Getting a Job at a Teaching Institution—and Then Succeeding: A Q&A with Experienced Teacher-Scholars

Lanethea Mathews-Gardner, *Muhlenberg College*
Michelle D. Deardorff, *Jackson State University*
Grant Reeher, *Syracuse University*
William Hudson, *Providence College*
MaryAnne Borrelli, *Connecticut College*
Glen Halva-Neubauer, *Furman University*

The December 2006 APSA report, "Trends in the Political Science Profession" (Sedowski and Brintnall 2006; Brintnall 2005), noted that the number of political science jobs posted on eJobs reached an all-time high for the academic year. Thirty-six percent of those jobs were in B.A.-granting institutions, institutions most likely to include a focus on liberal arts teaching. Similarly, results from the most recently available department chairs' survey show that almost one-third of all graduates in 2002, including those in non-academic employment, obtained jobs in B.A. institutions (Lopez 2003). In response to these circumstances, the Political Science Education Section has, at recent APSA annual meetings, including 2007's meeting, sponsored a short course titled, "Getting a Job at a Teaching Institution—and Then Succeeding!" For this article we have drawn on our experiences in the short course—and in interviewing, hiring, mentoring, and evaluating colleagues at a range of liberal arts colleges—to compile a list of frequently asked questions and their answers. B.A.-granting institutions are highly diversified, as evidenced by the authors' own affiliations. Still, after much discussion, we are confident that the advice offered here is broadly applicable to colleges focusing upon the liberal arts and undergraduate education. However, applicants should always research the mission and the corresponding commitments of the institutions at which they are seeking employment.

In working with individuals at the short course and on the job market, we have learned that many Ph.D. students and graduates are keen to work at teaching-focused institutions, but are unsure about how to translate their graduate experiences and teaching and research interests into a competitive application.

One of the most striking aspects of our experiences is the lack of preparation provided by most graduate programs for these kinds of jobs, in terms of developing teaching skills, strategy, and overall professional development (Deardorff et al. 2001). Frequently, graduates lack appropriate mentoring about the values of liberal arts education and the most effective strategies for navigating the differences between teaching- and research-focused institutions. In some cases, job applicants need to "remarket" themselves by re-composing cover letters and C.V.s and assembling teaching materials into an application package. In other cases, job applicants need a more comprehensive introduction into the culture of liberal arts teaching, a task made more difficult given growing demands to specialize. And it is important to recognize that once hired, success and happiness at a liberal arts teaching college are not guaranteed; graduate students need a better and more realistic understanding of what it is like to work in a teaching institution, including expectations for tenure, opportunities for professional growth, and strategies for balancing work and family.

While not all of these issues are addressed in the questions and answers provided below, we hope that the

Lanethea Mathews-Gardner *is assistant professor of political science at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA, where she researches and teaches courses in American politics, gender and political behavior, and American political development. She would like to thank her Muhlenberg colleague, Dr. Brian Mello, for his thoughtful remarks about earlier versions of this article. She can be reached at mathews@muhlenberg.edu.*

Michelle D. Deardorff *is an associate professor at Jackson State University; she previously spent 12 years at Millikin University (Decatur, Illinois). Deardorff is currently chair for the Political Science Education Section of the APSA and can be reached at michelle.d.deardorff@jsums.edu.*

Grant Reeher *is associate professor and director of graduate studies in the political science department at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. He writes on legislative politics, political participation, and citizenship education, and was a recent recipient of the APSA McGraw-Hill Scholarship and Teaching on Civic Engagement Award as well as a Syracuse University Chancellor's Citation for Engaging the World.*

William E. Hudson *is a professor of political science and director of the Public Administration Program at Providence College. He is the author of* The Libertarian Illusion: Ideology, Public Policy, and the Assault on the Common Good *(2008),* American Democracy in Peril: Seven Challenge's to America's Future *(5th ed. 2006) both published by CQ Press and* Experiencing Citizenship: Service-Learning in Political Science *(co-edited with Richard Battistoni, American Association of Higher Education, 1997). A partial list of professional journals in which his publications have appeared include* Political Science Quarterly, Polity, Policy Studies Journal, Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, New England Journal of Public Policy, *and* Western Political Quarterly.

