more for a particular tie, jacket, or skirt than for job-related accomplishments.

As mentioned above, applicants should have questions ready for each person on the interview schedule. This demonstrates an interest in the interviewer and the position. It also encourages the interviewer to do more of the talking, often providing information that will be very valuable in evaluating the potential fit an applicant has with the position or school, as well as for any future negotiating that may be required when an offer is received.

In every interview, it is important that an applicant answer questions clearly and succinctly. In fact, an applicant should always answer the question being asked and not provide a response to a question that would have been more preferable. These answers can make the applicant seem evasive or even less capable. In any interview it is important that an applicant demonstrate competence, future potential, and likeability. These are the characteristics that recruiters and interviewers in all industries seek.

It is also typical for an applicant to be asked to prepare a job talk (presentation of research) and/or a sample class. For both situations, the applicant should understand expectations about length, schedule, audience, topic, and equipment needs of the talk(s). If the faculty contact has not provided information about these expectations, the applicant should ask. In addition, the key to any presentation is to prepare thoroughly. An applicant should practice the talk(s) in front of others who are prepared to provide feedback and then practice the revised material again. In every job search there are applicants who are eliminated from consideration because their job talks or classroom demos were too long/short, covered the wrong information, seemed disorganized or inapplicable, or presented in a manner that was inaccessible to the audience.

The hiring committee is always looking for signals from an applicant. One important signal an applicant can send is that they do not see this position as a stepping stone to a “better” position in the near future. A hiring committee wants to invest in an applicant who fits into their environment and hopefully will for many years. One way an applicant can send such a signal is to ask interviewers questions about living in the community, about child-related (as appropriate) resources, etc. Don’t forget to signal to the committee and/or department chair if you would take an offered position. The easiest way to do this is to simply say so! This minimizes the risk from the university in making you an offer and communicates your desire to work there.

Finally, to increase the likelihood of further consideration for a position, an applicant should try to be as flexible as possible with the travel and visit arrangements and should treat everyone they encounter with respect, even when a person may not be part of the “official” interview schedule.

*Hint: The interview is always on; 24 hours a day from when your plane takes off to when you return back home. There is a college that sends a personal friend of the president to pick up candidates at the airport under the auspices of a random driver. To think that this person would have no influence on a hiring decision would be a mistake! Treat everyone you meet on a campus visit as if they are on the hiring committee – not just those on the campus itself. Don’t forget to bring climate appropriate attire; an overcoat may be required if visiting colder climate universities. Lastly, it must be noted, don’t drink too much alcohol (if any) at dinner, and make sure to smell nice!*

## **FOLLOW-UP**

This may be the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but basic etiquette is still important. After every interview and/or visit, an applicant should send thank you notes to each person significantly involved in the recruitment process (Lewis & Caughman, 2006). This includes people who conducted interviews, handled the travel and reimbursement processes, and hosted meals. When there is time available, hand-written or typed notes are preferable. When time is short, email notes are still considered appropriate, however, remember that the applicant is asking the institution to invest hundreds of thousands (if not millions with tenure). As such, the authors recommend the handwritten thank you note. For any format, however, it is crucial that each note be personalized and specific to the individual receiving it. Faculty compare these notes, and applicants who send the same form letter to everyone will appear insincere and be remembered much less favorably. An applicant should remember that sending a thank you is an opportunity to remind a recruiter or committee that the applicant is both interested in the position and is the most capable and likeable candidate.

## **CONCLUSION**

While the guidelines we have offered are not the only ones that an applicant can use to make it to the *first pile*, they are some of the key factors that can increase your chance to be included in the *first pile*. All of these hints have stemmed from direct experience as either a member of a search and screen committee or as a candidate in the search for a tenure track position. These hints have evolved over the years the authors have been involved in each stage for each type of search. While following these tips will not assure a successful outcome, ignoring them will almost guarantee your failure getting to the *first pile* and leading to an interview. Remember, that often the school is committing more than \$100,000 USD (inclusive with benefits, and often more) annually on your position and many times there is a two or three year commitment – so you’re asking an employer to bet \$300,000 USD and other resources on you. The least you can do is pay attention to their process and give the process and school the respect it deserves.

The final hint we would like to offer is: don’t stop until you sign an offer! Just because you may have gotten a verbal offer, keep the job search pipeline active until you get an offer in writing. This is academia; crazier things have happened than a verbal job offer being rescinded. It would be sad if a person missed an opportunity based on an agreement that no longer is true. Keep searching until the contract is signed.

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