

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **THE ACADEMIC JOB SEARCH**

A PhD does not guarantee an academic position, and unfortunately the market for tenure-track jobs is very competitive. The very existence of a job in your field depends on a number of factors outside your control. The vagaries of the economy and specific institutional concerns, such as scheduled retirements, government funding priorities, and the wishes of donors may mean that there are quite a few jobs in some areas (such as world history or nineteenth-century Canada), but hardly any in others. No matter how successful a graduate student you have been, then, forces beyond your control may adversely affect your chances of getting an academic job. For those pursuing an academic career, we offer some advice on how to optimize your chances of academic employment, identify some pitfalls to avoid, and indicate some of the difficult decisions that you will have to make.

#### **Prepare Early in your Graduate Career**

The best way to prepare yourself for the uncertainties of the job market is to begin planning early in your graduate career. Get experience as a teaching assistant in the first couple of years you are in the program. Later, try to get experience by teaching a course of your own. While waiting for your supervisor or committee members to review your dissertation chapters, sit down and prepare your dossier. Design your dream course, write up your teaching philosophy, refine your cv, draft a job letter, and practice summarizing your thesis and its scholarly significance in a paragraph or two. When a job ad actually appears, you will be ready to respond. Don't wait until the last minute to apply.

You can also prepare by being aware of your online presence. As academics, our workplace is as much virtual as it is physical. The proliferation of social networking sites, blogs and personal websites raises a new set of issues for job-seekers. It is a safe bet that anything you post on the internet will be seen by a future employer.

#### **When and Where to Apply**

First, you will need to decide when to first enter the job market. This is not a simple decision, and it is one which generates a great deal of contradictory opinions. You should consider a variety of issues before deciding when to first seek an academic position. On the one hand, you may be encouraged to try your luck if you have gotten positive feedback on a publication or conference paper, or your economic circumstances might necessitate a temporary or part-time job search. On the other hand, the job market in your area might be quite dismal at the moment, or your supervisor might discourage you from applying on the grounds that such a move is premature and will hamper your progress toward thesis writing. While teaching experience will certainly help you get a

job, do not be fooled into thinking that sessional or part-time teaching will inevitably lead to a tenure-track position. And keep in mind that teaching positions are labour and time intensive, and teaching will slow down the progress of your own work, perhaps considerably delaying the completion of your dissertation. Of course, you may have little choice: financial pressures may push you into looking for part- or even full-time academic work prior to finishing your thesis. Still, think about your situation and ponder your options carefully.

There are a number of pitfalls to expending time and energy in looking for academic employment as an ABD (All But Dissertation). First and foremost, the chances of getting full-time academic employment, even on a sessional basis, are slim. At the very least, you will probably need to have a couple of chapters finished to show search committees and to ensure positive letters of recommendation. Preparing a curriculum vitae and covering letter is time consuming, and if your job search is unsuccessful the experience can be discouraging. Given the expectation of employers for a finished dissertation and even publications, and assuming for the moment that extreme financial pressures are not pertinent to your situation, you should ask yourself if a time-consuming teaching position could delay the completion of your thesis or book to the point that you might lose your appeal as a candidate for a permanent position. At the same time, as an ABD you may find that undertaking a modest job search when you are within a year or so of completing your dissertation can give you the experience and build up the confidence you will need when you enter the job market in earnest. Ultimately, the final decision is yours.

