

# How to Get a Teaching Job at a Liberal-Arts College

By GARY DeCOKER

**N**OT LONG AGO, I served as one of three faculty respondents at a dissertation workshop. A dozen graduate students from universities around the country presented their dissertation proposals and preliminary research.

At the end of the two-day workshop, we started talking about job prospects. As I listened, I realized how little the students knew about liberal-arts colleges and how much my views on the job-search process differed from those of the other two faculty members at the workshop, both of whom came from large research universities.

I'm not sure how many of the 12 graduate students ended up seeking jobs at liberal-arts colleges, but here is what we discussed.

Perhaps it may be of use to recent Ph.D.'s and graduate students who are considering a career at a small college.

Start by thinking about how you present yourself.

**Learn about undergraduate education.** You are not ready to write your letter of application to a liberal-arts college until you spend some time learning about recent developments in undergraduate education. Start with the following organizations: the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Annapolis Group, the Carnegie Foundation for the Ad-

vancement of Teaching, the Council of Independent Colleges, and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

If you are applying to a college that is a member of a particular consortium, look up that organization as well: GLCA, ACM, ACS, ACA, COPLAC, ASIANetwork. Put ".org" after most of those initials and you'll find organizations that provide professional-development and networking opportunities at liberal-arts colleges. As you explore those Web sites, note the colleges' distinguishing features, such as the high rates of alumni who have earned Ph.D.'s and the disproportionately high representation of graduates among scientists.

About 600 or so baccalaureate

institutions refer to themselves as liberal-arts colleges, even though many of them are officially classified otherwise. Using the standard definition—a liberal-arts college is one that grants at least half of its

letters they write on your behalf to a teaching institution by including information about your teaching, communication style, and work with people in professional contexts. Of course, your recommenders should mention your dissertation, but their letters should balance teaching and research. If your dissertation is still in progress, ask your adviser to mention a projected date of completion.

**Teaching experience as a graduate student.** Teaching a course on your own is a good credential, but serving as a small-group teaching assistant can also be a wonderful opportunity. At our colleges, most classes are relatively small and include time for discussion, a variety of writing assignments, meetings with the professor, small-group work, and student presentations. We also provide feedback to students early and often. Straight lecture courses with a midterm and final exam just don't work for us. Experiment with various pedagogical techniques in your graduate teaching and tell us about them.

If your graduate program doesn't offer teaching opportunities, you might ask your professors to allow you to present part of your dissertation research in their courses. You also can ask to observe them teaching undergraduates, especially in courses that include a variety of teaching strategies. Ask for a copy of the syllabus, handouts, and assignments. Talk with your professors about teaching, and, if your college offers workshops or courses for new instructors, take advantage of them.

The next step is the interview. If you're lucky enough to get one, there is a lot you can do to prepare.

**The schedule.** We typically schedule campus interviews for three or four candidates. You can tell a lot about a department by how well your campus visit is organized? You should receive a detailed schedule that includes the names and titles of the people you will meet, along with phone numbers for your main contact person and information about lodging. The college will most likely provide a travel-reimbursement form when you arrive, but if you are concerned about who is paying for your travel costs, you might tactfully raise the issue when you are scheduling your visit.

Once you have your schedule, look up each person on the college's Web site. Memorize their names and learn something about them. These people are on your schedule for a reason: The librarian might be the liaison to the department; the IT person might be involved in a new departmental program. Don't be afraid to ask about anything that you are unsure

We also want to hear about us. What is it about us that attracts you?

undergraduate degrees in arts and sciences—the number becomes 200 to 300. The terms and criteria are confusing. Make sure you know the differences in meaning among liberal education, liberal arts and sciences, general education, and liberal-arts colleges.

**The letter of application.** Study the job posting and the college's Web site, looking particularly for information about its teaching philosophy as represented in the mission statement, its learning goals, a description of the major, faculty bios in the department, and so on. Mention what you have learned in your letter.

Generic letters do not capture our attention. Neither do letters that spend paragraph after paragraph describing your dissertation. We also want to know about your teaching: What courses have you taught? What have you learned from that experience? Does your scholarship complement what you would be teaching? Will you be able to involve students in your research?

We also want to hear a bit about ourselves in your letter: What is it about us that attracts you? Have you ever lived in a community location such as ours, in this geographic location? Had you heard of us before you saw the job posting?

