

# The Profession

## Netting the Big One: Some Things Candidates (and Departments) Ought to Know . . . From the Hiring Department's Perspective

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I read the articles on hiring in the March 1994 *PS* with great interest (Furlong and Furlong 1994; Zahariadis 1994). Having recently served seven years as a department chair during which I hired seven tenure-track faculty, I would like to review the hiring process from the perspective of the *department* rather than the candidate. Over those seven years, my department made 10 offers and had seven of those offers accepted. My goal is to clarify a number of points in these articles and at the same time share some of the things I learned about hiring that period.

The hiring process generally has eight stages, most of which the candidates do not see, but in all of these decisions are made that have an influence on the hiring process and on who ultimately gets an offer.

### 1. The Department Request to Hire

First, departments must request to hire, usually in the spring of the year before that during which the search is to be made. A department committee may make a recommendation to the department, the chair may make a recommendation based on a faculty consensus, or the process may be more formal. Our process was always a difficult one at this stage, because the California State University operates with a large part-time pool of faculty, and it is not unusual for almost 50% of the courses we offer in any one quarter to be offered by part-time faculty, persons with Ph.D.s who in some cases have taught these

courses on a part-time basis for a decade or more.

Job descriptions and hiring requests written by the full department at a department meeting can lead to detailed job descriptions full of requirements that no candidate can possibly meet and give the impression that the requirements have been written for one particular candidate. It is probably far better to have a small committee or the chair make up the hiring request so that the department can make the strongest possible case to the administration. The request can be commented upon by all the faculty, and the department can meet to discuss it, but one person should be in charge of making it as coherent as possible.

The strongest cases for hiring are ones accompanied by the elements of a strategic plan or at least a long-term case for where the department has been and where it is going. When I had my own strategic plan, I always felt I had a better case for hiring. On the other hand, making up a strategic plan and getting the department at least to acquiesce in it is a difficult process.

Normally the dean or vice president for academic affairs will give permission to hire. Once permission is obtained, preferably before the APSA meetings in September, the process can begin.

### 2. The APSA Meetings

The "meat market" referred to by the Furlongs does indeed exist, but I have a quite different perspective on it from theirs. I interviewed job candidates several times at the

APSA meetings and went through the process twice myself looking for jobs. Of all those times, only 1 of probably 100 interactions I had with candidates or with departments resulted in an interview. When I was chair and interviewing candidates, I met a lot of nice people, and I generally urged anyone who looked reasonably qualified for the position to apply. I left copies of the position description at the placement service and out on the counters at the APSA meetings. I also told many candidates who didn't seem to know much about the marketplace what the process was like and what they should expect. I critiqued a lot of vitas that left out important information. But I did no serious hiring or interviewing, and we never brought anyone I interviewed at the APSA meetings to campus for interviews. Why?

Candidates should remember that only a small portion of the candidates that a department will appraise during the search process will be at the APSA meetings (some good quality candidates do not decide to apply for jobs until after the APSA meetings), and the APSA meetings take place at a *very* early stage in the process. Departments change their views of the position as faculty get serious about the process during the fall, and most departments wouldn't make a serious hiring decision on the basis of 15 minutes or a half hour at the APSA meetings anyway. Even if you go out to dinner with a portion of the department's hiring committee, the likelihood that you have met a majority of the people who will be involved in the

process back at the department is small.

Also, some universities do not give departments permission to hire until well into the fall, meaning that the department representatives may be interviewing at the APSA meetings without an actual position in hand.

The bottom line is that the APSA meetings were a place where I spent a few hours meeting with candidates urging them to apply for the position if they looked interesting. My goal at that point was to get a decent-sized pool of candidates who will be seriously interested in the institution given our location (just east of downtown Los Angeles, not a place where everyone wants to live and work) and our teaching load (three courses per quarter).

### 3. The Job Advertisement

Almost every department advertises its job in the *APSA Personnel Service Newsletter*, and political science is fortunate in having such a well-established form of communication (some disciplines do not and still operate on the “network” principle). But the length of a *Newsletter* notice is limited, and some departments omit such important items as teaching loads. If the department offers to send a full description of the position, call and ask for it. If you have a question about the position, call the chair and ask, indicating your interest in the position. I always offered to send a full description of the position to prospective candidates; rarely did anyone ask for it. Seldom did candidates call with a question. But when they did, I remembered that and remembered that they were interested enough to call. It’s a small plus. (On the other hand, if you have nothing specific you want to know, don’t call. The chair will indeed remember you, but not favorably.)