Once you are actively on the academic job market, you will have to decide where to apply. Job ads for historians in Canada can be found in *University Affairs*, the magazine of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada ([www.universityaffairs.ca](http://www.universityaffairs.ca)) and the Canadian Association of University Teachers' monthly *Bulletin* (<http://www.cautbulletin.ca>). In addition, the Job Guide of H-Net, a networking site for scholars and teachers in the social sciences and humanities ([www.h-net.org/jobs](http://www.h-net.org/jobs)), provides a comprehensive (although not exhaustive) notice-board and email postings for job openings in Canada, the United States, and abroad. Job ads are also listed in the American Historical Association's *Perspectives* (<http://www.historians.org>) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com/jobs>). Job notices are often posted on the human resources page of the website of the university that is hiring or sent to graduate departments for distribution or posting on bulletin boards. Your university probably has a career counseling centre, with services specially geared toward graduate students and information about academic employment in Canada and elsewhere. The career centre might offer an academic dossier service, whereby a copy of your cv, transcripts, and letters of recommendation are kept in a special confidential file ready to be sent out to prospective employers, perhaps for a small fee. The dossier service may be very useful once you enter the actual application stage of your job search. Deciding whether to set up a file with the dossier service depends on the number of jobs you are applying for and whether your referees are amenable to writing a new letter for each job you apply for. Having individually prepared letters for each position is ideal, but it can pose an unrealistic demand on your supervisors and other referees.

Many academics find that it takes a few years to land a permanent position, and successful candidates often move through one or more temporary positions – or postdocs – between the time they finish their thesis and take up a permanent job. However, there is no set pattern for job placements. Some people find permanent jobs very quickly, others only after many years. Often, economic factors, public policy, or institutional needs dictate the type of candidates hired. With these considerations in mind, you should try to be as flexible as you can when deciding what positions to apply for, and consider applying for a large number of quite different jobs. For instance, specialists in modern Britain may find themselves applying for jobs that want someone to teach Western Civilization or European history; historians of gender or sexuality might apply for positions advertised as social or cultural; and Latin Americanists or Africanists may have to teach World History. In these situations, you have to convince the hiring committee that your specialty is related to the desired field, that you are qualified to teach the relevant survey courses, and that your presence will strengthen the department. Historians have also found homes outside history departments; for example, in Humanities, Education, Sociology, and Criminology departments, or in law, medical, or business schools. Interdisciplinary programs, such as Aboriginal Studies, Law and Society, and Gender Studies, also include historians. Keep your eyes open for advertisements calling for applicants with a PhD in a particular field *or a related discipline*. If you are unsure if you qualify, send a brief email to the contact person listed in the ad and ask if an application from history would be welcome.

If your qualifications and research interests fit most of the requirements of a job, by all means apply. Do not try to second guess the motives of employers. Job ads are often deliberately vague because the hiring department has not yet decided (or cannot agree) on the sort of candidate they want, or because faculty are shopping around for an individual who can plug all the gaps in their curriculum or are harbouring fantasies about the “perfect” candidate. Departments occasionally hire candidates who barely fit the job description. Some job ads seem very narrowly focused, while others combine several fields, historical periods, and specialties. As long as you fit one or more of the requirements, apply. Chances are good that you will be on a relatively equal footing with most of the other applicants. If in doubt, it does not hurt to apply. You may be completely surprised and fall into a good position unexpectedly.

Once you decide to apply, ensure that you will be seriously considered for a job by producing an application that is thoughtfully and carefully prepared. The old adage that you only have one chance to make a good first impression applies doubly here. Faced with dozens, even hundreds of applicants, search committees routinely throw out applications simply because they fail to impress on the first read-through. Take the time to write up a high-quality cv and covering letter. The curriculum vitae, carefully proofread and on good quality paper, should include your teaching experience, education, publications, and awards. Usually, it begins with basic information about where you can be reached, and then moves on to post-secondary education, including details about your graduate degrees. List your dissertation title and supervisor, fields of study, and any honours or awards. Include teaching appointments (most recent first), any other work experience relevant to an academic position, and publications or conference papers. Last,

mention other items of relevance to a prospective employer: languages, administrative experience, and other professional work. Do not pad your cv or pretend to be something that you are not, as you will eventually have to prove yourself and may be quite embarrassed.