**Your curriculum vitae.** Devote some space on your CV to your teaching experience. List the courses you've taught (with a brief description of each), your role in the course, the number of students, and perhaps the required texts. If you have teaching evaluations, include a few copies with your application materials, or make reference to them in your letter, vitae, or separate statement of your teaching philosophy. Your publications and presentations do not need annotations; a mere list will suffice. Along with your professional memberships, list the conferences you've attended.

**Letters of recommendation.** Tell your recommenders that you are applying to liberal-arts colleges and ask them to tailor the



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of. If you have a special interest or expertise outside of the department, perhaps in an interdisciplinary program, you might want to request a meeting with someone in that program. Here, too, you need to be tactful, especially if it is something your contact person already should have thought of.

**Your presentation.** Most liberal-arts colleges require candidates to make one or two presentations. If the talk is to students, you may not want to present your dissertation research, especially if it requires a lot of background knowledge to understand. Instead, pick a topic you enjoy that will be of interest to undergraduates. If the audience is faculty members, your talk should be similar to one you would give at a professional conference. Before your visit, be sure to ask about the audience, the time allotment, and the search committee's expectations.

Colleges that ask you to make a presentation to students are especially interested in you as a teacher, so you should pay as much attention to pedagogy as to content. If it is impossible to create opportunities for student involvement in your talk, then spend a little time talking about your approach to teaching. Make sure you leave the group with the sense that you are passionate about the subject and about teaching.

**Questions.** The people you meet will have questions, and you should have some, too. Start by making a list of things they might ask. Then create brief responses. Read those over and over ahead of time. Also reread your cover letter and other materials, so that you say the same things in person as on paper.

Your questions for the search-committee members and others should be specific to the college or the person. Since you'd be a member of a small department, you should find ways to inquire about how well the faculty members work together. For instance: How often does the department meet? Who is invited to attend? What are some recent initiatives? What changes are on the horizon: personnel, curriculum, etc.? A successful department at a liberal-arts college needs everyone's participation in teaching and committee work. Beware of situations in which you are asked to take on all of the less-desirable tasks.

Now it's time to make the most of your interview.

**The search committee.** It will probably include all of the department's faculty members and a student or two. Small departments might add another professor or administrative-staff member. In most cases, the search committee will make a hiring recommendation to the academic dean, who typically will support the choice. Everyone who has met you will be asked to provide feedback to the commit-

tee. Remember that you are always on. Casual comments on the way to the airport inevitably find their way back to the search committee.

**The chief academic officer (provost or dean).** The CAO's job is to sell you on the college and the local community. During this meeting, the best approach is to listen. A seemingly offhand comment about departmental tension or an unfavorable aspect of the position is probably an attempt to prepare you. Remember those comments for later negotiations. Also remember the positive comments, such as "We'll find your spouse a job." The CAO is a good

person to ask about interdisciplinary or other opportunities at the college. If you are offered the position, you should explore all of those issues further before signing the contract. (More on that later.) But remember that the interview is not the time for such negotiations.

**Staff members and students.** You may meet students and staff members only in passing, but take those interactions seriously. Introduce yourself to the department secretary and give a greeting or smile whenever you pass by. Our colleges are communities, and we want to know that you value each of us.

**Committee representatives.**

You may meet with representatives of the faculty-governance, personnel, or other committees. They typically provide details about campus policies and procedures. You don't have to understand everything now. Use the opportunity to get a sense for what faculty members take pride in and how they represent their colleagues and the institution to you.

**Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Make sure each group you meet takes away a good impression of you. If you have specific strengths to highlight, they bear repeating to everyone you meet.

If a job offer comes, you need to be ready with some questions.

**A conversation with the chief academic officer.** The provost or dean of academic affairs is typically the person who calls to offer you the job. The expectation is that you will ask some questions and then take a few days or a week to make your decision. This conversation is the time to clarify any conditions that you may have discussed while you were on the campus. Some of our colleges will consider spousal hires or joint teaching positions. Now is the time to get a commitment, perhaps

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*Continued From Preceding Page* in writing. Also ask about start-up money for your research, especially important in the sciences. If you don't have any specific needs, ask for a budget for library or technology purchases for your department. Your future colleagues will appreciate it.