The other thing that should be noted about advertising the job is that the *Chronicle of Higher Education* seems to pick up a different pool of candidates from the *APSA Personnel Service Newsletter*. It

was not until the last two or three searches that I advertised in the *Chronicle*, and then only because our Affirmative Action officer offered to pay half the cost. But the pool was quite different and included a number of assistant professors who were out there teaching and who were clearly interested but who obviously didn’t get the *APSA Newsletter*. The *Chronicle* is expensive but worth trying in some circumstances. And there are other places for specific subfields (the *PA Times* for public administration, and the area studies newsletters for comparative politics positions, for example).

My goal at this period was again to get a reasonable-sized pool of good-quality candidates, neither too large (for our committees, any number over 75 or 80 would be too difficult to process) nor too small (my experience is that it is difficult to hire from pools of less than 40 or so candidates). That means that I always included our teaching load to weed out those who wanted purely Ph.D.-level institutions and light teaching loads, and I always indicated that we were an urban, comprehensive university located in Los Angeles, and so forth. It’s easy to get huge pools of candidates—my colleagues in the English Department tell me that they have a thousand or more for every search they make. But a huge pool makes more work for the department chair or committee and indicates that you probably have a lot of candidates who aren’t interested in the position or in whom *you* are probably not going to be interested. I always felt that the more specific the job ad could be, the more likely it was that we would get candidates who were seriously interested in Cal State Los Angeles and its student body and in working in Los Angeles.

### 4. The Job Applications

When I look through a candidate’s file, there are specific things that I look for. I look, for example, for a letter that attempts to sell me on the candidate, summarizing the things the candidate has done that

are relevant to us and making the best case for the candidate. I always felt that the candidates whose departments send out their credentials, usually with a one-line or one-paragraph cover letter from an overburdened placement officer, were at a disadvantage. Candidates might consider writing separate cover letters if their departments nominate them, at least to the non-Ph.D. institutions to which they apply.

*Vitas.* It is interesting to me that even after years of advice on how to do a good resume, books on how to find a job, and so forth, a significant number of candidate *vitas* leave out important information. When I look at a *vita*, I want to know where you got your degrees, what years you got them in, what your fields were, what the title of your dissertation is and who your advisor and committee members are (for ABDs or recent Ph.D.s), and if your dissertation is not done, somewhere in the cover letter or somewhere else I want to know how much of it is written. If you did not go straight through school, I want to know where you worked, including job titles and dates, if it has any relevance at all to political science and perhaps even if it hasn’t.

I want to know your fields of specialization. Some candidates have teaching and research fields of interest, and that is fine if that is how you define yourself. But somewhere you should indicate what specific fields or subfields you are interested in. You should indicate, again as specifically as possible, any publications or papers presented, dates, pages, length of the manuscript and coauthor if there is one. If you are applying to research-oriented Ph.D. institutions, you will want to have a *vita* that emphasizes your research skills and accomplishments, but that will be a different *vita* from what you would send me or a small liberal arts college. If you have taught, I want to know the name of the course and the dates and whether you were a TA or taught on your own.

It is appalling to me after all these years to see how many *vitas* leave out important things or mix

up the papers presented at conferences with book chapters published, etc., in an effort to make a meager publication list look longer. If you are just starting out, you are not supposed to have a long publication list. What would be most attractive to me as a chair would be a graduate student who has just finished or is about to finish his or her dissertation, has given two or three papers at professional meetings and has one or two articles or book chapters in press. That is the kind of person who looks as though he or she will sustain that kind of progress over the difficult six to eight years to tenure and then after to make full professor.

*Student Opinion Surveys.* If you send out student opinion surveys of your teaching, consider *not* sending out the actual surveys with written student opinions on the back unless you are willing to make a written certification that these are the totality of the opinion surveys in the course. I assume that you know enough not to send me the bad ones and that you have simply removed the negative statements. I will read (and study) a statistical summary, but I don't even read individual opinion surveys in which the students have written how wonderful you were in this course. If you send the statistical summaries, be sure to include a cover page that explains what the scales mean and which end is favorable, unless that information is clear from the summary page.

*Publications/Professional Papers.* For beginning jobs, you should always send copies of professional papers or publications. Two to four are usually ample. We will read the papers for any person who has a cover letter, vita, and letters of recommendation that look interesting. We want to see how fluid your writing is, and whether you have organized your convention paper in such a way that a person outside the 30 people in your subfield can understand it.

*Letters of Recommendation.* Suffice it to say that I have learned to take these with a grain of salt. If your letters are very specific, in that

they talk about your performance in a graduate seminar both orally and in terms of the wonderful seminar paper you wrote, that's great. But many letters are relatively bland and are not very helpful in getting to know what a candidate is like. And referees who speak about what a wonderful teacher this person would make and state that the candidate will never write much are downright negative. There are almost no institutions left at this point above the community college level who do not want the faculty to do some professional work, and one of the biggest problems in the profession is the number of "aging associate professors" who have not done enough professional work by the standards of their institution to be promoted. I suspect that every chair is wary of taking on a faculty member whose letters state in one way or another that they are not going to write much. I have actually seen phrases like "never be much of a scholar" in at least one letter. Needless to say, such a phrase will not get the candidate the position at most institutions.