The same general guidelines apply to the covering letter. *Never* send out a form letter in response to an academic job ad. You should expect to re-craft your letter for each job. The covering letter should be succinct (1 to 2 pages) and link your research, teaching and administrative experience to the requirements of the particular job. Obviously, you need to fit a large amount of information into a small amount of space. You must explain how your qualifications fit the job by describing your dissertation and the courses you are capable of teaching. (Enclosing a course syllabus, published article, or short – 30-page – chapter with your letter or dossier would back this up nicely.) You must give a brief description of your current research, and/or explain how you are revising your dissertation. Opinions differ on whether to account for gaps in the timing of your employment or education. Some prefer to leave these gaps unexplained and let prospective employers ask about them. If your academic career was interrupted to raise a family (or for some other reason), you might mention it in your letter, but do not be defensive. It takes many drafts and a lot of time to produce a well-written, smoothly-flowing covering letter. Avoid selling yourself short. Put care and effort into your letter. And, once again, ask your supervisor or other senior colleagues to read your letter and provide feedback. Some larger departments have sample cover letters and cvs on file; others run job placement workshops and mock interviews. Take advantage of all these resources.

You will be asked to provide the names of references or to get professors to send letters of recommendation. Try to get recommendations that address both your scholarship *and* teaching abilities. Never hesitate to ask a faculty member to write you a letter of reference; they are standard fare in our profession. But do provide your referees with the time and information they need (ideally, including the job ad) to write the letters you want. Keep your references current. If you use a dossier service, make sure that the letters in it are up to date and that they reflect your current qualifications and situation. Leaving an outdated letter of recommendation in your dossier is a mistake; a letter which talks about the promise of a thesis proposal will not help you if you have actually finished your thesis! Make sure that when you finish your dissertation your letters are updated. Strong letters of recommendation are vital to your success or failure in the job search, so you must choose your referees carefully. The external appraiser of your thesis might write a good letter, particularly if he or she liked your work. But do not seek out referees who have an exceptional academic reputation but are relatively unfamiliar with your research. Try to strike a balance between reputation and enthusiasm. It is almost always better to have a glowing (and precise) letter from a lesser-known scholar than a mediocre or uninformed letter from a "big name." Find faculty who are enthusiastic about writing you a reference, and be cautious with those who seem reluctant or hesitant to do so. If possible, try to ascertain in advance if your intended referee is willing to write an enthusiastic letter or will "damn you with faint praise" out of apathy, unfamiliarity, or even hostility to your work. Remember, a bad letter in your dossier is likely to scuttle

your chances of getting to the next stage in the process: the interview. But also keep in mind that hiring committees will recognize and likely dismiss an unduly harsh or vindictive letter.

### **Affirmative Action**

Employment discrimination is illegal, and many universities in the United States and Canada also have affirmative action or employment equity programs intended to further “level the playing field” and remedy the effects of past discrimination. Most employment equity programs focus on the four groups that Canadian law recognizes as having been historically disadvantaged: racial minorities, Aboriginal persons, persons with disabilities, and women. In a very few departments of some universities, affirmative action may also apply to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals. Employment equity policies and procedures vary greatly from university to university. Some schools simply state that candidates from under-represented groups must be treated fairly and informed of their rights, others may give “preferential treatment” (for example, in short-listing) to members of designated groups, and still others use affirmative action as a “tie-breaker” – meaning that, if two candidates are equally qualified, the “equity-seeking” candidate must be offered the job. Excellence is the principal criterion for academic employment, however. You should assume that you will be treated fairly whether or not you are a member of a designated group.

Some job ads announce the university’s commitment to employment equity and ask job candidates to “self-identify.” If you belong to one or more of the groups designated for special consideration, we strongly advise you to self-identify at the outset of the search, either in your job letter or curriculum vitae. It is important to self-identify early because most candidates are eliminated from consideration at the short-listing stage, and this is when subtle forms of bias have the biggest impact. A hiring committee may be looking for someone who can replace a beloved colleague and “fit in” with the (homogeneous) departmental culture; they may question whether a candidate whose dissertation is on Aboriginal health care can teach Canadian political history; or they may be influenced by less-than-positive teaching evaluations that refer to a candidate’s accent, appearance, or cultural style. While some people are reluctant to self-identify because they want to get the job “on their own merits,” and others worry about calling attention to invisible disabilities, many schools’ affirmative action procedures do not apply to candidates who have not self-identified. If you feel you have been treated unfairly, the university’s equity office or faculty union may not be able to help if you have not self-identified.

