

# EXCELLING WITHIN THE ACADEMIC JOB SEARCH

Trachtenberg School  
of Public Policy  
& Public Administration

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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## TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

- ☑ Start looking the summer before you intend to graduate. The **majority of positions open up around October** and many applications are **due in November and December**.
- ☑ **For posted positions:** Sign up for TSPPPA's PhD HotJob Listserv; use Handshake and other academic job search sites; review targeted university job postings;
- ☑ **For networking/positions not yet posted:** Inform committee members/other faculty what you're looking for; set up meetings (in person/phone) with people in your discipline; reach out to TSPPPA, GW and alma mater network; connect with new/existing contacts via LinkedIn and ResearchGate
- ☑ Don't twist to fit into a job description, but rather be clear and honest about who you are.
- ☑ As time goes by...if you haven't heard from a school, contact them! But once in the process of applying, do not contact any faculty at the school other than the person chairing the search.

## APPLICATION MATERIALS TIPS

- **Writing Sample:** Usually a chapter from your dissertation.
- **CV:** Refer to the [TSPPPA CV Career Guide](#). Ask faculty/peer if you can look at their CVs for ideas
- **Cover Letter:** Refer to the [TSPPPA Cover Letter Career Guide](#) and this [resource](#) from the University of Illinois.
- **Graduation Transcripts:** Usually can be done through your university's registrar office
- **Letters of Recommendation:** Ask 3-5 faculty members and provide ample advance notice as they will likely be writing letters for other students. If requested, provide an overview of experience/accomplishments for them to reference.
- **Teaching Evals/Syllabi:** Only necessary if you taught.
- **Philosophy of Teaching Statement:** These are not always necessary. Ask a faculty advisor or committee member for their suggestions. For more information, see this [resource](#) from Vanderbilt University.
- **Research Interest Statement:** These are not always necessary. Ask a faculty advisor or committee member for suggestions. For more information, see this [resource](#) from Cornell University.

## CONFERENCES

- ☑ Attend conferences throughout your academic career with an *even greater focus* as you near completion of your doctorate.
- ☑ **Present at least one paper** at a conference important in your field
- ☑ Get as many applications out as possible **at least two weeks** before your first conference during application season
- ☑ Alert schools to which you have applied of your conference attendance
- ☑ Schedule Conference Interviews
- ☑ Bring *extra application packets* to conferences

## CAMPUS VISITS & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- ☑ Typically visits take about **2 days** and consist of lunches, dinners, tours and interviews with faculty, administrators and students.
- ☑ Schedule a **practice job talk** with your adviser prior to the visit.
- ☑ Ask for an **agenda in advance**: Which faculty members will you be meeting with? Will you be meeting with students? How technical is the audience?
- ☑ Once you find out which faculty will be at the meeting, gather and review their CVs

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### Questions for You **Organizational Fit**

- Why did you apply for this job? Why are you interested in university/college X?
- What is it about our department that interests you? What are your impressions of our curriculum?
- What experience do you have working at our type of institution?
- Why are you interested in this area of study?
- How well do you interact with your colleagues and what attribute do you bring to the department that will make a positive difference?
- In this position, how might you be able to support the university's philosophy toward diversity?
- What programs have you developed in the area of diversity?
- What do you see as the most challenging aspects of an increasingly diverse academic community?
- Tell the committee about a time when you had to adapt to a wide variety of people by accepting/understanding their perspectives?
- What have you done to further your knowledge/understanding about diversity? How have you demonstrated your learning?
- Service is important at xx. How would you see yourself contributing to the development of the department/college and the university?

#### **Research**

- What are your short- and long-term goals for your research?
- How do you see your research fitting within our department and what we already do?
- How would you incorporate others in your research?
- What types of interdisciplinary research might you do?
- What funding sources are you aware of that might support your future research?

### ***Teaching***

- Tell us about your teaching philosophy, style and methods.
- How would you teach the following course?
- What methods do you use to involve students?
- What new classes would you want to teach?
- What are your teaching strengths/weaknesses?
- Describe a time when you felt challenged in the classroom.
- What steps have you taken to improve your teaching?
- What technologies have you used in the classroom?
- How do you engage students, particularly in a course for non-majors?