### 5. The Departmental Review of Applications

Zahariadis (1994, 98) calls the process of finding a job a "garbage can" model, and when department committees review applications, there is certainly an element of the garbage can model in that process. Departments generally work under the constraint of the job description and whatever fields and other attributes have been indicated as essential (i.e., required), desirable, and so forth. It is important to realize the department committees also work under a severe time constraint, meaning that their reviews of files are likely to be quick and that points the candidates want to make should be prominent in their cover letters and vitas. Usually, department committees do not do much reviewing of applications before the deadline date, but if the deadline date is December or January, the other constraint is that most departments will need to start the formal interviewing season by

the beginning or middle of February to avoid losing good candidates. Most interviewing is over by the end of March, and sometimes by the beginning of March.

The departmental committee then recommends to the department or to the dean the candidates who should be interviewed. Recommending that a candidate be interviewed is an important decision for departments in many institutions, for affirmative action officers and deans look upon a willingness to interview as an indication that the department believes that the candidates interviewed have met the minimum qualifications for the job. At California State Los Angeles our former affirmative action officer at one point advanced the proposition that any affirmative action candidate who met the minimum qualifications for a position ought to be hired before any other candidate, no matter how qualified, although most faculty would not agree with such a decision rule. (The statement, however, does indicate the context in which at least some departments hire.) Also, the more candidates interviewed, the less likely it is that the department or department committee will be able to coalesce around any one particular candidate. In short, deciding how many candidates to interview and whom to include in that group is a very important decision in many institutions and will structure the entire search process from then on.

Also, for many institutions, the decision to interview requires committing at least several hundred dollars and perhaps several thousand dollars to each department recruiting. The bottom line for candidates is again that you might not be interviewed for reasons outside the control of anyone in the department.

At some point in the process, the department chair or the chair of the search committee usually will call the candidates on the "short list" to see if they are still interested in the position and to learn where they are in the interviewing process. If a candidate is far along in the interviewing process somewhere else, he or she might move down in priority upon receipt of

that information on the likelihood that the institution will not be able to move fast enough to make an offer in time. If I were a candidate, I would be cautious about indicating that I was about to get an offer unless I actually had the offer in hand and was about to accept it. Other than that, there is too much likelihood that you will not get the interview if you respond with anything other than that you are still interested in the position (if in fact you *are* still interested) and perhaps that you have already had an interview (if in fact you have had one). But I would not say more than that. Candidates who come on strong with demands for a quicker process in my experience will reduce the probability of their obtaining an interview.

## 6. The Interview Stage

If you are called for an interview, most likely you have had some conversations with someone in the department already. At some point, you might ask diplomatically how many candidates are being interviewed. If the number is one to three, the department is serious about you. If the answer is more than three, don't start hiring movers. I once had a call from someone who said they were down to a 20-person short list from 150 candidates. The tone in his voice suggested I should be pleased about making the 20-person list. I just laughed. If they are interviewing more than three candidates, they may have an ongoing lecture series every week or two that you are to be part of. Or the committee may be so divided that they have decided to interview every candidate that anyone likes. Or they can't agree on the attributes of the ideal candidate. But it's usually not a good sign in terms of your obtaining an offer.

There's not a lot that a candidate can do after one applies to move up on the list and obtain an interview. Sometimes the faculty at one's Ph.D. institution can make a personal call or send a short note saying that they really meant it when they said all those nice things

about you, but the decision is really in the hands of the local committee. It was rare that anyone who called about a specific candidate told me anything that changed the ranking of that candidate at our campus.

When you do interview, as the Furlongs state, you should definitely obtain descriptive materials about the institution and the department. Actually, the chair should offer to send them, but if s/he doesn't, you should definitely ask for them and obtain them somehow, even if you have to sit in the library and read the department and university descriptions from a microformed catalog. I have sat on innumerable administrative search committees where we felt that the candidates *should* have researched the institution but found they hadn't. Finally, I decided that departments and committees should get as much information in the hands of the candidate as possible. It simply makes for a better interview.