MaryAnne Borrelli *is associate professor of government at Connecticut College. Her teaching focuses on United States national institutions, with research centered on the presidency and gender and U.S. environmental policy.*

Glen A. Halva-Neubauer *is Dana Professor of Political Science at Furman University, where he directs the university's public service internship programs and coordinates its mock trial program. He can be reached at glen.halva-neubauer@furman.edu.*

 doi:10.1017/S1049096508080773

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096508080773 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insights that follow will stimulate conversation among applicants and search committees, as well as among tenure-track faculty and review committees.

Getting There

Q: What can I say in my cover letter that will help move my application to the short list?

A: The cover letter must demonstrate knowledge of the particular institution to which you are applying and, given this knowledge, that you are a good "fit." This means that you will need to write an individual letter for each liberal arts institution. Application processes at large universities are often fairly generic; no one expects you to be particularly loyal to the location of the school, the culture of the student body, or the history of the institution. It is different at small, teaching-focused institutions. Will you "fit" into the community? Will you be happy given the make-up of the student body and the faculty? What will you contribute to the mission of the school? The cover letter is the first thing the departmental search committee will use to make cuts in the candidate pool. In addition to attention to detail (e.g., spelling the institution's name correctly), you should address each element of the job listing. The job ad is the result of a carefully negotiated discussion between the department and the institution; your chances of making it to the short list improve if you can meet all of the criteria listed in the ad. Likewise, although your cover letter most certainly should discuss your research, remember to emphasize your teaching. This cannot be done effectively by simply re-ordering your discussion of teaching and research in a generic letter. The more clearly you demonstrate an understanding of the institution and the department—including an emphasis on teaching, mentoring undergraduates, contributing to the mission of the liberal arts—the more likely your application will be seriously considered.

Q: In what order should I list research, teaching, and other activities on my C.V.?

A: The reality of the job market is that your C.V. might be the point at which employers stop reading, particularly if it appears that your interests and background are not a good "fit" for the job. It is essential that your C.V. communicate your teaching experience and the significance of that experience to your job search. You cannot do this if you list teaching experience on the third or fourth page of your vita, buried underneath a laundry list of conference presentations. Like the cover letter, simply re-ordering your C.V. to list teaching before research is not sufficient. Consider the totality of your C.V. Does it fairly indicate the variety and intensity of your teaching experience? Show you to be competent in teaching a range of courses? Portray you as a serious but not overly narrow scholar? Indicate a research agenda amenable to undergraduate involvement? Demonstrate a commitment to college life beyond your own research and teaching? Establish your credentials as an effective leader?

Q: What are the differences between a job talk at a teaching institution versus one at a research-oriented institution?

A: Recognize that teaching and research institutions often mean very different things by "job talk." Many graduate programs prepare Ph.D.s for job talks that amount to an intellectual battle including, frequently, debates about methods. Faculty at liberal arts colleges are usually less interested in how combative you are, and more interested in whether you are an interesting, engaged, well-rounded, and collegial scholar. If you are invited to a campus visit at a liberal arts teaching college, it is essential to obtain details about the context and expectations of your job talk. Many teaching institutions will ask that you teach a class. Others will want you to teach a class *and* deliver a research talk, sometimes in combination. You should expect that there will be at least some undergraduate students in the audience, even if you are asked to deliver a research presentation. Think carefully about how you will pitch your talk to a broad, frequently interdisciplinary audience. Be prepared to spend time discussing your research question and its significance to larger questions about political life, even those that fall outside mainstream conceptions of the discipline.

Q: How is the overall context of an interview at a liberal arts teaching institution different from an interview at a research-focused institution?

A: During the campus interview you are evaluated on whether you will be a good member of the community. On small campuses people talk with each other; every interaction (whether student, secretary, or president) counts. Expect that your campus interview will involve the entire institution, not just the political science department. Indeed, should you work at a liberal arts institution, provosts, deans, and college presidents will likely be a regular and frequent part of your life. Small campuses have fewer layers of mid-level administrators between the faculty and campus leaders. Finally, it is especially important to engage with students during your campus visit. Students are the lifeblood of campus life at liberal arts colleges. Your interactions with them during a campus interview are just as important as interactions you may have with faculty and administrators.

Q: Should I build active learning, or at least a lot of discussion, into a class presentation during an interview, or is it okay to just lecture?

