

ADVICE

Do You Fit Us?

The hiring department is looking for a person, not just a CV



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By David D. Perlmutter | OCTOBER 09, 2016

Before I became a full-time administrator, my reaction to hearing someone call a job candidate "too good to hire" was resentment. After all, shouldn't a Ph.D.'s academic achievements transcend all other factors?

A decade ago I wrote about the "you were too good for us" problem — that is, when you're not hired because a department's professors doubt you'll stay or worry that your record will make them look bad, or any number of other subjective rationales. Since then, as a department head and now a dean, I've witnessed many a faculty hire that was — with good reasons — based on more than just merit. Those reasons center less on candidates being "too good" and more on them being a "good fit."

Academic hiring on many campuses and in many disciplines has become a gigantic gamble. Tenure-track positions are cherished these days, and neither faculties nor administrations want to waste a tenure-track position on anything less than a "just right" candidate.

At the same time, the costs of hiring have skyrocketed. Including job ads, airfare, lodging, and meals, the bill just to conduct a search can run to many thousands of dollars. For some — a languages department in a tiny liberal-arts college, for instance — the actual expenses might be lower but the relative outlay to the budget is more painful.

Then, too, start-up expenditures for a new faculty member vary widely. In the field of mass communication, new assistant professors might receive \$50,000 in technology and research support over their first three years. In chemistry, that figure might rise into the millions.

Many hires, thus, have become all or nothing. Departments settle on a finalist and put all their chips into hiring that person. If they get turned down, or if the hire stays only for a few years before moving on, the position may be pulled forever. Tenure-line hires matter so much that the effect can be counterintuitive, where search committees, professors, and administrators redefine "best." The optimum hire becomes somebody who will say "yes," who may not cost as much, who will remain for more than a few years before leaving for (perceived) greener pastures. In short, a good fit.

Local circumstances matter, too: A top-20 program is going to emphasize quantifiable merit as a matter of course. A small, less prestigious, poorly funded department may take more "intangibles" into fretful account.

So in such a complex picture, how can you tell when your scholarly record is going to work against you at a particular institution? Here are some of the questions professors and administrators may be asking themselves about your candidacy.

Are you going to be too expensive? Many senior professors (present company included) raise an eyebrow at today's start-up packages. The wealth variation on this front is vast. A humanities Ph.D. who procured a tenure-track position at a small college described his start-up package as "an office key and a cracked desk." On the other hand, the head of a science department at a top research university recounted a bidding war for a new hire; the chair gave up after he offered a \$1.9-million start-up package and another program topped his offer.

At the very least, expect administrators to make an economic assessment of your candidacy. Institutions of lesser means might evaluate a candidate as "too rich for our blood" and tell themselves, "He's fantastic, but he'll never come here because we could never offer him what he wants or needs."

If you're that candidate and you really want the job, balance what you want with what they can do — especially if you are not in STEM or don't have a research-intensive agenda. For a historian or an anthropologist, a reasonable travel budget might be all you need at a regional state university. If you are interviewing at a teaching-oriented campus with modest pay, instead of a higher salary, ask for guaranteed summer teaching assignments.

Are you going to be a flight risk? Certain search committees in out-of-the-way places may read your CV and note:

- You came from a top doctoral program.
- You grew up in a major city on a coast.
- You are already publishing well.

All positives — unless they are not. Discussing your candidacy, Senior Prof No. 1 — who has been at the institution for 30 years — scans your CV and letter. "Very accomplished, but will she be satisfied here?" Senior Prof No. 2 chimes in: "Grew up in San Diego. Well, she's not going to be happy with corn fields instead of beaches."

Are they unfairly stereotyping you? Perhaps. Or maybe they are shrewdly realistic and drawing from unfortunate experience. They fear you would take the job as a temporary resting place and be gone in a few years.

How to counter such sentiments? I never advocate dishonesty. Many a faculty member had initial misgivings about taking a job at their "Plan B" campus and then grew to love it. What you can do is explain why you want to work there — besides "I need a job." What attracts you about the program? What courses do they offer that you look forward to teaching? What familiarity or connection do you have with the location? In other words, personalize yourself away from being a mere stereotype of the "outsider."

Will you succeed with "our" students? If you are the product of a top doctoral program at a highly ranked university, some search committees may assume that your teaching experience is largely with other privileged students.

A friend who teaches at a regional state university in the South explained: "We have candidates for our open positions who have everything CV-wise going for them. They have great pedigrees from Berkeley or NYU or whatever, but I have to wonder if they are going to connect and have empathy with our students — many first gen, minority, poor, or rural, or all of the above." Such impressions may be compounded if you radiate classist or urbanist airs.

Offer evidence (including testimonials from your references) to counter that perception. A lot of people assume (falsely) that only elite students attend elite universities. You might refer to different populations and diverse audiences you have taught or TA'ed for. Perhaps you have made some special connection with individual students that you might bring up in your teaching materials. Find ways to highlight your interest in engaging undergraduates who are not prep-school legacies. Shatter the stereotype by noting that you yourself were not to the manor born (assuming that's the case).

Given the opportunity, you can also make those points in person. The teaching demonstration, meetings with faculty and administrators, and especially meal times are crucial occasions for showing and telling how much you can and will be a good teacher and mentor for people outside the typecasting of where you came from.

Will you fit into "our" faculty culture? Professors often have a sense of local culture not based on origin but on the rhythm, mores, and mission of the institution. For instance, one of the most common — but rarely discussed — tensions in higher education today is that Ph.D. programs are producing many high-powered scholars who are finding jobs at places where the senior professors earned tenure on criteria that did not require prolific research.

It follows that they don't want to invite into their midst someone arrogant and condescending. "He just doesn't fit us" will be the dismissive categorization if they think you think you are going to be slumming. They may see you as a show pony who won't pull the cart on committees and service tasks, and won't respect what they do.

Again, if you want the job, take steps to countertype the stereotype. In your letter and other application materials, and on Skype or in face-to-face interactions, bring up specific components of the institution's program and culture that attract you. Check any impulse, tone, or wording that comes off as "superior than thou." No one is expecting you to be "just folks," but demonstrate that you respect them and would be a collegial partner of their labors. Bring up examples of service tasks you completed and how much you learned. Ask your references to underscore your work ethic and willingness to help out.

In many fields it's a buyer's market for faculty. The choice for candidates who want to stay in academe is between tenure-track employment and permanent adjunct teaching. Maybe you graduated from a top research program but find yourself desperate for a job and eager to move to a rural teaching-focused college or a lesser-ranked university than your alma mater.

In such cases, don't kid yourself that you are overqualified. It's really that you don't fit some of the cultural, collegial, or attitudinal factors that mean a lot to the department or the institution. The only response is to go all in to prove you can fit into their world.

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