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How to Land a Job at a Small College

By Nancy Hanway

They arrive by the dozens, their contents swelling the color-coded files in my office. The job-application packages bristle with Post-it notes: cryptic comments from my colleagues or questions from the dean.

It's hiring time, and we're looking to fill an assistant-professor position in my department, modern languages, at a small liberal-arts college in the Midwest. And I am struck by the remarkable range of letters that we receive. A few are excellent—well written, tailored to the advertisement, from candidates who obviously did their research before sitting down to write. Some are terrible, ranging from wooden form letters to strange, inappropriate confessionals. Most are somewhere in that mushy middle: not awful enough to throw out, but not so wonderful that they inspire me to offer the candidate an interview.

I have to read them all. It's important work. From this group will come a colleague with whom I may work for the next few decades. At my college, I've gotten to know all my colleagues intimately, for better or for worse. We collaborate closely in curriculum planning, on committees, and sometimes on research projects. Our offices are on the same hallway of the same small building, and we often stand at one another's doorways, chatting before class. As a result, some of the colleagues I respect have become close friends. So I look at the stack of applications knowing that one of them is from someone I could be seeing at lunch for the next 20 years.

For a position in the language department—even at a small college in a rural area—we may receive over 100 applications. From this
group, we choose the 15 people we want to interview at the Modern Language Association's annual conference, before selecting the two we will invite to the campus. The entire process happens in late November and early December, the very worst time of the year for a college professor to do anything. Even if I spend just 15 or 20 minutes with each application, it means—with late-night meetings included—at least 30 extra hours of work that I need to fit in during the final, hectic weeks of the semester. The process is exhausting and difficult, rife with internal politics, weighed down by institutional history, and, in the end, decided by committee.

If you’re a job candidate, you should know all that. I read the applications with a sense of empathy for those going through this process—especially in the current job market—but I’m also exhausted, crabby, and impatient. Don’t give up, though. You should also know that writing a good application makes you stand out that much more.

If you are planning to apply for one of the increasingly scarce tenure-track jobs, particularly at a liberal-arts college, here’s what you should keep in mind:

**It's all about the letter.** The letter is the very first contact we have with you. It tells us a great deal about you, from your writing style to whether you spent time looking at our Web site. Most important, the letter tells us if you really understand the job. That is the key, and it is what, I believe, many job seekers ignore. When my department is reviewing your file, we are not investigating how smart you are or how well you remember literary modernism. We’re not grading you; your professors already did that for us. You're one of us now. We’re looking for the person who meets our needs. We’re looking for the right fit.

**We want to know your dissertation topic.** You are, and will be for many years, defined by your dissertation. It doesn’t matter how many fabulous courses with famous experts you took on any one subject in graduate school. If we're hiring in 20th-century Latin American literature, we're looking for a dissertation on that subject.

When you describe your dissertation, do it well. We expect your dissertation to be intellectually sound, interesting, and rigorous. But by rigorous, I don’t mean that you need to describe its theoretical underpinnings. (Hint: Describing in detail how Gramsci and Zizek influenced your thesis doesn't make you sound smart. It
makes you sound like an overeager grad student.) Give us the basic argument, along with a brief description of the texts you're analyzing, in two or three paragraphs. If we're interested after the phone interview, we will ask to read a few chapters. Then talk about your ideas for future research. We want to know that you have ideas beyond the dissertation.

**Convince us you're ready to work at a small college.** Your specialization is the first part of "fit," but not the most important. The most important part for us, at a small liberal-arts college, is that you understand what it means to work at a place where we teach six courses a year, engage in way too much committee work, and yet are still expected to publish. Do you understand the time you are expected to spend honing your teaching skills? Do you know how much time you will need to dedicate to students—in office hours, advising, leading activities? Do you understand that, despite the fact that it is really, really tiring to teach that much, you will also be expected to keep up an active research agenda?

As I read your letter, I search for evidence that you know this. I like seeing that you attended a liberal-arts college as an undergraduate. And I love that you said so in your letter. But if you never attended a liberal-arts college, don't despair. Only a few of our hires attended one—the concept doesn't exist outside of the United States, after all. Just make sure you say why you want to teach at a liberal-arts college, with a paragraph that starts off something like, "I'm especially attracted to a job at Smalley College because of my dedication to teaching."

Another important bit of advice has to do with the statement of teaching philosophy. Even though the job description may request such a statement, I, like many committee members, don't read them until the stack of applications has been whittled down to a manageable number. So don't stint on the description of teaching in your letter. Otherwise I may never get to your philosophy.