A: Although it is important to demonstrate reflective and thoughtful teaching during a campus visit, employers understand that a class presentation during an interview is somewhat artificial. Few will expect you to conduct a vibrant class discussion with a group of students you have never met. It is probably more important for you to show that you are comfortable, competent, and engaged as a teacher than to wow a prospective employer with active learning strategies. That said, do not simply lecture, or flip through PowerPoint slides during your class presentation. At a minimum, it is essential to take the students in your audience seriously—engage them with questions, eye contact, verbal and nonverbal feedback, and respectful answers to their questions. What you say after your class presentation to prospective colleagues is also important. What went well during your class presentation? What would you do differently? Discuss these issues with campus faculty present during your class presentation. Prospective colleagues are looking for evidence that you are a vibrant and interesting teacher.

Q: How open is the "fit" of a religious institution or a culturally unique institution?

A: Many liberal arts institutions are religiously-based or reflect a particular cultural tradition, such as that of historically black colleges or those with a service mission. Religious and cultural traditions often have a significant impact on the character of these institutions, including the nature of the student body, the make-up of the faculty, the curriculum, and the expectations of alumni. Job candidates need to familiarize themselves with these traditions and assess whether the institutional mission is compatible with their own personal beliefs and professional expectations. This issue is most likely to arise in regard to institutions with religious traditions. While a small proportion of these schools are sectarian

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096508080773 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and demand that their faculty adhere to a particular religious doctrine, most are ecumenical, tolerant, and respectful of academic freedom—they actively seek faculty of all religious faiths or, even of no faith, who can teach their students well. In spite of this religious openness, however, the religious mission of such schools does make them distinctive and does affect the lives of faculty that join them. At an interview, candidates ought to question faculty, students, and administrators closely about the institutional mission and assess how it might affect their career at the school. Some job candidates may be attracted to apply to a religious institution because of their own faith commitment. If this is genuinely the case, a candidate should not hesitate to reveal this in the application process, either in an application letter or at an interview. Be careful, however, not to overplay this religious motivation and be sure to connect it to how it will make you a better teacher and colleague at the school. Most political science departments at religiously-based institutions will be interested in recruiting a colleague on the basis of her or his teaching and scholarship potential rather than on the candidate's piety.

Q: How do I navigate the tension between teaching colleges' rising expectations for research … come to think of it, what ARE the expectations for research at a liberal arts teaching institution?

A: These will vary for every institution, and may vary within institutions following changes in administration (especially in presidents) or in tenure committee membership. As you interview, discuss tenure standards. Remember that there are always the stated expectations *and* the unstated but equally significant expectations shaped by cultural norms and values. Try to learn the names of recently tenured faculty members, in political science or in comparable departments, and study their publication records. Many colleges now profile faculty on their web sites, showcasing their accomplishments and revealing the institution's own priorities. Most fundamentally, determine what "counts" as research and as a publication. Will research in the scholarship of teaching and learning be accepted? What about coauthored articles? Is there an expectation that articles will appear in peer-reviewed journals? If so, is there a preference among these journals? Similarly, what are the expectations for book publication? Is it presumed that faculty will publish only with university presses? As these questions imply, some colleges have research and publication standards similar to those of research universities, while others respect the heavy demands imposed by teaching and service commitments. Liberal arts faculty typically perceive themselves as teacher-scholars. As you interview, try to learn how administrators and department members across the generations see these roles as relating to one another.

Q: How do I frame my research and teaching interests when so many listings for teaching jobs are so broad? It seems like I will have to teach everything!

A: Faculty in smaller institutions often teach outside their area of expertise, perhaps even outside their comfort zone. A sign that you are a good fit for liberal arts teaching is the extent to which you embrace or recoil from this expectation. Your passion for political science as a discipline may be more important in a small teaching-focused institution than your expertise on the U.S. Congress, or the intricacies of trade relations with China, or any other area of specialization. There are both practical and normative reasons for this. On the practical side, many small liberal arts institutions simply do not have the resources or space to employ large faculties. Beyond practicality, however, faculty whose teaching abilities are narrowly drawn run against the grain of the ideological commitments of the liberal arts, which emphasize creativity of mind and broad intellectual purpose over specialization and more technical forms of knowledge.

Q: How can I address poor teaching evaluations in my application and/or during an interview?

