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Essay on issues of 'fit' when applying for jobs at teaching institutions

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Six years ago this spring, my department began the hard work of replacing one of our colleagues, who had died that January of cancer. The hiring process was complicated because there were only five of us left, and we were all heartbroken. Our beloved colleague had taught world literature and women's studies for over a decade at our school, and we knew anyone we hired would be no real replacement for her, because no one could fit into our department as she had.

Yet when I talked about our situation, and used the word "fit," I raised the ire of someone who inexplicably saw the word as code for "white men need not apply." In a heated series of e-mails, this person let me know I was practicing reverse racism, that my department was discriminatory, and that the university needed to judge job applicants for their qualifications, rather than because they met some kind of predetermined racial or gender quota. And he wasn't even applying for our position.

Apparently, there's something about that word "fit" that frightens job applicants. Even a desultory read through academic job search forums uncovers strings of folks searching for jobs, trying to divine what institutions want, and whether even small acts — like stapling or paper clipping a vita — will help an application rise to the top pile of a competitive pool. Once in a while, someone (like my correspondent) rails against the subjectivity of departmental fit, believing that a remarkable vita alone should be used to decide who gets hired. Some fear that "fit" is code for some kind of diversity, while others fear it is code for the status quo and may in fact favor white men, or those who aren't pushing new ideas in teaching and research, or that it's code for someone who will prize politeness over all else.

From my experience on a number of search committees for our teaching-intensive institution, I would argue that fit *is* subjective and that sometimes, the strongest vita does not automatically earn someone employment. Whether we want to admit it or not, fit matters to hiring departments. But there are also steps every job seeker can take to make sure she expresses her fitness for the job she wants.

And there's the crux: Job seekers have to convince hiring committees they want the position. This seems obvious, especially given the challenges of a tight job market. Yet after having read more than enough careless applications, and endured more than enough excruciating phone interviews, I know that some academics are clueless about how to sell themselves — and more specifically, their fitness — to a teaching institution.

Here, then, is some advice:

First and foremost, when you are applying to a teaching-intensive college or university, **know the institution's mission**. Almost every teaching-intensive institution has a mission statement that guides the choices they make about hiring, curriculums, marketing, recruiting. At a university like mine, we live and breathe our mission statement (or at least we intend to); heck, our administration even plastered the mission statement on water bottles, and gave them out for free — a constant reminder to faculty members of what we should be up to every day in the classroom.

Before applying to a teaching-intensive college, take the time to read its mission statement, which should be readily available online. All your application material should be tailored to that mission statement. If you land a phone or campus interview, mention the mission statement in your answers; show how your own teaching principles resonate with the statement; reflect on ways you would apply the statement to your work with students. By doing this, you are arguing — both explicitly and implicitly — that your work melds well with the institution's mission;

Almost as important (and perhaps just as obviously), you need to **position yourself as a teacher, not a scholar**. Folks at teaching institutions love scholarship as much as the next academic, but we are hiring you primarily for your teaching ability, not for the dissertation-cum-earth-shattering book you are beginning to write. That means in your cover letter, start with your passion for teaching; don't spend the first five paragraphs explaining the minutiae of your latest research. When you are interviewing by phone, remember that those on the other end, huddled around a speaker, may roll their eyes if you can't stop talking about your next great discovery.

Instead, let them know the kinds of teaching you've already done, and what you enjoy about students (and if you don't have any teaching experience when you apply for jobs, get some; your application will have a better chance of succeeding if you have already spent time in a classroom). Make sure you have a philosophy guiding your work in the classroom, and be able to talk about the principles informing the syllabuses you might create, your relationship to students, and the pedagogical approaches you use.

When you get invited to campus, spend more time preparing for your classroom demonstration than your job talk: hiring committees want to know how you teach a group of students, much more so than how you convey your most passionate research interests to a specially picked crowd of other professors. If you can, find out as much as possible about the on-campus teaching ethos; unless you are a brilliant orator, lecturing for 50 minutes at a college where professors use primarily a collaborative approach may suggest that you won't fit there..

Fundamentally, this means **understanding the faculty life at a teaching-intensive institution**. Those who attended a college or university similar to that which they are applying may be at an advantage here, because they have a better understanding of the campus culture that often accompanies colleges where teaching is emphasized over research. Faculty life at teaching-intensive colleges will be different than at other institutions, and it's imperative that job applicants acknowledge that they appreciate those differences, including the kind of roles teaching faculty play on campus; their relationship to students outside the classroom; the ways scholarship fills the nooks and crannies of one's time; the relatively meager development funds available for research. If a job applicant argues her research agenda demands long trips to Europe during the academic year and an ample travel budget, her candidacy is probably toast: most teaching-focused institutions don't have the time allowance or the money to support her work.

As you prepare for a job talk, then, **explain how your scholarship can be sustained despite a heavy teaching load**. There are certainly ways to rescale most any research to the support offered by an institution. Think creatively about how your research could be reconfigured to sustain your

interests — and also the demands of teaching and a heavy advising load. Show how your own scholarly agenda enhances what is already being done in the department to which you've applied, and also complements the work of other scholars there. Reflect on ways you might be able to collaborate with colleagues and students at the institution to both enrich your own work -- and theirs as well. Your willingness to work with others as a teacher and a scholar will convey a conviction of wanting to fit in and progress the department's mission, rather than wanting to be the superstar whose work matters more than anything else, including your colleagues' research efforts.

Finally, arguing for your ability to fit in a department extends beyond your strong teaching record, your clear pedagogical philosophy, and your realistic research agenda; you need to show, in word and in deed, that you are the kind of colleague the hiring department wants to have. This means, at interview events, looking committee members in the eyes and answering their questions, rather than checking your phone for text messages. This means, when you are on campus, treating the administrative assistant respectfully, rather than acting as if she's not in the room; you may discover, once you've landed the job, that she is a prized member of the department's team. This means avoiding snarky comments about the students and their abilities, since those actually teaching at the campus are probably a better gauge than you are about students' skills, given how much time they spend together. And this means, on the trip back to the airport, refraining from criticizing the slightly crazy but still beloved department member whose questions during your job talk — the ones you thought "idiotic" and "bizarre" — were the very ones the committee hoped he would ask.

Because yep: those things happened during searches I've been on, making our decisions about how well a candidate fit at my university just a little easier.

I recognize that the job market is terrible for most disciplines, my own included, and that searching for a good — or even moderately acceptable — tenure-track position is daunting. This makes some job search behavior even more inexplicable. Sure, some of the work needed to show you fit into a department can seem like a crapshoot. But not everything has to be a guessing game.

In our department's case six years ago, when we were trying to replace our deceased colleague, we offered the position to a person who exceeded our job qualifications on paper. Although something about her vibe with students worried me and a few of my colleagues, her research presentation talk dazzled, as did her recommendations. Despite our misgivings, we went ahead with the job offer. Within a year, she was gone. But the next guy we hired understood the culture of a teaching-intensive university, and spoke fondly of his time in the classroom. During his teaching demonstration, he spend part of the class talking comfortably with students, learning to know a bit about them and their work. He described his modest but important research agenda, and explained the ways his work fit nicely with what department members were already doing. He also told a few good jokes during our department lunch, and laughed warmly at our slightly crazy but beloved colleague's antics.

In other words, he fit perfectly.

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