### **The Interview**

The job interview is an opportunity for candidates and their prospective employers/colleagues to determine if they are compatible. Good interviewing requires significant work on both sides. Unfortunately, some interviewees find that anxiety and the desire not to offend makes them suppress their natural personalities and appear less

interesting than they actually are. And some interviewers seem more concerned with demonstrating their own erudition and impressing other members of their department than with learning about the candidate! Some interviews are models of propriety and efficiency, while others turn into hellish experiences for the candidate (and occasionally for the interviewers). But the horror stories should be put into the context of the dozens of other interview experiences where the candidates (even if not selected) felt that they were treated with respect and genuine interest. As strange as it may seem, interviews can be a genuinely enriching experience for everyone.

There are many things you can do to make the interview more positive. Thorough planning and preparation is essential. Do not hesitate to send ahead a reasonable amount of written material, even beyond what is requested, to make your scholarship more familiar to those who will be evaluating you. Ask what to expect in your interview, and learn as much as possible about your interviewers' teaching and research interests by checking out the hiring department's website. Do faculty members represent more than one age group? Are women and people of colour well represented? Practise presenting your work, for you can often re-focus a wandering interview by being able to talk about your work in a condensed but easily comprehensible form. A useful way to get a sense of what to expect in the academic interview is to get involved with your graduate department's own hiring process. Volunteer for hiring committees, attend job talks given by prospective candidates, and discuss them with faculty and other students.

Academic job interviews fall into three general categories: convention interviews, distance interviews conducted by phone or video-conferencing, and on-campus interviews. Most Canadian universities short-list candidates after assessing the written applications, but US universities generally conduct brief convention interviews before deciding who to invite for an on-campus interview.

### *Convention Interviews*

Many US departments hold preliminary interviews at large conventions like the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, held in early January. These interviews are grueling situations for all involved because many people are seen very briefly, perhaps for as little as fifteen minutes. Candidates must therefore be prepared to sum up their work in five minutes or less and to convey its importance without seeming arrogant or boastful – or apologetic. Try to avoid being too narrow or cautious in describing your scholarship, and be prepared to think and talk beyond the limits of the dissertation. Interviewers sometimes ask candidates to talk about general trends in the historiography of their fields or to discuss their long-term research agenda. You will probably be asked about teaching, so be prepared to talk briefly about how you would organize key courses. You can bolster your preparation and courage in advance by having trusted faculty and friends ask you difficult questions in a simulated interview before you go to the real one. Confidence is always an asset, especially at a convention interview where you have so little time to make a favourable impression. This does not mean bragging or listing honours. Real confidence is reflected in a willingness to offer genuine opinions and to

respond to thought-provoking questions. Do not expect too much from a convention interview. It is practically impossible to know what the interviewers thought. In fact, sometimes those interviews in which you thought you did poorly turn out to lead to the next step.

### *Phone and Video-Conference Interviews*

Phone interviews are generally similar in length to those held at conventions, and usually serve the same purpose: to reduce a large pool of candidates to a number small enough to be brought to an on-campus interview. They are used if a candidate is abroad or cannot get to the convention, or if the university has limited funds to bring candidates to campus. In Quebec in particular, they offer a way to evaluate French language skills. Occasionally, small schools or departments with limited funds will rely on them in the final hiring process, instead of an on-campus interview (although this is more common for sessional than tenure-track positions). Prepare for a telephone or video-conference interview as you would any other. Arrange to have the interview at a location that has a minimum of distractions; explain to your family and friends that they should not try to phone or disturb you at this time. If you have a choice, use a phone with a clear connection; turn off or ignore features like call-waiting.

