

## Netting the Big One: Things Candidates (and Departments) Ought to Know\*

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While sitting in the waiting area at the 1992 APSA Placement Service, one has plenty of time to check out the competition. When we overheard one potential competitor—sporting a Harvard name tag—explain to his friends that he had removed his wedding band for the duration of the interviews, we began to wonder just what it would take for two political scientists to find teaching jobs in 1992–93. After spending over \$500 in postage, mailing 190 applications, and waiting one long anxious year, we found out. This article describes our search for tenure track employment in political science. It provides an in-depth look at the process and some of the costs, and may raise a few questions about hiring practices in higher education.

Since the job search experience has much to do with the credentials of the job seekers, we feel obligated to tell you a little about ourselves. Deborah received her Ph.D. in International Relations in 1990 from The American University, where she focused on International Political Economy and Methodology. She has taught graduate research methods as an adjunct faculty member for three years, and recently received an award for “Outstanding Teaching” from American’s School of International Service. Scott completed his dissertation in November 1992 and received his Ph.D. in Political Science, also from The American University, where he focused on American Government and Public Policy. He has co-authored an article and has presented papers at the past four APSA Annual Meetings. He also has a Master’s in Public Administration, and has worked for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for six years. Early in the job search we decided that we would go almost anywhere to pursue teaching careers.

### Managing an Exhaustive Job Search

Even before arriving at the APSA Placement Service in Chicago, we knew that finding tenured-track positions within driving distance of each other presented a difficult challenge. The intense competition in Chicago led us to believe that our best strategy was to apply to all positions that fit our capabilities. We started our exhaustive job search by asking to speak with many colleges and universities interviewing at the Placement Service.

Anyone who has gone through this arduous process can remember the “meat market” atmosphere at the four-day Annual Meeting placement process. Potential applicants submit multiple copies of their resumes for interviewers to review. Departments submit job descriptions that candidates can peruse. The Placement Service numbers the jobs, numbers the applicants, and provides mail boxes for communications between the two sets of players. If an interviewer reviews the resume of an interested candidate, and feels there is a potential match, an interview is scheduled. Interviews take place at a specified table (also numbered!) in a large ballroom. In Chicago last year as many as 100 interviews could occur simultaneously, creating an atmosphere not unlike the floor of the stock market on a busy day. During the four-day period, Deborah had ten of these “interviews” and Scott had nine.

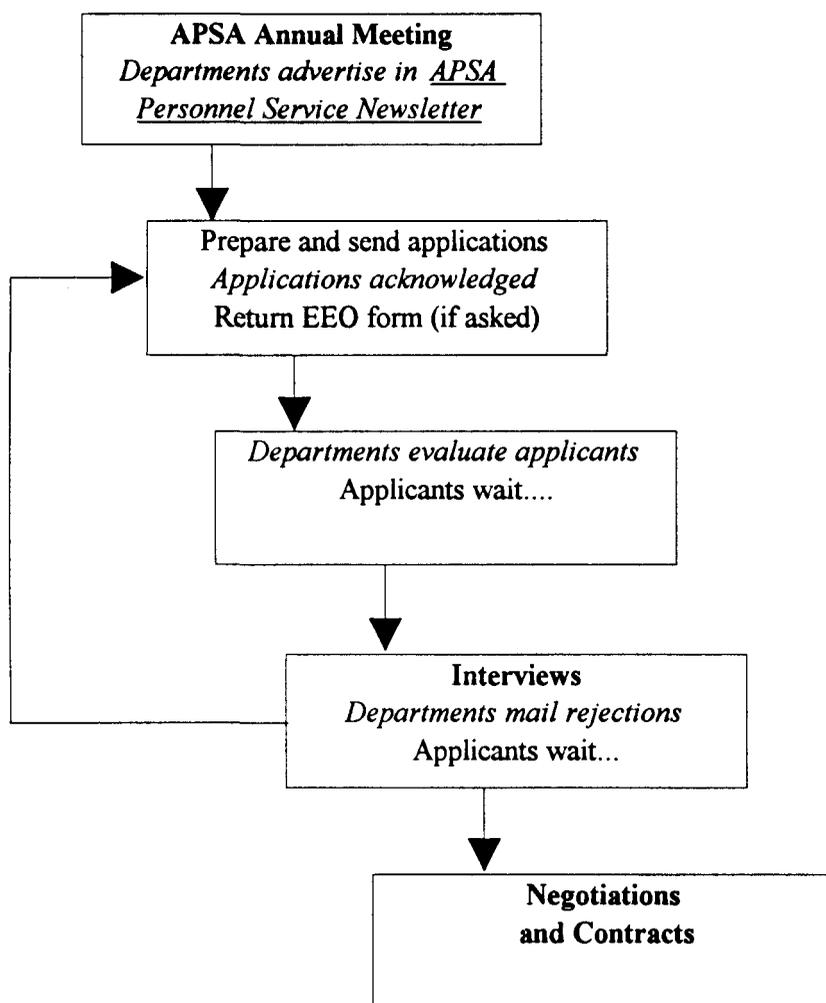
We came home from the Annual Meeting feeling totally drained, and somewhat relieved that it was finally over. In fact, the search had only just begun. Figure 1 diagrams the major steps in the job search process, starting with the Annual Meeting and initial advertisements, moving through several months of communicating with institutions,

