

OPINION

Career Advice: Finding a Job at a Predominantly Undergraduate Institution

Julio J. Ramirez

Psychology Department and Neuroscience Program, Davidson College, Davidson, NC 28035.

Seeking a teaching job at a predominantly undergraduate college or university can be a daunting proposition. Although reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that the job market for teaching positions at postsecondary institutions will be healthy over the coming decade, competition for these positions will likely be intense. This essay explores the profiles of predominantly undergraduate institutions (PUIs), the nature of faculty

positions at PUIs, the elements that make for a competitive job applicant, and strategies to consider during negotiations. Seeking a position at a PUI may be arduous at times, but the rewards reaped from a successful search for a PUI position are well worth the investment.

Key words: College; Science Education; Employment; Faculty; Negotiation; Teaching; Undergraduate Student

When I first contemplated becoming a college teacher back in the late 1970s, several of my graduate school colleagues and advisors warned me that teaching at a four-year college would doom my scientific career. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the prediction of my career's early demise was greatly exaggerated! I now have been teaching for 35 years and I enjoy teaching college students every bit as much now as I did when I first began teaching in 1981. Although the rate of my scientific productivity may have been slowed because of choosing this career path, teaching college students is extraordinarily fulfilling in its own right. If you have an interest in introducing eager young minds to the adventure of scientific discovery, I can assure you that this career path is deeply rewarding and provides marvelous opportunities to awaken students to the wonders of the natural world as they begin to explore paths that lead them to professional growth and fulfillment. Recent studies of job opportunities in the United States verify the quality of the professoriate as a potential career path. Being a college professor ranked third in a 2009 study by CNNMoney.com and PayScale.com of the top 50 careers in the United States with the best prospects for growth and pay (Rosato et al., 2009). In a more recent assessment of the 2014 job market by CareerCast.com, the position of university professor came in second among the top 200 jobs assessed along four core dimensions: environment, income, outlook, and stress. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reports that job growth for postsecondary teachers from 2014 to 2024 will likely outstrip overall job growth in the United States (13% vs. 7%). The sobering downside is that a portion of the job growth will occur in adjunct and non-tenure track positions as many colleges and universities migrate away from tenure-track positions. Although the stiff competition for tenure-track jobs at four-year colleges may be intimidating, the advice I share in this essay will hopefully provide prospective teaching-job candidates with the edge they need to be competitive for the teaching job of their dreams. In the remainder of this essay, we will explore the profile of predominantly undergraduate institutions (PUIs), the profile of faculty positions at PUIs, what elements make for a

competitive job applicant at PUIs, the components of a job offer that will be important to consider during negotiations, and finally I will provide some resources that might be of value as you contemplate this career path. For the purposes of this discussion, we will adopt the nomenclature used by the *U. S. News & World Report* in their annual college rankings issue, which is a variation on the Carnegie Classification System. The 2016 edition of the "Best Colleges" rankings issue in *U.S. News & World Report* lists 1,506 four-year colleges and universities. While two-year community colleges are a rich resource for the education of millions of students in the United States, we will focus our attention on securing a job at a PUI.

PROFILES OF PREDOMINANTLY UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONS

In all likelihood, the majority of the job applicants seeking a job at a PUI will have had a large portion of their career molded by their experiences at a national university. These institutions offer a wide range of disciplinary specializations with departments granting master's and doctoral degrees. National universities emphasize scholarly and scientific research, but they are also responsible for the education of a large number of undergraduate students in the United States. There are 280 national universities, of which 173 are public institutions, 100 private institutions, and 7 proprietary institutions.

As of this writing, PUIs constitute a total of 1,226 institutions that come in a variety of flavors, all of which emphasize teaching undergraduates as their *raison d'être*. National liberal arts colleges are defined as institutions that offer at least 50% of their degrees in the liberal arts and sciences (e.g., biology, history, philosophy, and psychology). Of the 245 national liberal arts colleges, 27 are public, 217 are private, and 1 is proprietary. Some 618 regional universities are distributed across the United States that offer a full range of disciplines for undergraduate- and master's-level courses of study, but these institutions offer few, if any, doctoral degrees. The regional universities include 346 private, 260 public, and 12

proprietary institutions. Finally, regional liberal arts colleges constitute a large portion of PUIs nationally and they offer fewer than 50% of their degrees in the liberal arts; the remaining degrees would presumably be focused on pre-professional courses of study. These 363 colleges are composed of 253 private, 94 public, and 16 proprietary institutions.