### *On-Campus Interviews*

Once you have been short-listed for a job (either after a convention or phone interview, or from the pool of written applications) you will be brought to campus and put through a series of meetings and interviews. Once you know you have been short-listed, you should find out all you can about the hiring department, the demands and requirements of the position, and the nature of the interview. If someone on the faculty offers you his or her telephone number prior to the interview, make use of it to ask specific questions, but do not be swayed either by overly positive (or negative) characterizations of the department. Try to get a detailed interview schedule in advance, as well as some information about who will be evaluating you. Interviewers inevitably interpret your knowledge about the department as evidence of your interest and engagement, and will see its absence as apathy or disinterest in the position.

If you are short-listed, you may be told on very short notice (often only a week, sometimes two) so it helps to be prepared for the possibility. Some job advertisements are extremely specific about the research and teaching expertise they are seeking, possibly because they want a candidate to teach the survey or a particular course in the department. In this case, you should construct a basic the course to distribute during the interview – and be prepared to discuss it. Do not simply borrow or download someone else's outline; if you are unable to talk intelligently about "your" course, it will be the kiss of death! In addition to showing that your research fits the hiring department's needs, it is a good idea to try to link your work to other research centres and clusters in the university.

Always inform the hiring committee if you have special needs. If you have a mobility disability, hearing impairment, or any other condition that might affect your interview, the university is obliged to accommodate you. Also inform them of your dietary requirements or child care concerns. Ultimately, it is impossible to predict how any one individual will respond to requests for special accommodation, but most hiring committees will be happy to adapt to your circumstances.

Once on campus, you will be busy: the interview process can take one, two, or even three days. The structure of the interview varies greatly. You will almost certainly have a formal interview by the search committee or possibly the entire department. You will be asked about your teaching, your current and future research, and what you can bring to the department. (See sample interview questions.) Ask for rest breaks if they have not already been put into the schedule. Try to avoid expressing any ambivalence you may have about the job or its location. You may start out not wanting the job, but by the end of the process you may well desire it. Moreover, try to avoid becoming exasperated when, over the period of a day or two, you get asked the same questions and have to sum up your thesis many times over.

It is essential to be absolutely clear about what the hiring committee expects in terms of a research talk or teaching presentation. Often, interviewees are expected to demonstrate their teaching abilities by providing a guest lecture before an undergraduate class or a mock lecture before the faculty. The latter can be awkward, but remember that no one expects you to become an expert on the topic in such a short period. The key is to demonstrate that you have the basic skills necessary to teach at the post-secondary level and can discuss a topic that is not in your area of expertise. (The lecture topic is often, but not always, chosen by the host department). If a research presentation, or “job talk,” is expected, bring a prepared paper and deviate from it only if and when you feel comfortable doing so. Make sure you understand what the committee wants – a broad overview of your research or a more formal conference paper. If a formal paper is required, present your strongest paper, even if recently published. Remember that in most departments you will be talking to non-specialists in your field, so make sure your talk is general enough and is fully contextualized. It is also important to be sure that your talk is the right length, the right volume, and is delivered with minimal repetitive mannerisms. If possible practice in front of friends or supportive faculty members. It is best to deliver a talk like a lecture, and speak directly to the audience, rather than reading. Be enthusiastic but also succinct, and do not drone on about your work. If there is a question period, make sure you answer questions graciously, even if you think they are stupid, and be honest if you do not know an answer. Faculty members often talk about a candidate who gave a mediocre talk “coming alive” in the question period; this could be the moment you win the job.

It is a good idea to compile a mental list of questions to ask while you are on campus. When you meet with the department chair or dean, ask about teaching responsibilities and tenure criteria. Ask members of the department about enrolments and student profiles, resources and opportunities for faculty development, evaluation and promotion,

departmental structure, anticipated hiring, and library facilities. Also ask about how and when the department will make its decision. It is not appropriate to ask about the other candidates (other than "how many?") and a properly conducted search will keep that information from you until the final decision has been made.