### ***Dissertation***

- Tell me about your dissertation. When will your dissertation be completed?
- What impact will your dissertation have on the field of X?
- How do you explain your dissertation to someone not in your discipline?
- What will you need to do to revise your dissertation for publication?

### ***Publications***

- Which of your publications do you feel is the most significant?
- On what topics do you intend to publish in the future?

### **Questions to ask the Faculty**

#### ***Research and Collaboration***

- How much do faculty collaborate amongst themselves, other departments and externally?
- Is there research support, such as research assistance or grants, for junior faculty?
- Is there research summer support? What funding is there for research in this program?

#### ***Courses, Teaching & Faculty Development***

- How often do classes meet? What is the typical course length? What is the average class size?
- Are these primarily day or night courses? What is the ratio?
- How many courses do faculty teach? How are decisions made for who teaches what?
- How are professors evaluated?
- What separates a good faculty member from a great one at this institution? What kinds of attitudes or work habits make people successful here?
- How are new faculty oriented and mentored during their first year?
- Are there faculty development programs about technology, teaching or grant-writing?
- What kind of guidance is provided about the tenure and promotion process?

#### ***Students***

- What is the current ratio of policy concentrations?
- How many work fulltime/part-time? What type of work do students pursue upon graduation?
- What is the ethnic diversity?
- How many faculty members work with doctoral students?
- Why do students choose this program?

#### ***Diversity, Equity & Inclusion:***

- How does your school define diversity? How do you center diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging?
- Has your school/university made any formal commitments in support of racial equity?
- What are some of the key DE&I actions that have been taken in recent months?
- Are there any programs or initiatives in place geared toward promoting diversity?

- What is being done to ensure inclusiveness? What do you do to create an inclusive team environment? Can you give me an example of how you make faculty feel a sense of inclusion, belonging, and equity on a daily basis?
- How has your school prioritized executive accountability toward DEI advancement?
- Are there any affinity groups or committees to support diverse populations? If so, how do these groups contribute to the culture of the organization?

### **General**

- What do you think is most important for me to know about the school?
- What are the immediate needs of the program and how can I meet these needs?
- What are the short-term and long-term goals for the program?

### **Questions to ask Dean/Chair**

- What goals does the University have both in the short-term and long-term for the school?
- What goals do you have in terms of your school and how do they fit within the university's goals?

## **FOLLOW UP**

- Send a thank-you emails to **everyone you interviewed within 24 hours!** You can also send handwritten thank you notes to the key individuals.
- Discuss the visits with faculty and committee members to get their advice as they have been through this process and can offer **new insights**.
- Once you have an offer, be prepared to negotiate.

## NAVIGATING THE ACADEMIC MARKET NARRATIVE by Eric Stokan, TSPPPA PhD Alum

### **Applying to Academic Jobs**

This document describes the process of applying to academic jobs in the area of public policy and public administration. I try to break down the process into stages and offer insights that I hope will be helpful to prospective applicants. While this is advice from my own perspective, it does reflect a good deal of research I have done along the way. This document is really intended for those individuals applying to research and/or teaching-oriented universities.

#### Early on

Before you go on the academic market, there are a few things that will improve your chances. The first is to do your best at getting something published in a peer-reviewed journal. If you have one or more articles, this will be tremendously helpful! If you can even get one under review, it may be a revise and resubmit by the time you are interviewing. Many departments want to know that you will raise their research profile. This is best exhibited by your productivity now.

If you can work with individuals that are well recognized in your field and can convince them to write you letters of recommendation, this will likely hold a lot of weight in the application process. I highly recommend attending professional conferences and begin networking, if you haven't already started this process. The feedback will improve your research and you will be exposed to an important network.

If you get the opportunity to teach and/or help with a capstone course, take it. Even research-oriented schools wanted to know what I have taught. They asked about my pedagogical styles, how I delivered classroom instruction for undergraduates and graduates alike. It would have been extremely difficult for me to answer this without having taught. Having more exposure also meant that instead of speaking to them abstractly about my pedagogical style, I could explain how I delivered content in the classroom.