and concluding—at least for us—with a job offer. For many job seekers, this process actually continues for several years until they find a suitable position.

Between August and March, we mailed 190 application packages in response to positions announced in the APSA *Personnel Service Newsletter*. Scott applied to 93 positions and Deborah applied to 97.<sup>1</sup> Each application contained approximately 40 pages (cover letter, vita, teaching evaluations, writing samples, research agenda, syllabi of courses we have taught, and transcripts) and cost approximately \$2.50 to mail. In all, our job search generated over 7,600 pages of paper and cost over \$500 (postage, paper, envelopes and labels).<sup>2</sup> Insuring that 570 letters of reference ended up at their designated locations presented interesting logistical challenges as well. We spent many weekends and evenings in the fall copying materials, coordinating packages, stuffing envelopes and waiting in line at the Post Office.

Most colleges and universities (68 percent) acknowledged receiving our applications within one month, although some took significantly longer, and close to five percent never acknowledged our applications at all (see table 1, presented in the next section). In general, the institutions’ acknowledgements included an affirmative action form for applicants to complete and return. These forms generally requested that an applicant provide his or her gender, age, race or ethnic origin, disability and veteran status. The questionnaires varied widely from school to school, indicating that the legal requirements are somewhat ambiguous.<sup>3</sup> Mailing in the affirmative action forms (frequently at the applicant’s expense) completes the second step of the process, and initiates the long waiting period. The next section pre-

**FIGURE 1**  
The Job Search Process



**Bold ....** indicates activities that involve candidates and institutions  
*Italic....* indicates institutions' activities  
 Normal.... indicates candidates' activities

sents some descriptive statistics about how this process worked for us.

**Job Search Process**

Going into this process, we had no idea how long it would take departments to make their hiring decisions. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics associated with three different time frames: first, the length of time from when we sent our application until the departments initially responded; second, the time between the initial response and the department's final correspondence to us (e.g., rejection letter, canceled position, etc.);

finally, the full length of time between when we sent our application and the department's final correspondence.<sup>4</sup>

The statistics shown in table 1 provide a view of the time span of a job search. As shown by both the mean, and especially the median, most institutions' initial responses to our applications arrived in a respectable time (less than a month). In fact, the 18-day median suggests that over half the schools must have sent out a response almost as soon as they received our application, long before they begin evaluating the candidates. However, twenty percent of our initial response letters came from departments that apparently review many

applications immediately: these used a single letter to indicate they had received our applications and were not interested in our credentials. (Those efficient schools had "0" days between their initial response and their final correspondence!)

