

An Accidental Job Search

Contributed by Peter A. Kindle, LMSW

By happy accident, my proposal was accepted for presentation at the 2007 Annual Program Meeting (APM) of the Council on Social Work Education. Accordingly, I decided to test the academic job market without my degree in hand. Forty-two e-mails netted 18 conference interviews in San Francisco that led to 27 formal applications, five telephone interviews, two campus visits, and one job offer. This article is an attempt to share the insights gleaned from my roller coaster ride on the academic job market in social work during the 2007-2008 academic year. I leave it to the reader to judge the accuracy of my insights. {mosgoogle right}

The Academic Job Market in Social Work

In 2004, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) attempted to collect data on 513 baccalaureate, 186 master's, and 66 doctoral programs. Enrollment was less than 50 students in 97 BSW and 12 MSW programs. The largest enrollment was more than 1,500 students at Fordham University (Office of Social Work Education and Research, 2007). Obviously, the social work academic job marketplace contains substantial variability.

Jean Anastas (2006) has provided an exceptional analysis of the employment opportunities for new graduates represented by job advertisements in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Her analysis indicated that the number of new openings for assistant professors was roughly comparable to half of new doctoral graduates, suggesting that "the prospects for academic employment . . . seem relatively good" (p. 200).

The competitiveness of the social work academic job market is weighted heavily toward research universities. These programs receive the bulk of applications and assess applicants against high standards. I was told by more than one search committee that tenure required five peer-reviewed publications annually in top journals with external funding in excess of \$2 million. On the other hand, I spoke with a number of attendees at the Baccalaureate Program Directors conference in October 2006, who indicated that job postings in small BSW programs often go without doctoral degree applicants. It seems that applicants chase jobs among research universities; in BSW programs, jobs chase applicants.

As one might expect, teaching loads tend to increase as one goes down the Carnegie classifications (see <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org>). Research Universities/Very High (RU/VH) productivity are currently at the apex, and applicants receiving offers from programs in these institutions can expect light first-year teaching loads, relocation assistance, high salaries, and research support. There is a tendency for salary, relocation assistance, and research support to decline with each drop in rank; however, this tendency is neither universal nor invariant. I spoke with at least one Master's Large (ML) institution that provided significant research support with a 2x2 teaching load. In general, however, I believe it is fair to assume that initial salary offers will decline by \$10,000 as one moves from an RU/VH to an ML institution. In like fashion, expect full reimbursement of relocation from an RU/VH institution, but only token assistance (e.g., \$1,000) from ML institutions.

The typical assistant professor job posting requires an earned doctorate, an MSW, and two years of post-MSW practice experience. Anastas (2006) reported that 81 percent of job postings required an MSW and 62 percent required two years of experience. My personal analysis of job postings in December 2005 suggests that Anastas's findings may actually understate the importance of the MSW and post-MSW experience.

The desired curricula area (practice, field, research, social policy, and HBSE) rarely defines the position completely. What Anastas (2006) calls "substantive areas" (e.g., child welfare, substance abuse, mental health, health, gerontology, etc.) are also important. I was unprepared to conceive of my future place in academe within a matrix defined on one dimension by curricula area and on another by substantive area. For example, the most common substantive area joined with policy is macro practice. Candidates for policy openings may be at a disadvantage without macro practice experience. Doctoral students are advised to review job postings to determine that their interests (i.e., curricula x substantive area) are consistent with search committee desires.

Search committees look for harmony among the applicant's experience, research agenda, dissertation, and teaching aspirations. Discord among these areas may constitute a barrier to academic employment. Large research universities may be more amenable to discord, but are likely to be more strongly focused on external funding potential. Smaller programs are less likely to embrace discord, but may be relatively disinterested in external funding.

The Job Search Process

When CSWE moved the APM to the fall in 2007, the job search process changed. Not only did the process move online, it also moved forward on the calendar. Last year, online job postings began in August with some closing dates for applications occurring as early as September. Candidates desiring conference interviews are advised to contact search committees prior to APM to schedule an interview.

Search committees ask for a variety of materials from applicants. Without exception, the job seekers can expect to provide a current vita, cover letter, and contact information for referees. Additional items may involve letters of reference, transcripts, writing samples, statements on research and/or teaching, and evidence of teaching effectiveness. In advance of a job search, students should obtain copies of all transcripts, student evaluations for classes taught, and, if available, single author publications. The first chapter of a dissertation is often used as a writing sample. Some programs ask for official transcripts, but I suggest providing only photocopies with the initial application, to avoid the expense. Many programs require an online application, so job seekers may want to consider obtaining electronic copies of all required

materials. Conversion of Word documents to PDF files is also suggested, and free software is available online (OpenOffice.org). Comprehensive guidance on all aspects of the academic job search, including preparing statements on research and teaching, is available from the Doctoral Student Center on the SSWR Web site and Chronicle Forums on the Chronicle of Higher Education Web site.