A: It is not uncommon for liberal arts institutions to ask applicants for teaching materials (e.g., syllabi, sample assignments, etc.) and concrete evidence of teaching effectiveness. Although it is important to be honest about teaching evaluations, do not be discouraged if student feedback is not as positive as you might hope. It is probably more important for you to explain, or be prepared to discuss, what you have learned from poor teaching evaluations and what you have changed as a result. Teaching evaluations do offer important summative assessments of teaching and you should take that assessment seriously. But teaching evaluations are also formative. They are a critical tool in developing effective pedagogies, course design, and student-faculty relations. Prospective employers want to know that you are a promising teacher; they do not expect that you will have achieved perfection at this point in your career. You might also think about other types of evidence of teaching effectiveness, beyond standard quantitative student evaluations. Have you collected qualitative data? Do you have samples of student work that you can share with prospective employers as a form of assessment? What kinds of innovative pedagogies can you emphasize in your application materials?

Q: What kinds of questions should I ask during a campus visit?

A: Lots of them. It is always surprising, and disappointing, that job candidates ask so few questions during a campus visit. The questions you ask at a liberal arts institution may differ from those you would ask at a research-focused institution, and should reflect the distinctions offered in other answers listed in this piece. This is where your research regarding the institution will pay off. The questions you ask should demonstrate a genuine interest in the institution, its unique mission, and the department.

Q: Can I get a job at a liberal arts teaching institution if I've never worked or been a student at one?

A: Yes. But you'll also want to find ways to signal that you understand this type of institution and that your decision to apply to this type of institution is based on a realistic understanding and not a mythical image of the life of the liberal arts professor. What about your undergraduate or graduate experiences has led you to an interest in a liberal arts institution? Are you familiar with small teacher-student ratios? Have you worked with undergraduates in another capacity? Are you interested in multi- and interdisciplinary opportunities? If you do not have personal experience in a liberal arts teaching institution, be prepared to answer questions about your interest in teaching at one. Translate your experiences into those items that liberal arts institutions value.

And then Succeeding: Future Conversations with Graduate Students, Advisors, and Departments

Successful job applicants and faculty possess a realistic understanding of their work environment. Demands and rewards for work vary by institutional type. New faculty at liberal arts colleges are often unprepared for the expectations of college service and student advising, or have idealistic notions of the ease with which they will be able to balance work and family. It is also a mistake to underestimate the pressures associated with

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096508080773 Published online by Cambridge University Press

research at a liberal arts institution; faculty are still expected to be productive scholars (at some institutions more than others), and most importantly, to be engaged in ongoing contributions to their field and discipline, often with scarce resources. Many liberal arts teaching institutions, especially nationally-ranked colleges, are increasingly emphasizing publishing high-quality research in well-recognized outlets. The ability to write grants and implement curricular innovations is also a growing expectation, as is a willingness to participate in assessment activities.

Most importantly, successful job applicants, tenure-track, and tenured faculty are committed to the mission and values of the institution in which they work. Faculty in liberal arts colleges recognize the significance of small class sizes, value close relationships with undergraduate students, engage in faculty governance, and seek opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching and research that go beyond the "department." And without a doubt, effective faculty in teaching institutions are committed to teaching and to pedagogies that advance the mission of the liberal arts: rigorous scholarship, broad intellectual purpose, the cultivation of civic skills and ethical reflection, and the pursuit of wisdom.

It is our hope that these frequently asked questions, with our collective responses, will aid those seeking work in a liberal arts teaching college and the roughly one-third of new Ph.D.s who will end up working in one. It is also our hope that graduate programs will find inspiration in this discussion to provide better mentoring for graduate students seeking a variety of kinds of employment.

References

Brintnall, Michael. 2005. "Academic Jobs in Political Science: A Review of Listings with the APSA Jobs Service." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 38 (January): 125–7.

Deardorff, Michelle D., Marianne Githens, Glen Halva-Neubauer, William Hudson, Grant Reeher, and Ronald Seyb. 2001. "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Getting and Keeping a Job at a Private Liberal Arts College, but Your Graduate Advisor Didn't Tell You." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (4): 856–7.

Lopez, Linda. 2003. "Placement Report: Political Science Ph.D.s and ABDs on the Job Market in 2001–2002," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36 (October): 835–41.

Sedowski, Leanne, and Michael Brintnall. 2006. "Trends in the Political Science Profession: Political Science Job Listings in APSA's eJobs Listing Service." Available at: http://apsanet.org/imgtest/EJobsWriteUp%2012%202006.pdf.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096508080773 Published online by Cambridge University Press