

ADVICE

5 Easy Fixes for a Broken Faculty Job Market



By *Chris M. Golde* | AUGUST 04, 2019

As anyone who has been on either side of the faculty hiring table knows, the search process is hugely stressful, anxiety-provoking, and time-consuming. Increasingly the job-search system itself feels broken.

I say this as a professional career coach at Stanford University, where I help doctoral students and postdoctoral scholars with their job searches. The faculty job search takes a tremendous toll on candidates, who sacrifice days of research and teaching time to creating their applications and preparing for interviews. The members of search committees also devote countless hours to this task, as they pore over enormous dossiers of materials in hopes of identifying the best pool of candidates.

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My fellow career coaches and I see a lot of the negative aspects of this flawed system from the candidates' point of view. Two features stand out, particularly in contrast with how hiring is handled in most other labor sectors:

- First, academic departments are requesting an ever-increasing number of specialized documents in the initial application. It takes plenty of effort to craft a CV and a two-to-four-page cover letter. But many departments ask for much more: a research statement, a statement of teaching effectiveness (perhaps with a sample syllabus or teaching evaluations), a diversity statement (the newest addition to the list, but increasingly common), writing samples (a dissertation chapter for humanists, up to three articles for science postdocs), transcripts (I can't fathom their value), and reference letters (three is the norm; one candidate I know was asked for seven). The prompts vary from position to position, meaning candidates have to adjust their documents for every application. With so much information requested and so much competition for every opening, candidates are left legitimately wondering: "Is anyone reading what I wrote? How do they even have the time?"
- Second, the hiring process extends over about eight months. Typically, the first tenure-track listings get posted in August, with new ones added through mid-December. Interviews are conducted from November through March, and some candidates are still negotiating in May. For months on end, candidates' attention is diverted from their scholarship and teaching. Uncertainty about the future freezes many in place, unable to pursue other opportunities as they wait to hear the fate of their applications.

So what do we want from a functional faculty hiring process?

We want to match qualified candidates with positions in which they will thrive. We want a fair process free of bias based on race, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, or national origin. Both candidates and hiring departments desire a humane process that doesn't take up more time than necessary, drag on forever, or result in a failed search.

I am not a radical reformer. I don't have grandiose, game-changing, or Silicon-Valley-style disruptive suggestions to make. I do have five simple suggestions — things any search committee could easily adopt in the 2019-20 hiring season — that would improve our broken system.

Fix No. 1: Request reference letters late in the game, or maybe not at all. Many search committees ask for recommendation letters far too early in the process, resulting in the unnecessary writing of thousands of letters. This represents a massive waste of time.

Consider: If a department asks for reference letters from every candidate and receives 150 applications, that means each candidate has to secure three letters. Suppose each letter takes 30 minutes to write. That represents 225 hours of writing time — or the equivalent of five and a half weeks. And that doesn't include the time each candidate spends asking for (often repeatedly) each letter. If a candidate applies for 30 jobs, each of that applicant's three recommenders has spent roughly 15 hours writing these letters.

Faculty members do not have the time to craft effective letters — tailored to the position and the hiring institution — when they are asked to write them for every job a candidate seeks. And we all know those letters are filled with superlatives, raising questions about whether anything useful can be discerned from them.

Even worse, a particularly insidious and shameful practice has emerged: Some professors ask candidates to write their own letters, and all the recommenders do is sign. That is problematic from every angle. Candidates are in a terrible bind between two impossible choices: (1) Write dispassionately about yourself while ghostwriting in someone else's voice, or (2) refuse the request from a professor who is in a more powerful position than you, and whose imprimatur is crucial to your career.

Instead why not do as both the American Historical Association and the Modern Language Association recently suggested, and request reference letters only at the midstage of a search — once the pool of applicants has been reduced to 10 or fewer. That would result in a radical reduction in the number of letters requested and in more substantive letters.

The question is: Are reference letters truly useful at *any* stage of the process?

This is, perhaps, my one radical suggestion. We know reference letters are prone to bias — women are often described in less-positive terms than their male counterparts of similar qualifications. Ample research (including studies reported in *Nature Geoscience*, *Sex Roles*, and *Harvard Business Review*— here, here, and here) shows this happens across disciplines. There was a time when advisers picked up the phone and called around to place their Ph.D.s.; all kinds of systems of privilege were replicated. Nationally advertised positions and application packets emerged to level the playing field and focus tenure-track hiring on merit rather than networks.

But letters of reference actually divert committee attention away from a candidate's carefully assembled dossier, and toward who they know. Asking for references at the start of a search is also a huge obstacle for students if their adviser is missing-in-action, if their relationship with a professor has soured, or if they have an overly controlling supervisor who, for example, tells postdocs in his lab which of them can apply for which openings (odious true story).

I propose taking a page from the business world (or from the way academe hires staff members): Call references on the phone (no more letters!) in the middle or late stages of the recruiting process. That allows a search committee to ask focused questions and elicit a more well-rounded picture of a candidate than is provided by reference letters.