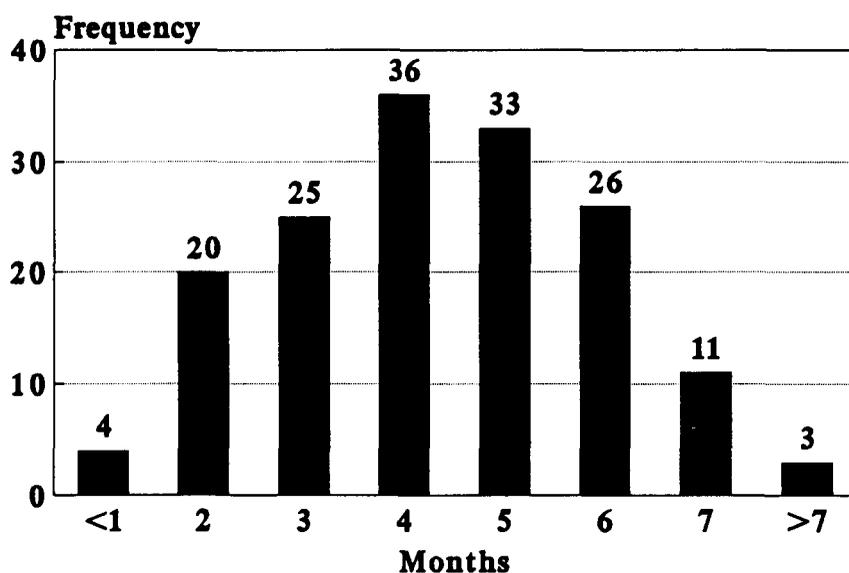
Opening rejection letters is never easy.<sup>5</sup> We started dreading the daily trip to the mail box in early November. The first really disappointing rejection letter arrived on Christmas Eve. Deborah had recently interviewed at a university in an area that held relatively few opportunities for Scott. Scott's "Christmas Eve Rejection" came from a nearby institution. That rejection raised questions about whether Deborah would accept the position if offered. (In the end, she was not offered the position, preventing us from having to make that difficult choice.) In all, institutions took almost four months (115 days) to act upon our applications. Approximately fifteen percent took over five months to provide us with a final response, and we are still receiving them well into the summer. While the process seemed totally chaotic from our perspective, apparently our experience was in fact quite "normal" (as shown in figure 2).

**Job Search Outcomes:  
Nibbles, Visits and Jobs**

The applications we placed generated several different types of responses. Some departments canceled their positions due to budgetary problems; others sent us speedy rejections, leaving no question about our standing in their search. Approximately ten percent of our applications generated some kind of "nibble," two percent invited us for campus visits, and one university offered a position (which Scott accepted). This section describes the nature of the contacts and campus visits, and offers some lessons about the current job search process.

By late fall, the fishing analogy had grown increasingly useful in our house. "Nibbles," as anyone who has fished knows, come in

**FIGURE 2**  
Time from Application to Rejection



n=158

many different shapes and sizes. We defined a nibble as any indication that our application had made some initial cut. The first nibble came in November, in the form of a phone call. A department chairman called around 8:30 on a Sunday evening to speak with Deborah (who now will never know why that Texas cheerleader's mother hired a killer to slay her daughter's best friend's mother). University contacts phoned us at work and home, and at various times of the day. Although it was exciting to receive these calls, they always seemed to catch us off guard and to leave us feeling fully aware of how little control we had over the process that would decide our future. Many other nibbles came as rejection letters that indicated we had

made some "short list" of candidates prior to being cut.<sup>6</sup> Short lists ranged from five to about twenty. In all, Scott received seven nibbles from his 93 applications, for a nibble rate of eight percent, and Deborah received eleven nibbles from her 97 applications, for a nibble rate of eleven percent. Interestingly, two of Deborah's ten interviews at the APSA Annual Meeting generated campus visits; on the other hand, none of Scott's APSA interviews generated nibbles of any kind (bad hair day? outdated suit? bad luck?).

Throughout the year we both had "nibbles" that we threw back. On two occasions, Deborah essentially withdrew her candidacy when she received an invitation to visit. Both colleges were in relatively remote

locations where Scott's applications had been rejected already. Other institutions in those areas had not announced any openings for Scott, and other types of employment seemed scarce. One interesting nibble came from a university that asked Deborah to teach a course as an adjunct faculty but did not interview her for its tenure track opening.<sup>7</sup> Scott threw back his last nibble in July, because he had already accepted a position.

