

Some musings

on contemplating an academic career

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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 you 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 loooooong, 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