**The endowment.** You may already have noticed information on the endowment while searching the college's Web site. Now is the time to take another look. Colleges with small endowments are tuition-driven. Without a consistent supply of students, they struggle. Larger endowments provide a cushion for everything, including faculty salaries. For a college of about 1,200 students, a \$150-mil-

lion endowment offers some financial stability. Double that amount leads to less financial tension. Half as much requires penny-pinching. The other factor here is student enrollment. Check the numbers for first-year enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. If this is your only job offer, the information may not matter. But if you are choosing between colleges, money—yours and the college's—is an important consideration.

**Salary and benefits.** The CAO will have some discretion in determining your salary and will very likely expect you to counter. Ask whether there is room for negotiation—but remember that many of our colleges have set salary scales across divisions and within faculty

ranks, so don't expect much movement. The rationale for a larger salary should not be made on the basis of your qualifications. The college already knows your background and has offered you the job because of it. Instead, focus on things such as cost of living, your spouse's loss of income, and other offers. You also can bargain for moving expenses and benefits.

On the other hand, you are beginning a relationship with the dean and will no doubt be making other requests in the years ahead. Tact and grace go a long way no matter what the negotiation. You also should avoid asking for things that might have a negative impact on other members of your department, such as course reductions,

leaves, or exemption from committees or advisees. You want to be a team player from the start.

**Tenure processes.** It may seem early to ask about tenure, but it is not too early to clarify procedures. Since many of our colleges encourage participation in interdisciplinary programs in addition to departmental work, you should ask the dean which department or program will have the most input regarding your tenure decision. If your interest is in women's studies, but your department (say, psychology) will provide most of the documentation for your tenure file, you'll have to consider the depth of

your involvement in women's studies. Clarify those things before you sign the contract.

Pull it all together for your first year on the job.

**Get off to a good start.** Draw on the expertise and good sense that got you the position. Enjoy your classes. Talk with your colleagues. Attend campus events. Exude positive energy. Be humble. Get enough sleep.

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## Forum: Rejection-Letter Genres

The Chronicle *maintains discussion forums on academic work and life. Here is a recent thread in our Job-Seeking Experiences forum. To join the discussions, visit <http://chronicle.com/forums>.*

incredibly interesting materials that you put together to apply to our job, which we won't be considering you for anymore."

**Response: The Switcheroo.**

"Our search committee has now reviewed all applications for the advertised position specializing in *An Area of Specialization Never Mentioned in the Job Posting at Orbiting in Space University*. Unfortunately, your specialization does not match our position requirements."

(Seriously, I got one of these and did a double take: "What? I applied for a position specializing in lunar geology? I don't do lunar geology. Did I send an application to the wrong department? Did I misread the ad?" Went back, re-read the ad. Didn't mention lunar geology at all.)

**Response: [B]Ooops.** There's No Money for This Position. "We know we put you (and others) through phone interviews, campus interviews, checked all your references, but now it appears that we do not have the money for this position after all. We welcome you to apply again next year."

**Response:** My favorite is:

■ **We didn't even bother to look at your materials and obviously don't care.** Its variants included letters addressed to me as Dear Ms. Avdunkle, Dear Mr. Avdobrek, Dear Dr. A. Smith.[/B]

By the way, do any of you keep all of your rejection letters?

When I finally land a job, I want to have the collection as a trophy of my hard work. But I think it will come in handy when I get on a search committee and create the ultimate rejection letter that will defy any genre! I'll trademark it and make millions on the royalties: "Arne's Quick and Dirty

**Comment:** I'm devising a taxonomy of rejection letter genres. So far, from my experience, I've come up with these categories:

■ **Postcard or Mass E-Mail.** "Your application to Snooty U. is no longer active."

■ **It's Not You, It's Us.** "You really truly are special and a unique and valued human being, but we really had an astounding array of highly qualified applicants, and..."

■ **You All Suck.** "We had a kazillion applicants. None were suitable. We closed the search."

■ **Baby Announcement.** "We don't want you. But let us tell you all about the Chosen Person."

■ **Weirdness.** "We had a bajillion applicants. None were suitable. But you were great. Reapply next year."

■ **Dear John (Jane) Break-Up Letter** (after campus visit). "It was great getting to know you better and let's stay friends" (followed by handwritten note from the search-committee chair).

Any others?

**Response:** Here are two from my experience:

■ **The Black-Hole Rejection.** Apparently the sheer density of Important Academic Minds all located in such a small area prevents rejection letters from ever leaving the desk of the search-committee chair.

■ **Don't Shoot the Messenger.** "The search committee has asked me to inform you that you are no longer under consideration."

**Response: The pleasure is ours.** "We want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to review your



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