The first major nibble that led to a campus visit came in early November. Between December and March we each visited two institutions. Two were mid-sized, public, four-year institutions. One is a doctoral granting public institution. The last one is a medium sized private university. Three of the departments asked that we put travel expenses on a credit card. All of them reimbursed us rapidly. When the campus visit required a plane ticket, they always asked if it would be possible for us to stay over a Saturday night (to keep the fare as low as possible).

Deborah's first visit included lecturing to an undergraduate class at 8:00 in the morning, meetings with committees, the chairman and a dean, presenting a research paper to an open forum and sharing two meals with various faculty members. And all in one day! She came home exhausted, but felt like things had gone relatively well. She was impressed with the warmth of the faculty and students she had met, and felt sure the university would be a good place to work. She was not aware of heinously offending anyone, which is about the best one can hope for in these situations. The department chair called a few days later and said that the university had directed the department to interview a minority candidate before making the final hiring decision. Quite frankly, that seemed like a bad omen. Since the department only had one female faculty member, we had expected that it would be pleased to find a qualified female candidate, even if she was not a minority. In any event, the department planned to conduct that last interview in January. A letter arrived in late Febru-

**TABLE 1**  
Descriptive Statistics of the Job Search Process

	Number of Days from . . .		
	Application Date to Initial Response Date	Initial Response Date to Final Correspondence	Application Date to Final Correspondence
Minimum	6	0	11
Maximum	202	248	259
Mean	34	79	115
Median	18	86	116
Standard Deviation	38	56	47
N	182	158	158

ary indicating that the department had hired another candidate.

Scott's first visit occurred in March, and included several meetings and shared meals, and a research presentation, but did not include lecturing to a class. As with Deborah's first visit, Scott came home exhausted but excited. The position seemed like a "good fit." The department moved quickly, however, and within a few weeks informed Scott that they had offered the position to another candidate.

A few days after Scott came home, Deborah left for her second visit. This trip lasted two days. Unlike the others, this interview did not follow a pre-determined schedule of meetings and events. The chairman had asked her to prepare a lecture for a course on race and class that met on Fridays, but she ended up delivering a lecture to a course on Latin American politics that met on Thursday. She had about an hour to pull her notes together and re-orient the lecture. To make the experience even more stressful, one of the school's Vice Presidents attended her lecture. Despite this, the class went well and a student stopped her on campus later that day to follow up with some questions. The schedule for the remainder of the trip left many hours open for Deborah to walk around the campus. In all, the visit seemed to go well. One faculty member actually told Deborah that she was the top ranked candidate, and several faculty members indicated a strong desire to hire a female applicant. At the end of the visit the chairman indicated that he would either call or e-mail Deborah with the results of the search committee's meeting the following Tuesday. By the end of that week, after not hearing from the department, Deborah sent the chairman an e-mail thank you note, and the following week she sent a regular letter of thanks to the department and students. Over one month after the campus visit, Deborah received a standard rejection letter in which we learned another person, a man, had been hired. The letter in no way acknowledged her interview or her seemingly strong candidacy.

Scott's second visit lasted four

days and included meetings with the chair, the search committee, other faculty members, the Dean, and a number of students. He presented his research to the faculty members on one day and presented a lecture to an environmental policy class the following day. Once again, Scott returned home exhausted but sensing a good "fit" between the department's needs and his credentials. The Search Committee felt the same way: Scott received a tentative offer within a few days, and within a few weeks our fates were sealed!

