The Academic Hiring Process: A Survey of Department Chairs

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Doctoral students in political science are understandably concerned with job placement. Most students enter graduate school with an eye to academia and want to know what they must do to secure their ideal academic position. Faculty members readily offer guidance on how to increase students’ likelihood of obtaining an academic job. And PS has published many articles that focus on this topic, ranging from empirical descriptions of the job market to personal accounts of job-hunting experiences. Unfortunately, graduate students often receive anecdotal or contradictory advice. To help rectify this, we undertook a more systematic examination of the qualities department hiring committees seek when granting interviews to job applicants.

Here is what we knew prior to conducting our study: the job market is competitive. Job placement for political science Ph.D.s has hovered near 70% in recent years, with only half of candidates finding permanent employment (Davis 2002). Temporary positions constitute an increasingly large proportion of all openings, with ever more newly minted Ph.D.s accepting part-time and adjunct positions. Such a competitive environment creates a buyers’ market. Job candidates must do all they can to meet the needs of hiring departments. Even with that information, however, all that we know about the hiring process is that candidates with a Ph.D. in hand do better in finding employment than ABD candidates (Davis 2002; Yin 1998; Mann 1997). Besides this empirical evidence the data on the hiring process are largely anecdotal.

What exactly do hiring departments look for when granting applicant inter-

Table 1
Survey Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th># sent out</th>
<th># returned</th>
<th>% returned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National University</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>37.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>31.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>29.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Colleges</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methods

We conducted the survey in the fall of 2003 after selecting departments through a stratified random sampling procedure. The master list of colleges and universities and the sub-category breakdowns came from the US News & World Report 2003 edition of America’s Best Colleges. We randomly sampled 58% of each of the following four types of schools (as categorized by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching): National Universities-Doctoral, Liberal Arts Colleges-Bachelor’s, Universities-Master’s, and Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor’s.

Finally, we used the APSA’s internal directory to locate the addresses of department chairpersons at the selected schools and asked that either they complete the survey, or designate another professor with experience on a hiring committee to do so. Response rates are given in Table 1.

The sampling procedure screened out many potential biases, leaving response patterns and our use of department chairs as the major causes for concern. Some might object that department chairs do not accurately represent department hiring committees, but targeting these individuals has a built-in advantage. Department chairs almost certainly have recently served on a hiring committee, and we have no reason to think that their responses would differ from those of other faculty. Non-response bias is also

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of little concern, as we have no theoretical reason to expect that respondents have qualities that make their answers significantly different from non-respondents.

Although these potential sources of bias do not appear problematic, one should bear in mind that the survey results are reported at an aggregate level. Each member of a search committee has his or her own preferences and biases. Readers should view the averaged responses as just that, the relative importance that an average committee member at a particular type of institution would place on each hiring factor. We encourage the reader to also examine the variability of each factor as a measure of how confident we are of that factor’s position relative to others.

Finally, in the results section we aim to compare results within and between school types. Each comparison entails certain hazards. Different school types may have different applicant pools, which can cause problems when comparing across school types. For example, if national universities rank an applicant’s academic record lower than comprehensive colleges, this could mean that academic records are less important to them. But it could also mean that everyone who applies to national universities has an exemplary academic record, forcing hiring committees to base their hiring decisions on other criteria. This has implications in rankings within school types as well, as respondents may rank a factor as less important simply because it does not vary among the applicants they come across. One, therefore, must be cautious in drawing inferences regarding the differences between and within school types. That being said, the results of the survey still afford plenty of insight.

Results

In the top portion of the survey we asked respondents to rank 10 factors that figure into the decision to grant applicant interviews, with “1” signifying the most important factor and “10” the least important factor. These include departmental reputation, dissertation, fit, teaching experience, academic record, letters of recommendation, quality of application, publications, conference presentations, and honors/awards. Most of these categories are self-explanatory. Fit is perhaps the most vague. While conducting a pilot survey we asked our respondents how they interpreted the “fit” factor. Respondents took this to mean the fit between an applicant’s area of research and the department’s specific sub-field needs.

We graphically display the results of the top portion of the survey through box plots of the 10 items. Figure 1 shows results for all respondents, regardless of school type. The more importance respondents place on a factor, the closer to zero the resulting box. Thus we see that leaving aside the school types of our respondents, department chairs, on average, value the fit between an applicant and a hiring department, an applicant’s teaching experience, and faculty letters of recommendation much more than an applicant’s dissertation, conference presentations, or honors and awards won.