The most important thing about the interview is how the candidate handles himself or herself intellectually. Most departments are past the point where your clothes make much of a difference (although at the extremes factors like that can be important), but how you handle yourself in the classroom, talking with the faculty, and in your colloquium are crucial. We expect that you will know a lot about a little—that's what Ph.D. candidates are supposed to do. But we also want to know how you react to hostile questions, how you handle shy students if you are asked to teach a class, how defensive you become if someone attacks you, whether you will make something up to stop a persistent and obnoxious questioner, how much depth and scope you have about the significance of your topic. In short, we want to know how much intellectual maturity you show about the areas in which you claim competence. Much of the rest is fluff.

The candidate probably wants to know about the facilities on the campus, the library, computers, how one's prospective colleagues interact with one another, the tenure process and criteria, and so on,

and those are all things that are relevant for a candidate. But we want to know how well you will teach, how much depth there is in your thinking, how much breadth and knowledge you have about the field of political science and your subfields, and whether you have some ideas about what the implications are for future papers, books, et cetera, of whatever it is that you are studying for your dissertation. Those are the things that make for quality teaching and a professional, scholarly career that goes beyond finishing your dissertation.

We generally found that a one-day or just over one-day interview was more than sufficient. Longer interviews leave the candidates with too much empty time, and they wonder why they are on campus. With one evening meal, the committee can get a sense of what the person is like informally, although again, the most important considerations are in the two preceding paragraphs.

Take note of how the department handles your travel reimbursement. Did you fill out the forms while you were there so that your reimbursement could be processed promptly? They are probably going to treat you as well as or better than anyone currently on the faculty. View how you are treated on your travel reimbursement as a sign of how well the institution is run.

If someone on the faculty tells you that you are the leading candidate, again, take it with a grain of salt. Everyone is probably feeling good on the day of the interview, particularly if you did well in your presentations, but remember that they may have more interviews coming up and that the real thinking about an offer doesn't occur until after you leave.

## 7. After the Interview

Candidates can send thank you notes if they want, although they are hardly required and do not do much. The crucial thing for the department after you leave and the interviews are completed is to decide whether they will recommend making you an offer.

Usually that decision will go from the chair or search committee to the full department and then the chair will make a recommendation to the dean. Along with the recommendation will come the affirmative action forms detailing how many applications were received, how many were interviewed, how many were final candidates, and all that. With the recommendation to the dean comes the most crucial item for many departments: the justification as to why X candidate is being recommended and Y is not. Needless to say, this is the point where one has to justify, for example, not hiring an affirmative action candidate whom you have interviewed or not hiring the candidate the dean thinks is best, and it is easy to have problems arise at this stage. The department must also decide what salary or step level to recommend, how many years to credit toward tenure, whether to make a computer part of the offer and what kind of moving package to recommend and who should pay for it.

It is easy for the "sorry you didn't get the job" letters to sink to the bottom of the priority list when making offers involves such a complex process. And administrators have their own priorities. Things can happen to delay or stop the process until the moment the offer goes out, and candidates should not count on anything said until they have something official on paper.

### 8. Negotiating an Offer

Often the chair will sound out the candidate on how a given salary level sounds while the interview is going on, indicating as well what other things might happen

(computers, moving expenses, and so forth) if the candidate receives an offer.

The bottom line for candidates is (1) not to bring these things up during the interview unless the chair or the committee does, and (2) to negotiate everything once the university decides to make an offer.

Once they decide, you can certainly ask about anything. I always had a personal rule of never accepting a first offer, but I have been endlessly surprised with the number of candidates who immediately accepted our first offer. Even in the California State University, one of the more rigid systems of higher education in the United States today, we negotiate things like teaching loads for the first year or two, provision of a computer in one's office, moving expenses, salary, etc. I would be remiss if I did not say that these things changed considerably over the period when I was chair from 1986 until 1993 and that the willingness to provide extra things varies according to how much the department wants you and (at least on our campus) your affirmative action status. But it never hurts to ask, and the worst that can happen is that the chair will say no or that it is just impossible.

And in all honesty, you have more leverage before you accept the offer (think about what the department has been through to get the university to make you the offer) than you will ever have until you get *another* offer. So ask.

### Conclusions

Adding a faculty member to an academic department is like invit-

ing an adult to live in a family, certainly not a choice to be made idly, but on the other hand, we *are* talking about adults here. Candidates should not read much of anything into whether they get interviewed at the campus after the APSA meetings, whether they receive offers after interviews, and so forth. The truth is, aside from your intellectual ability and capacity, most hiring decisions are made for reasons related to the hiring university's problems and not because of something the candidate said or did. And the situation in political science is going to remain tough on candidates as long as there are many more candidates than there are academic positions, a situation that has existed for approximately two decades and shows little sign of change. That is a factor of supply and demand that will inevitably lead to all of the seemingly bizarre factors highlighted in Furlong and Furlong (1994) and Zahariadis (1994).

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### References

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