At this point, it seems useful for us to summarize some of the things candidates might encounter during campus visits. First, as soon as a search committee issues an invitation, candidates should request a set of descriptive materials about the institution and department. We found receiving materials prior to the visit quite useful in our own preparations. Second, candidates should begin asking for a schedule of events so they will know what kinds of activities the visit will include. However, candidates should realize that schedules will change, and they should be flexible. Third, we both found preparing a list of questions to ask the Search Committees minimized the length of those awkward pregnant pauses and ensured that we covered topics important to us. Fourth, candidates should take every opportunity possible to practice speaking in public. All interviews include presenting either research or class lectures, and many include both. Candidates who have not taught or presented conference papers should set up a mock presentation with their own peers prior to the campus visit. Fifth, candidates often have to pay for the trip up front and have the department reimburse them for expenses. Consequently, having a high credit limit can help. Finally, candidates will do a lot of walking, so wear comfortable shoes!

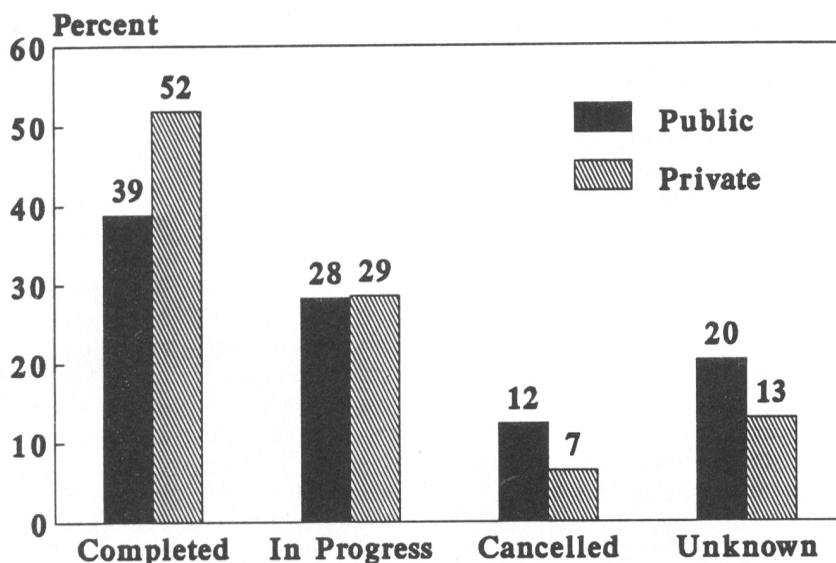
By mid-July, 83 percent of the institutions had informed us of the final status of our applications. The rejection letters reveal interesting things about the hiring process and the state of higher education in the early 1990s. Overall, ten percent of

the institutions canceled or significantly altered the positions to which we applied. However, public institutions had a cancellation rate almost twice as high as private institutions. This surely reflects the budget crises in state-funded higher education. Public institutions were also more likely to leave us hanging, and not send a rejection letter. Also, whereas 52 percent of the private institutions' rejection letters indicated the position had been filled, only 39 percent of the public institutions had completed their searches at that point. On the other hand, places with searches in progress responded more rapidly than those that waited until after the job was filled to mail the rejection letters: the "In Progress" rejection letter arrived about 98 days after our application dates, whereas the "Completed" rejection letters took about one month longer to arrive. Figure 3 indicates the status of the positions according to our final communication with the department.

The rejection letters tell other interesting stories about the search process and the current state of higher education this year. First of all, over half of the rejection letters we received specifically noted the massive number of applicants. The "unprecedented number" of "many outstanding" and "extraordinary qualified" candidates produced an "unusually heavy volume" by submitting an "overwhelming number" of applications. Although most departments relied on these colorful adjectives to describe the response, 35 of them stated the number of applications they received. Those 35 institutions alone received over 5,300 applications this year! Figure 4 provides the frequency distribution of applications received per position.

Whereas some rejection letters referenced the large applicant pool as an explanation for the delay in their ability to process our applications, most referred to the large number of applicants in an attempt to explain why we had not been selected. The economics of supply and demand might "explain" why many will be left unemployed in an aggregate sense, but at the personal level the fact of the matter is that

**FIGURE 3**  
Position Status by Institution Type



**n = 190**

you are either hired or you are not. Quite frankly, from the perspective of the job applicant who is not selected, it does not matter whether the applicant pool consisted of two, or two hundred. To the individual, the fact that there were two hundred other applicants does not explain why one particular individual was not selected. The bottom line is that another applicant better met the department's needs.<sup>8</sup>