**Tell us why you want to teach here.** So why do you want to take a job at a college that happens to be bordered by cornfields? I don't think we're alone in that. There are many colleges in rural areas, and we all worry about attracting candidates. It's an important consideration for us. We're 70 miles from the Twin Cities, in a lovely little town with a thriving arts community and a kick-ass food co-op. Yet we have hired several junior colleagues who were miserable living in the area, and who left abruptly after, say, attending the dinner party of a colleague who was dating a
local pork farmer. ("But he was an organic farmer!" we wailed.) So we look at your résumé—Ph.D. from New York University, Harvard University undergrad, last spotted doing research in Paris and Dakar—and we worry.

This is a time when it is advantageous to show your desire for stability, as we believe we'll have a better chance of retaining you. ("I am especially interested in finding a job where I can put down permanent roots.") Or you might mention your prior experience living in a rural area. ("I was raised in a small town in Uruguay, so I think I would feel very comfortable in Petiteville.") Or, if you don't have either of the above (and assuming it's true), "I look forward to living in Dinkyton, as I have always thought I would enjoy the sense of community of a small town."

**Keep it clean.** Avoid grammar and spelling errors. One typo won't destroy you. And we don't ever expect nonnative speakers to produce perfect English syntax. But most grammatical errors in your application will keep you from making the cut. Get someone to proofread. If your best face includes spelling errors, you may be the kind of junior colleague who won't arrive at meetings on time, who misses deadlines, who cuts corners in ways that produce calls from the dean—in other words, the nightmare junior colleague that I have to baby-sit.

**Be clear and succinct.** Your letter should be written in 12-point type, with at least one-inch margins. It should be less than two full pages long. Above all, don't try to gain space with 11-point type and half-inch margins. I have 100 of these letters to get through before the meeting on Monday night, remember? There should be no long clauses, such as, "My interdisciplinary, exquisitely theoretical approach to my research, and my diverse, communicative-based, globe-trotting teaching experience have been the building blocks of the foundation of my academic philosophy. ..." Please. Imagine having to read that at the end of the semester! If I have to get out a magnifying glass, you're going into the wastebasket. Why? I fear that you would be the kind of colleague like a former co-worker at another institution, who talked a mile a minute, interrupted constantly, and wasted time at department meetings with long explanations about the fascinating building blocks of his academic philosophy. No thanks.

**Avoid giving Too Much Information.** I really appreciate hearing details about candidates who make them seem more
individual. For a small liberal-arts college, sometimes your hobbies ("cordon bleu chef" or "award-winning tango dancer") are useful for us to know about—you have a valuable cultural talent that you may be willing to share with students.

But don't be strange. Don't tell us about how your recent acrimonious divorce inspired you to learn Chinese, or brag about how your "elite, well-connected, international family" makes you perfect for the job.

**Don't hide gaps.** When a candidate is hiding something, it's easy to see. It is best to explain gaps in your résumé or that failure to get tenure. Tenure denial happens, and we know it may have nothing to do with you. We have hired people who didn't get tenure elsewhere. But we won't use one of our valuable interviews on someone who doesn't tell us about the tenure denial in a straightforward manner. So make sure you fess up, without getting emotional about it. You could say: "While I very much enjoyed teaching at Bigtime University, I did not receive tenure. As you will see from the recommendation letters written by my former colleagues, this decision was not supported by my department." (Or "... was not supported by the majority of my department.") Go on, tell us more, but don't diss the people who threw you out; it's bad form. Be brave and be clear, and finish by reminding us again how much you love teaching.

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**Above all, show enthusiasm for the job.** The anxiety of many job seekers shows through in their letters, usually in wooden, awkward prose. While I can commiserate, it does make me wonder if they really want to do this for the rest of their lives. So please show your enthusiasm. Nothing is more attractive to us jaded old-timers than that sense of youthful excitement (whether you are youthful in years or simply in career). I want to know that you enjoy being in the classroom, that you really have a passion for the work. I want to know that you've thought about how to translate your dissertation into a course for undergraduates. I want to know your favorite moments of teaching, how you use cultural artifacts in your language classes, what you like about technology. More than
anything else, I want to know that you love what you do, that all those years of grad school haven't worn you down so completely that you approach the job search with dread and self-loathing.

After all, when we see each other at the copy machine, I want our future selves to discuss the novel you're reading, to talk about the new class you're developing for the major, and then to head to the student union for lunch.

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