SALARY, BENEFITS, AND PERQUISITES

For those of you transitioning to a PUI faculty position from a grant-supported, postdoctoral position at a research university or medical school, the great news is that the salaries at PUIs are typically stable, nine-month contracts. In addition, because these are nine-month contracts, faculty may have opportunities to supplement their annual salaries with summer salaries derived from teaching or research grants; not all institutions offer summer teaching opportunities so prospective faculty are advised to explore the options available to them at a particular institution. Salaries at PUIs vary widely, but a job candidate can review available data on salaries at American colleges and universities that can be found in the March-April issue of *Academe*, published by the American Association of University Professors (www.aaup.org/academe). Although the salaries reported are about a year out of sync with the salaries offered in the year of a presumptive job search, the salary report in *Academe* will be very helpful as a job candidate sizes up a variety of PUIs in a job search. Generally speaking, positions at PUIs pay a tad less (sometimes a lot more than a tad) than what might be offered at research universities, but the intangible and tangible benefits of working in PUI environments are certainly worth weighing when contemplating a position at a PUI. Although there are too many to list here, intangible benefits include having numerous opportunities to work closely with undergraduates, working at institutions that cherish undergraduate education, having colleagues in near proximity from a wide range of disciplines with whom you can have interesting interactions, and campuses that are often quite attractive. Depending on the institution, a few tangible benefits that job candidates would do well to inquire about include tuition remission for family members (this perk may include approaches such as actual reduction in tuition costs at the home institution or tuition exchanges with other institutions for spouses and children), housing subsidies supporting the rental or purchase of homes, access to athletic facilities that often rival the quality of exclusive athletic clubs, in-house summer research funds that may be modest but sufficient to run a small research operation during the summer (these funds may include support for student stipends and supplies), and travel support to professional meetings.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF FACULTY AT PUIs

Although the emphasis may vary according to the nature of the school, teaching, research, and service are the three essential domains that constitute a faculty member's contributions to the life of an academic institution. Not surprisingly, teaching excellence is expected of job candidates at PUIs and the requirements for teaching may

vary considerably among PUIs. Depending on the institution, the so-called "teaching load" may range from as few as two courses per semester to as many as four courses per semester. Although I use the phrase "teaching load" here because it is common parlance, I find it troublesome because "load" sounds more like a burden than a joy – a joy that many faculty at PUIs experience when they teach undergraduates. For many faculty teaching laboratory courses, the laboratory courses may carry greater weight in teaching credit. For example, a course with a laboratory may earn the faculty member up to two course credits as part of his or her teaching load. As to the research domain, the level of research productivity that is expected of faculty at PUIs is typically calibrated with the teaching expectations of an institution. Generally speaking, PUIs have lower expectations for research productivity than what might be expected at research-intensive universities. This may be expressed as fewer requirements for number of publications, journal prestige and impact factor, federal grants, and the like. A job candidate would be wise to inquire about research expectations and weigh them against teaching expectations. As a rule of thumb, institutions with lower teaching loads will likely have higher research expectations. The third domain, service, is crucial for the governance of an institution. Although I sometimes imagine committee work as "death by droning" (a few faculty members have been known to be overly enamored with the timbre of their own voices), PUIs thrive because of the dedication that faculty have to the operations of their home institutions. While the glamor and significance of some committees may be less than desirable, decisions in areas ranging from the safety of campuses to the adequacy of library or research facilities are often made after review and debate by faculty members serving on committees at PUIs.