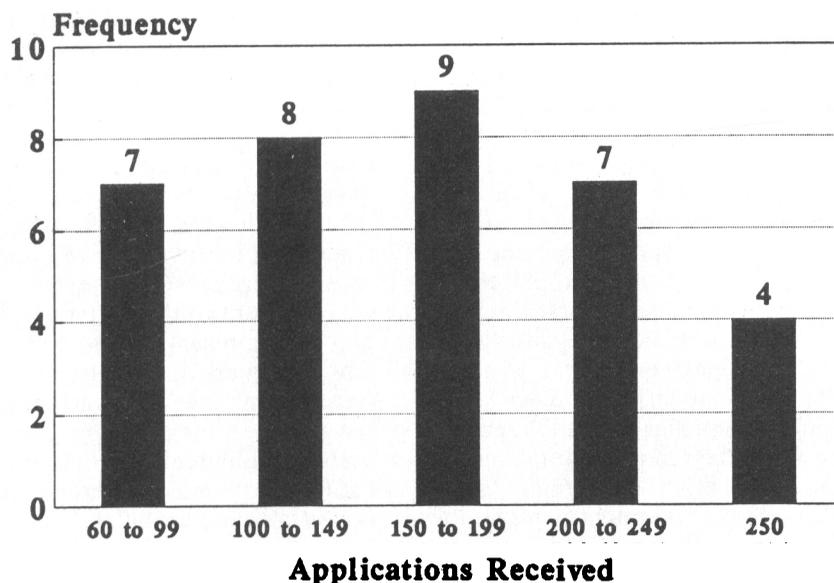
Whereas some departments depersonalized the rejection process by focusing on the nature of the job market, others took a more personal approach in their rejection letters. That is, several letters (17 percent) included the name and institutional affiliation of the person hired. Of the fifteen institutions that listed the recipient's name, five hired women (Nina, Suzanne, Kathryn, Diana and Margaret),

nine hired men (Alasdair, Paul, Ron, Michael, Steven, Philip, Steve, Paul and Michael) and one hired a person whose name we could not "gender". Twelve letters gave the recipient's institutional affiliation: Catholic, Columbia, Cornell (2), Eastern Michigan, Hartwick, Harvard, Stanford, UT-Austin, University of Virginia (2), and Washington University. Although it is nice for institutions to have pride in their new colleagues, we believe that colleges and universities have more appropriate avenues for announcing their recent faculty acquisitions than in the rejection letters mailed to other applicants. For example, both this journal and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* routinely list new appointments.

**Negotiations and Contracts**

As early as the APSA Annual Meeting, we learned that teaching jobs vary widely. We spent many hours during the year talking about course loads, publishing requirements, tenure arrangements, and release time. We found, in general, that salaries vary less than work requirements. This may relate to the work of the American Association of University Professors, which publishes average salaries for a range of institutional types. Almost every place that mentioned salary to us related its salaries to AAUP levels. Salaries at the universities we visited ranged from \$30,000 to \$36,000; the differences seemed clearly related to regional location and institution type, even in our small sample. This standardization has certainly reduced candidates' abilities to negotiate on the basis of salary. On the other hand, work requirements seem to vary widely. The teaching loads we encountered ranged from twelve hours a year (two courses a semester) to 25 hours a year (five 5-hour courses a year). Class sizes ranged from the sublime (ten to twelve students) to the ridiculous (massive lecture sections with hundreds of students). While travel arrangements and research support also vary widely across institutions,

**FIGURE 4**  
Applications Received per Position



**N=35, Median=160**

most of the institutions interested in us focus more on teaching than on research. In fact, research arrangements seemed more inflexible than salaries. Although graduates from exclusive institutions probably drive hard bargains regardless of national economic trends, in a buyer's market most job applicants have relatively little room to maneuver.

We only had one contract experience, and can not make generalizations to others' experiences. Some possible negotiating points include:

- Salary;
- Teaching load;
- Research money and release time arrangements;
- Tenure timeline and requirements;
- Benefits;
- Special needs of particular candidates.