I strongly urge you to consider creating your own website. I used Google Sites, which is free. It can be wonky and I still can't get it to work correctly with both Macs and PCs. Nonetheless, it is free and easy to use. If you don't mind spending a little bit of money, consider WordPress. Either way, I embed Google Analytics code so that I can track when individuals visit [my website](#). I can see what city they are from, how long they spent on each page, which pages were visited, what their network domain is (paying attention here to University.edu), etc. If you are a candidate, connect this site to the Ph.D. Candidate site in the Trachtenberg School. Also, it is useful because you will want information in the application process and this may be the only source of information you get. At the least, you can know when your application materials are being reviewed.

#### Dissertation

From day one, if you are interested in an academic position- think about how you will use this dissertation to put yourself in the best possible light once you hit the market. At some point, you will present a section or more of the dissertation to prospective employers who will want to know that you can do quality research and defend your ideas. Realize that this is more than your gateway to earning

three letters after your name. This document, or at least a small section of it, matters to prospective employers as you will likely carve articles out of it and/or convert it into a book.

### Application time

There is a lot that can be said here! First, you need to determine when certain disciplines begin posting and filling their positions. It is not uncommon to start the process in July or August of the year before you start. Many political science departments are earlier in the cycle than public administration or Public policy schools. It can be hard to break into this market, unless you have additional background in political science. Nonetheless, don't be discouraged. There are many departments with strong subfields in public administration or policy and they invite PA and public policy applicants to campus. Economics departments interview in January at their national conference (AEA). Also, take advantage of APPAM [postings](#) on faculty and non-faculty jobs, the Chronicle Vitae [Job Site](#), the American Political Science Association site if you have a membership, and in your own subfields (e.g. [Urban Affairs Association](#)).

One consideration in the application process is how broadly to apply. Generally, I would only apply to places you would really consider going. Keep in mind that this process takes quite a bit of time. Schools may request a large number of materials, and schools may vary considerably in this respect (e.g. teaching statements, research statements, teaching and research statements, community service statements, teaching evaluations, CV, three letters of recommendation, cover letter, and maybe even a syllabus for a course you would like to teach). My experience is that each application, if done correctly, could take half a day or longer. You need to research the department, the offerings, affiliated research centers (possibly), and consider how you would fit in the department. At this point, you can then begin tailoring your cover letter to reflect this information. I would consider having a somewhat standard template for the cover letter where you briefly describe your teaching and research interests, but flip these sections depending on whether the department you are applying to is more teaching or research oriented.

You will also need to let your letter writers know several details for each application (search chair name, address of school) and maybe why you are interested and what you want them to mention (probably only able to do this a few times if you apply to a lot of schools). I personally casted a very wide net (almost 40 schools) and I think we were all fatigued by the process. Former students told me they applied closer to 10-20, but people vary greatly in this and you have to consider what makes the most sense for you.

I cannot emphasize how important it is to continuously reevaluate your application materials. My initial teaching and research statements were undoubtedly too long. I cut them down to one page (pretty much recommended) throughout the process. I tweaked the cover letter as I went. I benefited from having several early reviewers of my application materials. Spend a good chunk of your time early thinking about these documents and the basic structure of your cover letter. Make sure they are as strong as possible and free of grammatical errors.

### Phone/Skype Interviews

If all goes well, you will start getting phone and Skype interviews. This will be exciting, but also a bit nerve wracking at first. If you get several interviews, you will undoubtedly get more comfortable throughout the process. Consider doing mock interviews if possible.

As a practical matter, make sure you have the proper technical equipment ready for the interview. Many departments do Skype interviews, so download the program- it is free. On my first Skype interview my

laptop decided to die about 10 minutes before the interview was set to start. I scrambled to try and set it up on my desktop (with a shoddy camera) and ultimately did the interview (about 10 minutes late) on my phone (not ideal!). I learned from this experience, and bought a new laptop the next day. You spend years of hard work getting to this point, don't mess it up by relying on old equipment that may fail.