Take the "informality" of any specific meeting or social event with a grain of salt. Even when you are out for dinner, you are being evaluated. You are better off sticking to generally observed formalities unless instructed otherwise, and you may wish to abstain from alcohol. Wear clothes you are comfortable in, but that show you want to be taken seriously. It is not necessary to dress like a Bay Street banker. Wear what you consider to be formally "dressed-up." In certain contexts, specific cultural dress may be accepted or expected. If you are unsure about dress, try to find out departmental norms in advance.

In the social situations of the on-campus visit, questions may surface about your personal situation. It is illegal to ask about your personal life, but this does not necessarily prevent questions from cropping up, sometimes inadvertently. Keep in mind that departments are evaluating you not only as a scholar but also as a potential colleague. They want to know if they will be able to work with you over a period of years. For example, while being given a tour of the town or city in which your prospective department is situated, you may be asked if you'd like to see the neighbourhood schools. While heterosexual couples with children may engage in such discussions easily, others may find questions about their personal circumstances, especially regarding marital status and children, difficult. But do not assume that the department will be hostile: Americanist Molly Ladd-Taylor was six months pregnant at the time of her (successful) interview at York University.

It is entirely up to you as to how to deal with probing or off-hand questions or remarks about your personal life. Feel free to discuss your situation if you like, but plan responses in advance if you wish to retain your privacy. You can always state simply that you have no personal commitments that would prevent you from taking the position. You will have to assess each situation as it arises and respond in a manner that you are personally comfortable with. On the other hand, don't feel that you must converse only about professional topics; it is useful and important to let people know about your other interests. Indeed, letting your interviewers know about what sort of things you like doing in your spare time (such as music, volunteer work, watching and playing sports, gardening, or collecting antiques) is an important means for them to get to know you as a potential colleague.

Handling innocent questions about your personal situation can usually be done with a certain degree of tact. But there are no simple or easy answers for dealing with overt prejudice or discrimination during the interview process. Comments about your appearance can be particularly unnerving. If someone compliments your looks or what you are wearing, you may wish to acknowledge it with a smile or a nod and promptly change the subject. If that fails, you can say that you would feel more comfortable concentrating on your academic credentials. If there is an implied insult, you may need

to challenge it directly, although if you still want the job you may wish to help the interviewer save face. You might try to defuse the tension with humour, or simply ignore it and try to move on. Remember that interviews can be stressful for both parties; it may be that no offense was intended.

In considering your response to offensive comments you will have to weigh various factors: is the entire department pervaded by a sexist/racist/homophobic culture (in which case you will have to ask yourself whether you want to become a part of such a department at all), or is it limited to a few individuals? Are you confident enough to challenge such comments directly at the interview, or would you rather let them slip by and address the problem later, after a final hiring decision has been made?

Even when everything goes really well in the interview, you still might not get the job. This is hard to take, but it is a fact of life in the current job market where universities have their pick of many extremely well-qualified candidates for each position. It is natural to be disappointed, but don't see it as a reflection of your self-worth. So many factors shape the hiring process that any one of a number of things could tip the balance. You might consider asking an approachable member of the search committee about your performance, but be aware that this is not common practice. On the other hand, if you and some members of the hiring department believe that you were treated in a discriminatory manner, talk with the faculty association or union there, and ask your supervisor to help you weigh the pros and cons of launching an appeal.

No amount of good advice can obviate the fact that interviews, and indeed the academic hiring process itself, can seem full of arbitrary interactions and unexpected decisions. A good candidate is enthusiastic, brings new ideas to the university, and shows the promise of future ability. Even if you don't get the job, you will have had a chance to practice your job talk and make valuable contacts. If you do get the job, enjoy your celebrations!