Aside from the formal aspects of the contract, however, departments can do many informal things to make accepting an offer and starting a new job more or less difficult. For example, Scott's chairman greatly facilitated Deborah's job search as a trailing spouse.

## Conclusion

We subtitled this article "What Job Candidates (and Departments) Ought to Know," and feel compelled—as social scientists—to derive some lasting truths about our job search experience. Based on our own experiences, we offer the following tips for job applicants. First, publishing seems very important, and perhaps more important than teaching. Scott, with no teaching experience and no student evaluations in his application package, had almost as many "nibbles" as Deborah, made the same number of campus visits, and received a job offer.<sup>9</sup> Deborah's three years of outstanding teaching evaluations seemed overshadowed by her limited publications and conference exposure. Second, be prepared for the job search to last all year. Get your materials organized early, and establish routines that will keep the process organized throughout the year. We even posted a wall map in our office and used colored push

pins to keep a visual record of the job search.

Third, if at all possible, try to share your job search experiences with someone else who is experiencing the same thing. Contrary to popular beliefs about the difficulty of couples on the job market, we found this to be an ideal time to be married! For starters, sharing the burden of application preparation creates economies of scale. Furthermore, we cannot imagine how it would feel to open all of these rejection letters alone. Finally, the campus visit process is so unique to higher education that people who have not had the experience have a difficult time understanding (and believing) what happens.

In fact, although we enjoyed visiting with all of the people we met on the campus visits, and left feeling it would be a good place to work, the experiences of the visits made us begin to seriously question the rationality of the hiring process. The only other field that we have heard of which routinely requires cross-country, multiday interviews for entry level applicants is law. None of the lawyers we know who have gone on such interviews said they did anything analogous to presenting research and lecturing to students. The fact that entry level law positions pay quite a bit more than entry level teaching positions makes the process seem even more inappropriately grueling. We suspect that the nature of tenure contributes certain irrationalities to the hiring process. Regardless of what causes colleges and universities to conduct elaborate searches, the outcome is that the more they spend recruiting, the more expensive hiring mistakes become. Hiring mistakes result in having to refill the position so institutions spend more and more resources trying to find the "right" candidate the first time.

Many people have begun to seriously question tenure and its necessity in the modern age. Since we doubt that higher education will overhaul the tenure system anytime soon, we have tried to think of other things that might improve the process of faculty hiring. Slight modifications in the way APSA structures the job search process

might help. For example, APSA could expand the personnel roles of the regional associations, and reduce the dominance of the national annual meeting and the nationally distributed *Personnel Service Newsletter*.

What can individual institutions do to facilitate a smooth job search? First of all, we feel departments should only conduct a national job search when they have legitimate faculty openings to fill. A friend of ours who has sought a tenure track position for the past three years maintains that some places advertise openings even though they already know whom they want to hire. Some departments even write their job announcements with a specific candidate's credentials in mind. APSA should discourage departments from using the *Newsletter* to advertise positions that have pre-selected candidates. Also, if a department feels compelled to conduct a national search when a serious internal candidate exists, perhaps the announcement should indicate that fact.

Second, prior to campus visits, the search committee should send the candidate a complete and accurate schedule of events. Having to guess what happens next merely adds unnecessary stress to an already nerve wracking situation. Furthermore, the schedule should avoid having too much "down" time. Loosely arranged schedules put the applicant and the search committee in the awkward position of trying to find things to do with each other. Departments should also have meaningful student representation (graduate and undergraduate) on the search committees. All of our interviews included at least one session when we could meet student representatives. In every case the students asked questions very relevant to their interests and perhaps represent the most important customers in the hiring process. During the late stages of a search, all of the members on the search committee need to avoid the temptation of making verbal indications about the candidate's status. A department can emotionally devastate candidates by telling them that they rank first and then offer-

ing the position to another person. Also, as we mentioned before, colleges and universities should think carefully about the contents of the rejection letter. We found references to the number of applicants and to particular individuals neither relevant nor consoling.