In the interview itself, I think establishing good rapport early on is very important. Be ready to talk briefly about your dissertation and other research you are interested in (or where you will go with your research for the next five years). It is a bonus if you can see how your research fits in to the department and how your work overlaps, but is distinct, from the work of their faculty. You will likely get questions about your teaching philosophy and pedagogical styles. They will want to know what you have taught, what courses you can teach (look at the original posting again for what they want covered), and your dream course or courses. They may ask how you would teach that dream course and what books you would use. Be ready to answer why you want to be at this department (with specifics about the department itself). Equally as important is to be ready with several good questions. If you don't know what to ask, there are plenty of websites that will help you get started. Nonetheless, you can always ask about the students, how research is supported in the department, what the tenure process and expectations are in the department, and maybe about the city itself. When possible, I would try to infuse what I knew about the department as part of my answer or question- showing that you care enough to do your homework (e.g. "I noticed that Dr. X and Dr. Y have collaborated on several articles, that is really great to see, is that encouraged within the Department? What about collaboration with students?")

Don't forget to send thank you emails to those individuals taking the time to interview you! I also, when true, suggested that the interview reaffirmed my interest in the department and particularly liked X.

### Campus Interviews

If at all possible, try to be flexible on dates and time for campus invites. If you have other campus invites that overlap, feel free to let them know that. Be honest about this though. While I did not want to have two layovers on a flight home from one of my interviews, I didn't say anything about this. Fortunately for me the department chair realized this, thanked me so much for my flexibility and willingness to do that, and changed it to a single layover. Also, consider that if you do get multiple campus invites you may need some room on a credit card or need to have some money on hand, it can take a couple months to be reimbursed and you may have to fly the following week which is more expensive. For one of my campus invites I had to pay out more than \$900. Within about 3 weeks, I had four campus interviews and this was completely grueling in every way, but not having the fiscal resources can make it challenging. Consider opening a new line of credit if needed. Early in my academic career I opened a credit line where I earned flight miles, which has proved to be a smart decision. Also, if you do have campus invites back to back- DO NOT try to arrange both of them as a single trip. Even if you are going back to the same city the very next day, fly home first. This was not an issue for me, but things did get close.

You may receive the campus interview after the phone/Skype interviews, or they may opt to go straight to a campus interview. The campus interview will likely be more nerve wracking and exhausting than the phone interview. Keep in mind that they have just culled down hundreds of applications to the top 3 or 4. Use the confidence of knowing this to deliver the best research presentation (and maybe teaching presentation) that you can. At this stage, definitely do your homework on the department. I elected to find pictures of each faculty member and created a document where I placed the picture above their name, what courses they taught, what their research was on, and I included other information that might



be worth knowing into a single document. I would take this document to the gym. I would take it and study it on my flight out. I would also study it the night before my face-to-face meetings. When being introduced to people we are often thinking about what we will say next rather than listening to their names. This way, I saved the cognitive resources involved in remembering their names at that point. I came in prepared, and did not have to worry that I was not paying attention when being introduced to a faculty member. I also, at the very least, read the abstracts for each faculty member (paying more attention to those where I would meet one-on-one). In several occasions, especially where our work intersected, I would read their articles. My understanding is that most do not prepare this much, but I did find it to be useful in conversations and made me more confident in my interactions.

In preparing, one important goal is to figure out ways to relate their research or other activities to your own work. This should not be disingenuous, but you should really consider these individuals as potential collaborators and maybe a second family for the next thirty or more years.

Know for a fact that things will come up and change during your campus interviews, be flexible and be courteous. You don't have to praise every aspect about the place or what they tell you, but don't be condescending and don't verbally contrast it with your other experiences if you consider those other invites to have been better. Because of snow, I had to have dinner with another candidate (fortunately for a different academic line). I kept in mind that this may be my future colleague as well, and that it was a unique opportunity to get to know someone else. While it certainly changed the dynamic, upon receiving the news, I simply said that would be a great opportunity to meet another candidate. When the Search Chair informed me that it was for a different position, I joked by saying that it shouldn't quite feel like the Apprentice then. Basically, the idea is to roll with it. After doing a few campus interviews and having really nice meals, I was told that breakfast would be at Starbucks. The faculty member was overly apologetic about this (they want to impress you as you want to impress them), but it made sense given the timing. I made light of this by saying that it works well for me because then I would be appropriately caffeinated for the day. I assured her that it was really no issue at all! Maybe the best advice I received in the process was to "roll with it" and not complain about how tiring the experience is for you.