Next, we disaggregate the responses by school type. To do this we use three different statistical illustrations. Table 2 lists the means of each factor by school type (again, a lower mean implies greater importance). In Figures 2 through 5 we present a series of box plots by school type. Unlike Table 2, these figures order criteria by their medians. Finally, Table 3 lists those school-type pairings and
factors that yielded statistically significant t-tests for differences of means, along with the relevant p-value. In the interest of space we will highlight some particularly noteworthy findings from the top portion of the survey and leave it to the reader to examine the figures and tables. The results show that national universities indeed put more emphasis on publications and the dissertation than any other school type. Conversely, all other school types put more emphasis on teaching experience than do national universities. Respondents from liberal arts colleges distinguish themselves in that they place more importance on the reputation of an applicant’s department. They also rank teaching experience substantially higher than publications. Finally, the box plots reveal that the inter-quartile ranges of factors rarely overlap for master’s universities and comprehensive colleges. This implies a clearer ordering of hiring priorities for these institutional types.

In the latter portion of our survey we asked respondents to rate 30 smaller factors on a one to five scale—more to less important. These 30 factors are subsets of the more inclusive factors from the first part of the survey. For example, we disaggregated the “letters of recommendation” according to whether or not the letter came from an applicant’s advisor or another faculty member. We can use this section to look at several, more specific relationships. But with 30 factors and four school types, there are too many possible relationships to test or report. Instead we focus on a few interesting results.

One section asks respondents to rate the importance of the reputation of the applicant’s department overall, as well as that department’s reputation in the applicant’s sub-field. No matter the school type, the two categories do not significantly differ in importance. However, respondents from national universities appear to value sub-field reputation more highly, just not significantly so, while respondents from the other three school types appear to value overall department reputation more highly.

Another section inquires about the quality of the dissertation and the importance of a candidate having finished it. Again, no matter the school type, respondents rank a finished dissertation ahead of a good one (p < .00001). This confirms earlier findings that a finished dissertation helps in securing an interview and, subsequently, a job.

We also asked respondents about the importance of letters of recommendation from an applicant’s advisor, and those from other recommenders. At all school types except for comprehensive colleges, the dissertation advisor’s letter holds more weight. At comprehensive colleges the two letter types do not significantly differ in importance.

The bottom portion of the survey contained four items related to publications: the number of published/accepted articles, the number of articles under review, the reputation of the publishing journal, and the number of publications the applicant solo-authored. Results are given in Table 4. Recall that the scale goes from 1 (more important) to 5 (less important).

We once again see that publications on the whole are more important to national universities, less so to liberal arts colleges and master’s universities, and still less so to comprehensive colleges. But we also find that a somewhat clear general ordering of the four factors exists within school types. The reputation of the journals that publish an applicant’s work holds more weight than even the number of articles an applicant has had published. And both of these factors play a larger role than the number of articles under review or the number of articles an applicant has solo-authored.

Finally, the results from the bottom portion of the survey enable us to re-examine the debate between research and teaching. We look at this in two ways. First we compare the responses on our [Figure 2: National Universities—Criteria Ranking]

![Figure 2: National Universities—Criteria Ranking](image)

[Figure 3: Liberal Arts—Criteria Ranking]

![Figure 3: Liberal Arts—Criteria Ranking](image)
leading publications indicator, reputation of publishing journals, and our leading teaching indicator, amount of teaching experience. Here we find significant differences for all school types, with national universities weighting research more heavily, and the other three school types weighting teaching more heavily. A similar pattern obtains when we do a difference of means test for an applicant’s statement of teaching interests versus his or her statement of research interests. National universities privilege the research statement, while the other school types privilege the teaching statement.

Summary and Conclusions

First and foremost, the survey results establish “fit” as the most important factor across school types. Whether a job candidate works in the sub-field of the available position is of greater importance than anything else. Since hiring departments often establish their area of need and then look to fill it—instead of identifying the “best” candidate and filling a generic position—even the strongest candidates may have difficulty securing employment if the market is tight on positions matching their credentials. This is intuitive but important. A graduate student mulling over potential courses of study should at least consider the future need for certain specialities. Although this is an admittedly speculative undertaking, and many agree that a doctoral student ought to study what he or she is interested in, all else being equal, students should pursue research in areas in which they anticipate departments will hire.

The results of this survey also inform the debate regarding the relative importance of research and teaching. Overall, it appears that schools that hire political scientists on average weight teaching experience ahead of publications—and far ahead of conference presentations and quality of dissertation. Again, we cannot deduce from these rankings the amount of research or teaching experience that respondents have in mind; but we can say that teaching experience is important no matter where one wishes to work. However, national universities provide one wrinkle in the research/teaching debate: on average national universities place publications ahead of teaching experience and rank them significantly higher than do other school types. And the totality of the survey results clearly shows that publications matter much more in securing employment at a national university than at other schools. The moral of the story is that doctoral students need teaching experience no matter what academic job they desire. On the other hand, publications appear necessary in securing a job at a national university, but their value decreases significantly when dealing with the remainder of schools (which represent the majority of existing schools).

