

Job Applications in Academia

ICERM Professional Development Program



Outline

Having insight on how institutions approach recruiting may help you make sense of the process and navigate inevitable bumps in the road. There are variations from school to school, country to country, and year to year. Our goal is to give you tools for understanding what may happen and why.

We'll break this down into four parts:

- 1 Before you apply
- 2 Application preparation and review
- 3 Interviewing and visiting campus
- 4 Job offers and negotiations

Before you apply

Be ready for the job market

Create and take advantage of opportunities to:

- Participate in conferences.
- Give and attend talks.
- Meet seminar speakers, visitors, conference participants, talk about your and their research.
- Build your own network of contacts, go for lunch or dinner with seminar speakers and colleagues.
- Seek teaching opportunities and document your teaching, work with undergraduates over the summer.

What happens before a search?

Before a faculty search is announced, lots has happened behind the scenes. The advertisement reflects negotiations between the department and the administration on both resources and academic directions.

Departments may hire to build on an existing area of research strength, replace retiring or departing faculty, fill gaps in teaching capacity, and develop inroads to exciting new research communities.

Institutions may also have interests in recruiting in “hot” fields with lots of research support, building bridges between departments and opportunities for interdisciplinary scholarship, responding to student demand for courses, and realizing campus-level strategic goals.

How to decide where to apply?

Be aware of people you might want to work with – and are hopefully interested in your work – at places with active searches.

Read the advertisement! These are a public record of the negotiations leading up to a search. It can provide important clues on what they are looking for academically, who will be driving hiring decisions, and the larger campus context for the search. Searches by a department run differently from interdisciplinary hiring processes.

Do the teaching expectations align with your goals. Some people are happy at liberal arts colleges focusing on undergraduates; others want to train doctoral students. Schools with low teaching “loads” often have higher expectations for service, publications, or external funding.

Application preparation and review

How are applications read?

Best practice is for applications to be reviewed deliberately, taking time to carefully evaluate each element of the file. But sometimes a faculty member finds themselves racing to screen 60 applications the night before a hiring committee meeting. It's in your interest to make their job easier!

The main elements are most applications are:

- cover sheet: landing page in the online review system with basic demographic information, often automatically generated
- cover letter: a one-page letter from the applicant explaining their interest in the position
- curriculum vitae
- letters from evaluators
- statements on research, teaching, and diversity.

What does this mean for my applications?

Faculty may first read the application elements that are most likely to offer decisive information. Having a model of how these decisions are made will help you prepare these materials.

For tenure-track jobs at research-oriented departments: Prepare your CV carefully, leading with information most relevant to hiring decisions: publications, preprints, grants or competitive fellowships, etc. The presentation might depend on the responsibilities of the position!

For positions emphasizing teaching: Draft a cover letter discussing how you'd contribute to the department. This might not be possible if you're applying to hundreds of schools, so it's smart to identify a manageable list of top choices – places you'd like to work where you have a good chance to be hired.

And what about reference letters?

These are very important; many reviewers read them before your research statement! Think carefully about whom to ask:

- Referees should know you and your work well enough to make a meaningful, sound judgment.
- If possible, ask referees who are well known in their field and preferably from different places
- For the teaching letter, ask somebody whom you worked with as a TA; if you taught a course as a lecturer, ask an appropriate faculty member to visit one of your classes to help them write a letter.

Practical tips

Ask your letter writers early, give them plenty of time to submit. Most faculty require a month to write a strong letter. Keep in mind that some faculty write upwards of 40 letters a year, concentrated in the fall.

Provide letter writers all the information they will need to write: your CV and research statements, papers and preprints, and possibly draft work if this is relevant. For teaching letters provide lists of courses taught, course evaluations, and possibly materials from your classes.

Letter writers appreciate receiving the list of schools where you'll be applying in advance. This is important if letters have to be uploaded individually.

Research statement

Before writing your statement, think about who will read it and what they're looking for. If your preprints and papers are publicly available, this should be a narrative linking together what you have done.

- First part should be accessible to a general mathematical audience.
- Put your research interests into a broad perspective.
- Address your current and future research interests in more depth.
- For future research projects, find a good balance between concrete problems that you wish to work on and your long-term vision.

Have fellow students, advisers, mentors, read them.

The shorter a statement, the higher the chance that it will be read!

Teaching statement

Be concise, concrete, and clear!

What are your objectives as a teacher?

How would you teach to achieve your goals?

If you have taught, describe activities and techniques you have used with your students, as an instructor or TA.

Aspects to consider: testing or evaluation of students, experience with pedagogical methods like flipped classrooms, courses you might like to offer as a faculty member, and examples of how you responded to feedback.

Interviews and campus visits

What committees and administrators hope to learn?

Interviews can be brief Zoom calls or multi-day campus visits with a colloquium and ten individual meetings.

How might you be as a colleague? Do you lecture clearly? How do you respond to questions from peers and students? Will you be an active contributor to the life of the department?

Chairs and deans may want to communicate the goals and aspirations of their units as well as expectations for reappointment and promotion.

Everyone will be gauging how interested you are in the position and the community of the institution.

Advice on job talks

Prepare your job talk carefully. Know your audience (will students be listening? faculty from other departments?) and who you're trying to influence. If you already have the support of the specialists in your field, you might focus on explaining your work to the rest of the faculty.

NEVER RUN LATE

Always finish your talk on time, even if your presentation is delayed by questions or other factors outside your control. Have a clear plan for how you'll begin and end your talk, and what bits in-between can be dropped to save time.

Advice on meetings

Spend a little time learning the backgrounds of people you're meeting.

Have questions prepared: This is the main way to communicate interest in the position! There is no harm asking the same question twice, and some value if the answers differ!

Questions you may be asked:

- Why did you apply?
- How do you see yourself fitting into the department?
- How would you strengthen the department?
- What courses do you want to teach?

Question you may want to ask:

- Living environment: benefits (health insurance, retirement), housing (schools, day-care)
- Junior sabbaticals, parental leave (and the tenure clock.)
- Teaching: teaching load, which courses would I teach?
- Research: quality of facilities, financial support for seminar speakers
- Service: expectations for service and committee work
- Expectations: what are the expectations for tenure? how many junior faculty got tenure over the past years? how is teaching and research evaluated?
- Support: seminars, graduate students, postdoc positions, visitors, ...

Job offers and negotiations

What are departments worried about?

What are the odds you'll come?

What competing offers do you have? How do they compare?

Are there non-academic factors influencing your decision? Note that US employers cannot legally ask about two-body problems or family circumstances.

How long will this take? If you turn us down, will it be too late to turn to the next candidate?

Negotiations

Negotiations often start before a formal offer is made – prepare for this case

In principle, everything can be negotiated, though what you may obtain in the end depends on your leverage (other offers) and on the position (postdoc offers are much more rigid)

Prepare a wish list: salary, startup funds (ideally not time-limited), teaching reduction, service load, office space, computer equipment, moving expenses

Phone conversations can be scary but informative. You may learn more about the constraints a chair/department is working under in a conversation than an email .

Prioritize your list and prepare arguments/justification for what you ask for (eg “I plan to apply for grants XYZ in my first year, so a teaching reduction would be helpful”) and emphasize benefits for department.

Startup often comes from the Dean’s office: give the Department Chair arguments that they can work with.

Be polite but also state your requests clearly: have your mentor read over your emails if you are unsure about how to formulate requests or inquiries.