It is an exhausting process by any measure (See Appendix 1 for a typical schedule). You will likely get little sleep the night before. I am mostly a late night person, but started going to bed by midnight and getting up by 7ish for several weeks before the interviews so that I was adjusted to an earlier schedule. You will meet with about 5-7 members of the faculty for one-on-one meetings. Between these meetings, you will give one or two presentations (teaching and research). If you are an introvert, interactions with others typically draw energy out of you, this will be completely draining. The faculty know you will be getting exhausted and they will do their best to keep you going by offering you coffee and rest room breaks, but sometimes they will forget because they may only be meeting you for thirty minutes at a time. When faculty mentioned how draining it is, I would often just say that I am running on coffee or make some lighthearted joke. Bring extra water and quick snacks (peanuts, granola bars, etc.). Also, consider bringing toothpaste and a tooth brush if you will be drinking a lot of coffee.

I would suggest bringing copies of your CV, your PowerPoint presentation, and maybe a few copies of your job market paper. I added this to my website and provided the link at the beginning of an abridged set of printed slides. It may be small, but they seemed impressed by this. I also opted to buy a clicker and a new laptop (because of the Skype interviews). It was nice not having to worry about these technical aspects when I was presenting.

Try to work with your committee to do mock presentations before the live performance (the more practice the better). They can help you tremendously with the content and your delivery. You don't want to lose the faculty or impress them with how advanced you are in your methods. They want to be able to understand what you are doing and feel engaged in the conversation. I cut sections out because I realized that I had it in there just to make myself sound smart. You can get overly technical during questions and answers if pressed to do so. The faculty will be more interested in knowing that you can clearly communicate your research, that you have thought through your research in an intelligent way, that you can defend your ideas, and be comfortable addressing your weaknesses. Be comfortable explaining how you hope to address these weaknesses going forward in your research and why they exist (resources, data sources, etc.). Also, be sure to include slides as an appendix that would offer too much detail for your discussion (summary statistics, technical appendices, data sources, sample information, etc). This is for the Q&A section that will follow.

During your job talk (research and/or teaching), be sure to stay on time. Going over the allotted time may lose you the job. At the least, the faculty may view you unfavorably for making them run behind. Try your best to also stay on time for your one-on-one meetings, but don't stress too much about this. Things may run over a bit and my experience is that they build in a little extra time. You will likely be given time to prep before your presentation(s), but don't count on actually having that time!

When I got home, I sent thank you emails to everyone I met, whether or not I had one-on-one interviews with them. If I did not, it was just a thank you for attending my research presentation and asking that question about X. When I did have one-on-one meetings, I tried to bring in at least one thing of mutual interest or something we had talked about. If someone mentioned in advance that he/she was going to miss my talk or teaching presentation, I agreed to send them the slides and/or the paper. I made sure to do that immediately upon returning home. It may be advantageous to keep a little notebook nearby so you can write information down as needed (e.g. send Professor X my slides). I tended to write down my notes at the end of the day, or before dinner.

Also, dinner is not the time to be casual- you are still being interviewed even if the faculty seem relaxed. People disagree on alcohol and how formal you dress. My perspective is that if you don't drink, then don't drink. If you do, and they are truly encouraging it – have one drink. I dressed in a suit, even during dinner. I would prefer to be a little over dressed than under dressed. I recommend getting a garment bag for your suits and using these bags as your "carry on" if you are flying. You don't want to lose your luggage at the airport and have to present in whatever you wore during your flight.

### Offers

If you have the very fortunate problem of negotiating offers, it can be quite stressful. It is not uncommon to get an offer when you still have a few interviews. Generally, it is best to contact the other schools if you are still interested in them and notify them that you have been given an offer and have to make a decision by the date specified in the offer letter. If they are strongly considering you, and have the flexibility in their scheduling, they will try and move up their timeline. It may be intimidating to call them and tell them that you have another offer, but rest assured that they will be glad you did and it may signal to them that they were not wrong in inviting you out. They may want to know what school gave the offer, and the relevant details. I think it is generally fine to tell them this.