Like “fit” and teaching experience, letters of recommendation prove quite important across school types. Letters place as a top-three factor for liberal arts and national universities and as a top-four factor for the other two institutional types. No matter where students wish to obtain employment, it is important for them to secure strong recommendation letters—especially from their dissertation advisor. Again, this may seem intuitive, but the importance of letters of recommendation really stands out in this study. Letters outrank everything but fit and publications at national universities, and outrank everything but fit and teaching experience at liberal arts colleges.

The significance of the results regarding the quality of a candidate’s dissertation, academic record, and department...
reputation is less clear. The data indicate that the dissertation becomes less important as research overall becomes less important. Moreover, it appears that national universities prioritize publications ahead of a candidate’s dissertation (although it is worth noting that a quality dissertation may lead to future publications). What we do know is that on average the candidate with a completed dissertation has an advantage over a candidate who has not yet completed one—apparently regardless of the quality of the research.

As for the reputation of the department from which the candidate comes, the results for the most part are not statistically significant. Department reputation appears to matter most for liberal arts schools and very little for master’s and comprehensive colleges. Moreover, it appears that national universities value department reputation in an applicant’s sub-field more than the overall reputation of an applicant’s department. Conversely, the other three school types seem to favor a department’s overall reputation. Although these results are merely suggestive, it makes intuitive sense that schools predisposed toward research would use sub-field reputation as a signal of candidate quality, whereas schools predisposed toward teaching would worry about the overall quality of students a department tends to attract, regardless of their specific research training. These results, coupled with the fact that liberal arts schools seem to weight department reputation more heavily, seem to imply that students aiming for top liberal arts schools get the most mileage from overall department reputation.

Academic record is of moderate importance, although at master’s universities and comprehensive colleges it becomes more important. As mentioned before, however, this may have a lot to do with what varies among the applicant pool for each type of school. If comprehensive colleges do not have an applicant pool that varies according to publications, quality of dissertation, and department reputation, perhaps they only have academic record as a means of distinguishing between candidates.

Finally, conference presentations and honors and awards place at or near the bottom for each school type. This indicates that students considering a tradeoff between teaching experience and conference presentations should go with more teaching experience. In that vein, if a student seeks a job at a top national university and has to decide between having frequently presented at conferences or having one or two publications, he or she should focus on publications. In this study, honors, awards, and conference presentations come off as expendable part of the CV. This may be misleading, however, since conference presentations can lead to publications, and intangibles such as networking. And, for example, good teaching may yield honors and awards. All we are saying is that conference presentations and honors should not be sought for their own sake, but as byproducts along the path to obtaining teaching experience, recommendation letters, and publications.

Seeing as the difference between research universities and liberal arts colleges has been a topic of debate, it is worth reiterating some of our findings on the subject. The survey results indicate that in terms of our original 10 hiring criteria, “publications” yields the only statistically significant difference between the two school types. Consistent with that, other research-related criteria, such as dissertation and publication quality (including relative number of publications and reputability of publishing journal) are of greatest value to national universities, and decline in import as one moves from liberal arts, to master’s, and finally to comprehensive colleges. Moreover, national universities privilege the statement of research interests over the statement of teaching interests, while the other school types privilege the teaching statement.

Unfortunately, the survey instrument precludes our distinguishing...
between different schools within the Carnegie classification scheme. It is conceivable, and probable, that some liberal arts schools hold greater research demands than some national universities. In fact, the “top 20” may have vastly different preferences than the remainder of national universities. All we can say is that on average, it appears that research matters more to national universities, and that teaching is not notably more important at liberal arts colleges.

This study sheds more light on the hiring process by providing information on the relative importance of some different factors in obtaining an interview. The importance of fit affirms that market demand is the greatest force working against certain job candidates, irrespective of their quality. The value of publications varies depending on the type of school, while the importance of teaching experience and letters of recommendation is constant and strong across school types. Finally, it appears that some factors are not worth focusing on, although they may be a means or byproduct of meeting some of the more important hiring criteria. This study for the most part does not allow us to look into the absolute differences between certain factors within and between school types, such as the number of publications and years of teaching experience the respondents had in mind—but it should provide graduate students in political science with a clearer idea of the tradeoffs they should make, depending on their career aspirations.

Note

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1. US News lists 249 National Universities-Doctoral. These schools offer bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees. There are 217 Liberal Arts College-Bachelor’s. They emphasize undergraduate education, with the majority of their degrees awarded in liberal arts majors. 572 Universities-Master’s offer a master’s as the highest degree and tend to draw students regionally. Finally, there are 324 Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor’s. They focus on undergraduate education, but do not award a majority of their degrees in the liberal arts. For a more complete description of the Carnegie Foundation categories, see any edition of US News’ America’s Best Colleges.

2. Although this is marginally insignificant (~p/.15) when compared to liberal arts colleges.

3. Their inter-quartile ranges barely overlap in Figure 3.

References