Fix No. 2: Every first-round interview should be conducted via video-conferencing technology. Most departments are already doing initial interviews that way, so let's make it the industry standard. It is a vast improvement over two problematic practices that still continue:

- Some departments skip the initial screening interview. They go directly from receiving an enormous pile of applications to inviting a handful of candidates to a campus interview. That approach is highly prone to bias, as people on the search committee have fewer opportunities to determine their shared criteria for the hire, and is inherently conservative, as fewer candidates get a full airing.

- In some fields (e.g., English, languages, classics, history, economics), the national-association meeting coincides with the tenure-track hiring cycle, and first-round interviews continue to be conducted in person during the conference. But unless a department is covering the applicants' travel and lodging costs to get to the meeting, the expense leaves many of them in debt — and all for a 20-minute interview as one of 10 to 20 candidates for a single position.

Scholarly associations should take a stand against conference interviews, and encourage departments to rely on videoconferencing and telephones to pare down the initial pool of applicants. In-person interviews have obvious advantages (like not having to worry about technology snafus). But talking with candidates via video or phone levels the playing field.

Search committees should devise clear criteria and ask consistent questions of each candidate to ensure they are comparing applicants along the same dimensions — especially if the task is spread among committee members.

Fix No. 3: Communicate clearly and in a timely manner. At each stage of the process, tell candidates when they are no longer in contention. You are not legally required to wait until the process is complete to inform nonviable candidates of their status. Don't keep them in limbo or force them to stalk the job wikis (too much mean-spirited chatter there) in search of information.

The same goes for the negotiation phase. After making an offer, sometimes the hiring institution's representative suddenly goes silent for days or weeks. That fuels the candidate's anxieties. At the career center we counsel candidates to respond promptly to a job offer, to be clear and professional in negotiating, and to avoid stringing a department along while they await a "better offer." Hiring institutions should follow the same etiquette.

Fix No. 4: Let candidates have personal lives. In American culture, and particularly in academic culture, work consumes the majority of peoples' waking hours. But we are more than our jobs. Candidates expend a lot of worry about whether — and how — to present their fuller selves to you, their future colleagues.

Women routinely remove their wedding rings because of the (sometimes well-founded) fear that they might be passed over in favor of a single, childless candidate. Applicants who either have children, or plan to, wonder whether, and how, to ask their prospective department (and institution) how family friendly it is.

Here are a few things departments can do to ease such fears:

- Don't wait for candidates to ask. Take the initiative and spell out the institution's family-friendly policies and practices to every candidate as a matter of procedure. Offer information upfront about area schools. If the institution helps with employment for spouses and partners, explain that to all applicants.
- Provide every candidate with access to a neutral and informed staff member who can discuss HR matters in confidence. This person can answer questions about topics as diverse as disability accommodations, tenure-clock-stoppage policies, parental-care resources, and access to specialized health care for transgender people. There are many things that candidates need to know in order to fully assess whether they will thrive at an institution but are reluctant to ask — either because it detracts from showcasing their abilities or because they fear it will result in their not being offered the position.
- A neutral staff member — someone uninvolved with the hiring decision — can help solve another problem, too. If candidates have a bad experience during the interview — for example, someone asks an illegal question or belittles them — they need to be able to inform the institution about that. Tell candidates who they can report such incidents to.

Fix No. 5: Put yourself in the candidate's shoes and represent the best of higher education, not the worst. While many job candidates I work with report they are treated with compassion, warmth, and generosity during their interviews, others report behaviors that have soured them on higher education. A few specific pleas:

- Do not ask job candidates you're interviewing to pay for their flights and hotels and wait to be reimbursed. Most graduate students live on the edge of penury. Asking them to front thousands of dollars is unacceptable. What's even worse: making them wait months for reimbursement.

- Don't make unethical requests in negotiations. If a candidate has more than one offer, it is reasonable to ask Department A to meet or beat the offer from Department B. These days, Department A may ask for evidence of the second offer but that presents an ethical dilemma when Department B's offer letter is marked "CONFIDENTIAL." In fact, a candidate I worked with last year faced this very quandary with two offers, both marked "CONFIDENTIAL." One department, seeking evidence of the other offer, assured the job candidate that the warning was meaningless, and that she should feel free to breach the implied request of confidentiality and share copies of the other department's offer letter.

Bonus Fix No. 6: Support Ph.D.s who pursue a nonfaculty career path. This advice is aimed squarely at doctoral advisers and department chairs. Academic culture continues to value the faculty path more highly than other careers, and many graduate students feel great pressure to conform. They also feel tremendous anxiety about revealing their decision to explore careers beyond the professoriate.

Let's be completely clear: It is OK for a graduate student or Ph.D. to decide not to enter the faculty job market and to choose another path. This is not a rebuke to you; it does not negate the value of your mentorship or your department's training. It is simply choosing another path. Make it easier on your advisees by publicly celebrating the diverse careers of departmental alumni. Let's make sure that every Ph.D. recipient and every postdoctoral scholar feels like a success in whichever career they pursue. Don't write them off.

One of the best improvements in graduate education in the last decade is that career coaches like me now can be found now at most doctorate-granting universities. We see the needless suffering of many job candidates, and we urge administrators and professors to help these talented people move with ease into their next professional chapter.

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