Reflections on My Tenure-Track Job Search

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Introduction

I went on the tenure-track job market in fall 2018 to search for a position as an assistant professor. I primarily targeted mechanical engineering departments among the top engineering schools in the United States and in Canada. This document recounts some of my experiences from this process and my advice. I'm focusing on the details I learned from the process and not as much preperation advice that can be found elsewhere. A limitation is that this is a sample size of myself. Nonetheless, my hope is that others may find this useful and enlightening, particularily individuals from underrepresented groups who may be unfamiliar with the tenure-track job search.

Application Preparation

Enlist feedback and advice from PhD advisors and faculty, as well as researchers that have recently gone through the tenure-track job search. Ask this latter group if they could share their application materials, if not already available on their personal websites.

Applications usually consisted of the following:

Cover letter either required or optional. Keep under 2 pages.

Research statement/plan with page limits from one to five pages. Page limits were either strict, as in strictly one page, or a range, for example from 3-5 pages.

Reference letters from 3-5 people minimum. Some applications asked for reference letters by the deadline, while others asked only for the contact information of my references.

For reference letters that were required by the deadline, the submission format came in several forms. Some schools have their own job application system. I would enter in my references' contact information, click a buttom to submit or resubmit a request, and would often times be able to see a status as to whether the letter was submitted by my reference or not. Some schools used a third party system such as academicjobsonline.com or dosier.com. These third parties required me to create accounts on the respective site, and either request references through the site, or if a reference supplied a generic reference letter to the site, include the generic reference letter with an application. A few schools, mostly in Canada, required my references to email a letter to a particular email address by a deadline.

Teaching statement often about 1-2 pages. I have also seen requests for teaching plans,

outlines for classes, and teaching evaluations.

Diversity statement may be required, optional, or not mentioned at all. Diversity statements are more popular among public schools.

Personal research website not officially part of applicantions, but you should create one.

Application Deadlines and Submission

Most deadlines were between Novemember and early January with some as early as October and some as late as March. Common dates were the 1st, 15th, and 30th/31st. Jobs may be announced with as little as a month of notice before the deadline, but 2-3 months before the deadline were more common. Postings may be for one or multiple positions. Among the schools I applied too, most engineering departments eventually had at least one posting.

Some job descriptions appeared generic for a department, while I later learned there was a specific area that was being targeted. Some job descriptions were extremeley specific (e.g. a joint position between energy engineering and public policy).

Even the mininmum of clicking through an application and changing names in a cover letter took about an hour. Plan accordingly if you are submitting mutliple applications.

Hiring Committee

The hiring committees I communicated with were made of about 4-6 faculty members from the department. Most direct communication was with the chair of the committee. Sometimes initial contact would be from an administrative assistent or coordinator.

First Round Interviews - The Video Call Interview

I received emails to schedule a video call interview as quickly as within a week after the application deadline to as long as about 1.5 months. Faster turnaround was from applications that required reference letters with the application. Slower turnaround was often from applications due around the end of the year, before or during the holiday period, and the applications required only the contact information of references. Thus, the committee needed to request letters and hear back from my references. The first call would usually be scheduled for about a week or two later.

The call was often over Google Hangouts, Skype, or Zoom. The length of the call was often 30 minutes, possibly 20 minutes, or as short as 15 minutes. Shorter calls had more specific and direct questions, often tailored to my application or the school. Regardless of the size of the hiring committee, only about 3 people could be seen in the video feed seated around a conference table, including the chair of the hiring committee. The chair of the hiring committee

asked almost all the questions, which were prepared ahead of time. The interview is very to the point and formal, at least in the beginning.

My phone interviews were in January and February. In one case, the hiring committee had recommended that I be considered for an alternative position, so I had a phone call with the chair of that department to explore the alternative position. Even when someone says it's an informal chat, assume that the chat will still be judged as an interview.

Date options for the first round interviews span about about two weeks. Thus, invitations for campus interviews occur about a week after the end of the first round interviews.

Campus Interview

Logistics

The chair of the hiring committe or a coordinator reached out with an invitation for the campus interview and a set of possible dates or date ranges. Campus interviews occurred around March and April. The school booked the hotels. I purchased my own flight tickets and local travel and submitted reimbursements after the campus visit. Schools requested my abstract, biography, and photo prior to the visit to create talk posters and advertise the talk.

My interviews lasted a vey long day from around 9am-6pm, and dinner from 7pm to about 9pm. Research presentation was around noon with the chalk talk soon after in the afternoon. Meetings with faculty were scheduled for either 30 minutes or 45 minutes. The full schedule with names were sent a few days prior to the visit.

Research talk about 45 minutes contect with 15 minutes of Q&A

Chalk talk about 30 minutes with 3 slides of content and mostly Q&A. This talk is to faculty only and discusses future work, funding, and research plans.

Faculty meetings are 1:1 meetings with faculty members from all ranks within the department, including the chair of the department. Meetings may also be scheduled with lecturers, the dean of the faculty (of engineering), and professors outside the department. The scheduled time is usually 30 minutes per meeting, or 45 minutes per meeting. Even though I prepared by researching faculty, faculty may end up asking questions unrelated to their research, for example, my thoughts on if X should be kept in the curriculum, a particular completely new research direction the faculty member was considering, or how the department prepares and supports assistant professors. I also encountered questions asking if I would have a two-body problem (!) and how I am different or similar (in good ways) to my PhD advisors.

Lunches and dinners are often with 2+ faculty members. The day ends up starting between 8-9am and ending around 9pm.

Communications

Faculty members updated me on when important committee decisions and meetings were made, or else I emailed them and asked them, so I knew to expect an offer (or not). I was formally notified by the dean of engineering who asked me for a list of my start up equipment expenses.

Offer

After sending this list, some back and forth Q&A, and waiting for various levels of approvals on the schools' end, I received the formal offer from the dean of engineering. The official offer was two pages long outlining my salary, moving costs, lab startup funds, student funding, teaching load, etc. The deadline of the offer letter was two weeks after I received it. To accept the offer, I would need to sign the offer letter and email it back.

Final words

I was expecting that I may not receive any interviews, but surprised myself. You may too. I encourage you to apply.