Some musings
on contemplating an academic career

Gene Tsudik

Disclaimer: I disclaim nothing…

Outline

• Whither Academia?
• The Candidate
  • The Application Process
  • The Interviewing Process
Academic Career: the good

- Freedom!!!
  Repeat loudly in heavy fake Scottish brogue :-)
- Research: addictive, challenging and rewarding
  Working with (and training) PhD-bound talent
- Staying on top of things: cutting edge
- Teaching:
  Shaping impressionable young minds :-) 
- Colleagues are (mostly) peers, stable set
- Faculty (sometimes) get a say in university governance (service)
- Tenure?
  Stability? Lots of vacation time? Sabbaticals?

Academic Career: the bad

- Teaching can get repetitive, tedious
- Teaching gets in the way of research & freedom
- Service is boring and
- Research can be (any of):
  - fruitless
  - incremental
  - inconsequential
  - too competitive
  - unappreciated
  - no longer exciting?
- Chasing LPUs can be boring and unrewarding
- Working with students can be trying
Academic Career: the ugly

- Academic politics can be byzantine
- Backstabbing and envy are not uncommon
- Self-importance and pomposity are not rare either
- Colleagues are a fairly static set
  the “soap opera” effect
- Getting tenure: long, grueling and complex
- Competition for limited resources

The Candidate
You: critical factors

- Where did you get your PhD?
  school, dept, program
- Who is your advisor?
  known? respected?
  has-been? rising star?
  (btw, where did his/her other students go?)
- What is/are your research topic(s)?
  depth v. breadth
  mono- or poly-topical v. inter-disciplinary?
- Do you have any “stature” out there?
- Who have you collaborated with?

You: important factors

- Publications
  - Conferences, Workshops
  - Journals
  - Patents
  - Software
  - Posters, Demos
  (p.s. Authorship, ordering, etc.)
- Honors: Awards, Fellowships, etc.
  “trivial” v. “real” honors
- Reference Letter Writers
  breadth
  known? respected?
  do they really know you? did you work with them?
- Reference Letters
  lukewarm or generic letter = a “kiss of death”
You: miscellaneous factors

- Internships
- Where is your undergrad (and/or MS) degree from?
- How long did you linger in grad school?
- Presentations/Talks
- Teaching experience
- Jobs (non-internship type)

You: the “sensitive attributes”

Do you think they matter?
- Gender
- Age
- Citizenship/Residency Status
- Race, National Origin
- Family Status
- etc.
The Application Process

Applying

• Get PLENTY OF ADVICE apropos where to apply
• Which school? Which dept?
  – how good (or not) is it?
  – research the place!
• Don’t aim too high
• Don’t aim too low
• Established v. rising schools
• Teaching v. research schools
  – No way back...
• Make sure position is at the right (entry) level
• Make sure position is either generic or in your “area”
  – if in doubt, ask
  – If slanted/focused position, you stand little chance
• Find a PoC (potential ally/champion)
Applying
• CV, Web page - professional, concise and correct!
  – Avoid deceptive tactics
  – Journals confs, wshops, book chapters, posters, videos, etc.
  – Acceptance rates!
• Line up references well ahead of time
  – Don’t overburden them!!!
  – Give lots of notice, provide info, materials, etc.
• Apply on time
  – Many places have Dec 15 or Jan 15 deadlines
• Don’t apply if not sure of graduating in time
  – Avoid advisor/committee “blackmail”
• Don’t apply frivolously
  – Waste of other people’s time

So you’re late…
• Didn’t apply on time this “season”
• Still worth checking with each place -- ask around!
• Consider delaying graduation (within reason)
• Consider a postdoc position -- a “bridge”
  – Empty publication pipeline
  – Work in good/better place
  – Get some more pubs out, get more research done
  – Apply next year
• Make contacts, inquire about next cycle
  – Or
• Consider later entry into academia (by first going into an alternative research venue)
The Interview Process:
Before, During, After

Before (1)

- **DO YOUR HOMEWORK!!!**
  - Research the place fully
  - Get the scoop on faculty, students, program so you won’t seem clueless during visit
    - Get a list of faculty you’ll meet ahead of time
    - Prepare questions for each
  - Try to arrange a talk in the morning
    - Makes it easier for others to talk to you
  - Try to arrange to meet grad students
  - MAKE SURE to meet other junior faculty
Before (2)

- PREPARE YOUR TALK!!!
  - Not defense talk
  - Not conference talk
  - Not invited talk
- ACADEMIC JOB INTERVIEW TALK
  - Connect with the audience, sound excited but not hyper
  - Give them depth & give them breadth
  - Fluctuate your voice; monotonous delivery is a curse
  - Watch out for the “glaze-over effect”
  - Keep it SHORT (45 mins max!)
  - Don’t make slides too flashy or too dull
  - Avoid gratuitous pictures/colors/fonts
  - Steer back when questions cause you to deviate

Before (3)

- Logistics
  - Try to spend an extra day before (better if jetlag) or after
  - Do not take red-eye flights in
  - Get a VERY GOOD night sleep
  - Try to arrange dinner after, not before, interview
    - You’ll be less tense, they will have more to talk about with you
  - Dress for success
    - Don’t dress for a wedding or a funeral
    - Don’t dress for a Star Trek convention either
    - Avoid garish/bright colors
    - Look well-groomed (you might meet some bureaucrats :-))
    - Manners, manners, manners…
During (1)
- Arrive early, eat/drink before
- It’s usually a looooong, grueling day…
- Get a good map
- Be VERY nice to staff/secretaries/receptionists, etc.
  - They often have more influence than you think
- The day will be made up of “slots”
- Each slot typically 30-45 minutes
- Be on time; politely ask to be escorted to the next slot
- People LOVE TO TALK ABOUT THEMSELVES
  - Let them… but… know when to interject.
  - Want to leave an overall impression
- Highlight potential collaborations (but not gratuitously)

During (2)
- Meals: Lunch, Dinner
  - Don’t eat a lot
  - Don’t talk while eating
  - NEVER consume alcohol at lunch
  - Consume alcohol at dinner ONLY if most others do it and even then only a LITTLE
  - If smoker, don’t smoke
  - If surrounded by vegans/vegetarians, go easy on cooked flesh
  - If you’re vegan/vegetarian, keep your opinions about meat to yourself
  - Don’t talk politics (but sports usually okay, not sure about pets…)
  - NEVER EVER discuss religion
  - Avoid personal details (family, etc.) -- don’t “leak” too much information
  - Avoid initiating back-slapping “common roots”-type conversations

- Be courteous
- Thank the host(s), ask if any further info needed
After

• Send individualized emails to most/all people you’ve met, especially your host
• Tell them how much you loved it, what you liked best, follow up on any technical conversations, etc, etc.
• Wait…
• A polite “ping” in a few weeks is reasonable
• Do not pester people!!!

• If you decide that you’re not interested at all, let them know IMMEDIATELY

So, you got that phone-call or email

• Take a deep breath…
• Relax (drink something, do yoga, etc.)
• The negotiation process is about to start