Upon receiving an offer, you may be asked to give verbal confirmation that you will accept. The advice I had been given is that you should not do this by any means, even if it is your top choice. I think it is fairly well anticipated that there is generally room to negotiate. This is a very delicate balance, so I have included a lot of resources in appendix 2 on this topic.

I think it is okay to let a school know that you would like time to consider the offer. The standard is usually two weeks in political science, though you may get an exploding offer (so be prepared for various scenarios). It is a very big decision and you may have multiple factors to consider (teaching, research, location, family, etc.). Also, there are a lot of things in the contract that are generally negotiable (salary, maybe teaching load for first year, additional conference travel, greater start-up funds, computer hardware or software, etc.). Don't be afraid to negotiate, but do it in good faith and don't do it at a place you would not consider going. If you can make the case for why a higher salary or additional research funds would best position you to be productive, then that is how you should approach it. Realize that even \$500 more per year in salary will grow over 30 years- especially with raises. Also, be mindful of the fact that faculty are prone to wage compression. Thus, asking for more than 10% may mean that you would start off higher than someone in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year. If it is a public institution, you can likely find the salaries for their assistant professors. Ask for what is realistic and consider that this is a long term set of interactions you will have, so if you ask for the best parking spot (and I don't suggest you do this), you may be currying resentment before you even start. When you do ask for something, express why it would best help you (improve your research or teaching). In the event that you do have two or more offers at the same time, you can certainly contact your preferred school and let them know your preference but see if they could match on salary, start-up funds, etc.

### Thank you emails

I kept my letter writers informed during the process, and sent thank you emails after I had decided where I was going. Recognize how much work they have done in this process!

### Best of Luck to you!!

Best of luck to you in this process!

I heard from others that they strongly considered a few non-academic jobs. Generally, you can apply to these later in the process. I think it is a good idea because the process can be quite idiosyncratic and may feel like a rollercoaster. Given that this process was coupled with my dissertation process, I certainly felt some of the highest highs and the lowest lows. This can take a toll on your psyche. While I used running and swimming as my coping mechanisms, it helped to consider that not getting an academic position would not be the end of the world for me. I could have always gone on the market the following year. Do keep in mind that what you end up doing in that first year may decrease the possibility that you will have the time, desire, or energy to apply as broadly. Faculty members may not look as favorably at your application materials if you accept a job that is unrelated to research and/or teaching. Nonetheless, we all have fiscal constraints and must understand that everyone's path is different. You may find one or two-year post-docs and visiting assistant professor positions later in the application cycle.

## APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE CAMPUS INVITE SCHEDULE

### *American/Public Policy March 1-3*

#### **Tuesday, March 1**

3:55 PM Arrive at XXXX (Southwest - from Detroit)  
5:30 PM Arrive at Hotel XXXXX (XXXXShuttle Service)  
6:30 PM Dinner with faculty (Faculty 1, Faculty 2), meet in lobby

#### **Wednesday, March 2**

8:00 AM Breakfast (Faculty 3), meet in lobby  
9:00 AM Tour of XXXX (Faculty 3)  
10:00 AM Faculty 4  
10:30 AM Faculty 5  
11:00 AM (Lunch at XXXX)  
11:30 AM Prepare for Presentation  
12:00 PM Research Presentation (Room X)  
1:30 PM Assoc. Dean XXXX (105E XXX)  
2:00 PM Faculty 6  
2:30 PM  
3:00 PM Faculty 7  
3:30 PM Meeting with Graduate Students (Room X)  
4:00 PM Faculty 8  
4:30 PM Return to Hotel XXXX  
4:45-6:30 PM Break  
6:30 PM Dinner, return to Hotel (Faculty 9, Faculty 10)

#### **Thursday, March 3**

7:15 AM Breakfast at Hotel XXX (Bill to room)  
8:15 AM Transport to XXX, Shuttle Service from Hotel XXX (AA, Flight Departs 11:08AM)

## APPENDIX 2: JOB MARKET NEGOTIATIONS

[The Professor Is In: OK, Let's Talk About Negotiating Salary](#) (from Chronicle of Higher Education)

[Evaluating Academic Job Offers & Negotiating Positions](#) (from NIH)