Third, doctoral granting departments can improve their graduates' understanding of the process and marketability. Some of the things our departments have done include:

- letting doctoral students teach undergraduate courses;
- encouraging senior faculty to co-author papers with students;
- financing student participation at national conferences;
- providing guidance on the job search process;
- continuing the mentoring process beyond the completion of the dissertation.

We also believe that it is important for senior faculty to maintain their own professional networks because those connections can prove invaluable to their department's recent graduates.

Finally, the time when married applicants feel pressured to take off their wedding bands should end. Everyone we met this year seemed committed to hiring on the basis of professional qualifications. Trends continue to show increases in the number of two-income families, and increases in the numbers of dual-doctorate couples. Higher education can facilitate that commitment by developing more resources related to hiring "trailing" spouses. APSA could address this concern by facilitating an open discussion between deans and department chairs about their successful methods. Information sharing could also occur at a regional or local level. For example, twelve institutions in the Washington, D.C. area belong to a consortium committed to sharing certain resources. The consortium could establish a formal job network devoted to helping spouses and partners find jobs. Institutions in other metropolitan areas could develop similar arrangements. We can tell you from our experience that helping the spouse find a job increases job loyalty, decreases

stress, and will certainly enhance the new faculty member's productivity.

Each year, hundreds of search committees meet to review thousands of applications for tenure track positions in political science. The process drains faculty resources, and exhausts their future colleagues. Many people seem genuinely interested in developing more humane methods. The fact that you read this article indicates that you too share at least some of our concerns. By sharing our experiences, we aimed at shedding some light about how the process currently works. Hopefully, future job applicants will start their search with a better understanding of the process than we had, and future search committees will have a clearer picture of how their actions play out in the lives of their future colleagues.

## Notes

\*We wish to thank Samantha Durst, Cornelius Kerwin, Mike Kraft, Laura Langbein, and Kevin Snider for their very helpful comments and suggestions on this article.

1. We realize that at this point more than one department chair and search committee member will throw this article down in disgust, cursing our names for increasing their work loads during this past year. In our defense, let us make three points. First of all, we can both teach across several traditional areas (International Relations, Comparative Politics, Methodology, American Politics, Public Policy, Public Administration), which increases the number of positions we felt capable of filling. Second, we did execute certain exclusions. We did not apply to certain geographic locations (e.g., New York City area, Hawaii, Alaska and Canada). In addition, we did not apply to many of the "Ivy League" institutions. Third, wanting to find two positions within 150 miles of each other encouraged us to apply to schools that we would have otherwise avoided. Finally, our marital status made the prospects of spending more than one year on the job market particularly unrealistic. Whereas our single friends can accept a series of one year appointments and move around for a few years before landing a tenure-track appointment, professional partners can not re-create their careers in new locations on an annual basis.

2. We purchased paper that we used in copy machines at our jobs. Our expenses would have more than doubled if we had to pay copying costs as well. We recently learned that our departments might have paid for copying and postage. Candidates should explore this possibility with their own departments.

3. Several forms either asked for our names or already contained our names on them, and then asked for items like age, gender and ethnic origin. Most forms clearly indicated that providing the information was voluntary. Still, we did not understand the need to ask for applicants' names on the forms.

4. Dates are determined as follows: application dates are based on the date application was mailed; initial response dates and final correspondence dates use the date listed on the letter.

5. Judging by some of the odd rejection letters we received, writing them is not particularly easy either.

6. Several of our reviewers questioned calling a rejection letter a nibble. However, people frequently learn of a nibble when they pull up the line and find a half-eaten worm.

7. A few weeks after Deborah mailed her application for the school's tenure-track opening, the chairman called. He said that the search committee had not yet begun to deliberate, but asked if she would consider teaching a course in the spring, as an adjunct. Due to prior commitments (namely working full time and teaching a course at American), Deborah had to refuse the offer. We assumed that when the committee made their initial cuts, Deborah would at least receive an invitation to interview for the position.

8. However, we would like to thank all the schools that bothered to count up the applications and enabled us to write this section!

9. Scott taught his first class in Spring 1993, and received his first evaluations after signing the contract with the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

## About the Authors

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