I was asked two questions so often that I believe job seekers should always be prepared with answers for both. A 60-second explanation of one's dissertation topic and how it is relevant to social work is an absolute necessity. Conference attendees can expect to provide this explanation in hallways, stairwells, and casual conversations, but it will also be useful in more formal interview settings. In more formal settings, the job seeker should also expect some version of the question, "Why our school?" Please note that it is not sufficient to merely have two-sentence responses developed for these questions, because the most interested individuals and search committees are quite likely to ask for further clarification and explanation. Research universities are also quite likely to ask about the external funding potential for the job seeker's research agenda.

Strangely, I do not think that applicants can expect search committees to look at their qualifications from a strengths-based perspective. Each search committee appears to screen applicants according to a set of idiosyncratic factors. Some of these are, of course, identified as requirements on the job posting, but there are unstated expectations, as well. A single deficiency is more than enough for a candidate to be removed from further consideration. With the possible exception of the strongest institutions, there appears to be little difference in adequately satisfying each factor and exceptional performance. Simply by way of illustration, two publications may be as efficacious in the job search as ten, if all other factors are also adequately met. The candidate with ten publications is unrealistic to expect the strength of his or her publication record to compensate for a deficiency elsewhere. In fact, quantity alone may raise additional questions from the search committee if every publication does not narrowly lead to the focus of the applicant's dissertation research.

What else can the job seeker expect? One can expect the vita to lead to conference interviews; however, I also believe it is important that the applicant realize the limitations of a conference interview. Search committee decisions are made by the full committee. Many conference interviews are convenience-based preliminary contacts with ad hoc campus representatives. No matter how wonderful an ad hoc meeting might be, it means little to the deliberations of a search committee. Applicants should carefully weigh the potential costs and benefits of participating in conference interviews. The more ad hoc the meeting, the less likely that anything positive will result. Remember, the entire search committee process is focused on deficiency. It may only take one questionable impression to stall a candidate's further consideration.

In comparison to a conference interview, a telephone interview is solid gold. An applicant who progresses to this point has made it through a substantial vetting process and has probably been rated at least adequate on every significant factor important to the search committee. If successful, the telephone interview will lead to a campus visit.

It is difficult to over-estimate the energy required for a campus visit. On my first campus visit, I was involved in a one-on-one interview for over four hours the afternoon I arrived. The next morning, the interview continued with different subsets of the faculty for more than ten additional hours. I believe it is absolutely essential to be well-rested before a campus visit, and to avoid any outside distractions while on campus. The relative importance of a research presentation to a teaching demonstration will depend on the focus of the institution, but I suggest that the applicant insist on utilization of PowerPoint in both cases. Nothing lends the flavor of professionalism to a presentation like PowerPoint, even if nothing is more important to a teaching demonstration than making connections with students. The key is to do both well.

Funding for campus visits should come from the institution, but it is worth confirming this when an invitation is received. I have heard of cases in which the institution did not automatically offer to pay the full cost of the visit. Only the largest institutions will prepay flights. This means that the applicant will often have to spend significant funds to make a campus visit. The wait for the reimbursement check will take at least 30 days after the institution receives the expense report and receipts. I recommend planning on at least \$600 of unused credit on a credit card for each campus visit.

Is a Premature Job Search Worthwhile?

My 2007-2008 job search experience was premature for at least two reasons: (a) I had not defended my dissertation proposal, and (b) the date of my final defense had not been set. In retrospect, it may have been a mistake to invest my time and energy in this search. Not only did I lose a significant amount of time that should have been devoted to my dissertation proposal; I also found waiting to be emotionally draining. My quality of life declined substantially as a result of the constant stress, and my writing productivity crashed. I have decided not to return to the academic job market until I have my degree in hand and two years of post-MSW experience.

This does not mean that I regret my decision to enter the job market in the fall of 2007. I think that I learned a great deal about my suitability for a future academic position and the type of position that I will eventually pursue. I also hope that, by sharing my experience, impressions, and insights, my student colleagues will find the pathway toward a tenure-track position smoother than it would have been otherwise.

References

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