MAKINGS OF A STRONG JOB CANDIDATE

First and foremost for an applicant looking into the possibility of teaching at a PUI, the completion of the Ph.D. is of paramount importance before setting foot on campus to begin a new position. This is not to say that you should not apply for a position at a PUI unless you have defended your dissertation before you apply for the position, but having the Ph.D. *completed* before beginning the job will reduce the psychological stress associated with starting a new job, preparing lectures and laboratory experiences for the first time, as well as having to set up a new laboratory and launching a research program. At most institutions that have particular emphasis on research, having a few years of postdoctoral experience will likely strengthen your candidacy, as this will demonstrate more compellingly, that you can sustain an intense research career. At some other institutions with little emphasis on research, however, having a postdoctoral experience may matter less than having solid teaching experience; after all, at many PUIs the main interest is whether you can inspire students in the classroom and associated laboratory or field activities. Opportunities for gaining experience in the classroom or teaching laboratory may be found in a variety of settings:

adjunct positions at local community colleges and PUIs, teaching opportunities at your own institution (e.g., teaching assistantships – though these may be less helpful in your portfolio than actually teaching your own courses), occasional guest lectures in courses offered both at your own institution or at local institutions, and IRACDA Programs (Institutional Research and Academic Career Development Awards - www.nigms.nih.gov/Training/CareerDev/Pages/TWDInstRes.aspx).

When crafting materials to make your case to PUIs, one notion should emerge with resounding clarity throughout your portfolio: your avowed passion for teaching undergraduates. In addition, if the position you hope to secure also has expectations for research productivity, explicit articulation of your vision for your research program and how you would involve undergraduates in your research effort would be crucial. The research program you hope to undertake should be aligned with the resources that would typically be found at or could be purchased for an undergraduate research facility. If the equipment you require is out of reach for most PUIs (e.g., an fMRI), a strong candidate will have thought through continuing collaborations with colleagues at research-intensive institutions or exploring possible collaborations at a neighboring facility, for example. Demonstration of an awareness of extramural funding sources that are particularly friendly to PUIs (such as the Academic Research Enhancement Award Program at the National Institutes of Health [grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/area.htm] and the Research at Undergraduate Institutions Program at the National Science Foundation [www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5518&from=fund]) suggests that a candidate is concerned about the long-term viability of his or her research program in a PUI setting. Undergraduates at a PUI should be viewed more as junior colleagues than as simply research assistants. After all, one objective of many PUI science departments is to ignite a desire for exploration and discovery in their undergraduates, which they should be prepared to pursue upon graduation in the next phase of their career development. Attaining this objective will be more likely when a student has participated as a junior colleague in the richness of the scientific endeavor rather than as an assistant tasked with washing beakers. Finally, be sure to align your application and teaching portfolio with the job ad of the PUI in which you are interested. The courses and laboratory experiences you assert you can teach should actually be the ones the PUI has advertised as needing to be covered. If the PUI has stated that the specialization is open within a given field – the department may be looking for the strongest candidate emerging from a net more widely cast across specializations – you may have a bit more latitude in how you portray what you can bring to the institution.

A TWO-STEP INVITATION

At many, if not most, PUIs, the search committee will conduct a two-step interview process in selecting their final candidate. The first step will involve reducing a pool of applicants to a manageable number of candidates that will be invited for a phone or video interview (for the sake of

simplicity I will just refer to it as a phone interview). The length and intensity of these interviews will vary across PUIs, but a 30-minute phone interview would not be unusual. There is nothing mysterious about the questions that may be asked: What are your reasons for seeking a job at a PUI? Are there features of a liberal arts setting that particularly excite you? How might your research program be accommodated at a PUI with limited resources? How would you involve undergraduates in your research? Departments will likely have a set of questions that they are most interested in and they are not likely to provide them ahead of time. Some faculty may want to see how well you can respond in a give-and-take format. A prospective candidate should not underestimate the importance of asking informed, probing questions during the interview. To some extent, the nature of the questions a candidate raises indicates how well a candidate has studied the PUI to which he or she is applying. So, before you have the phone interview, spend some time studying the department and the PUI at which you are being interviewed.

The payoff for having been prepared for the phone interview and for making a positive impression, which best matches the needs of the department to which you are applying, is the invitation to visit campus. Each PUI has its own traditions, but typically around three candidates may be invited to visit campus for in-person interviews and a presentation (or two). Once again, the more prepared you are for the campus visit the more competitive you will be for the position. Before arriving on campus, a competitive candidate will have familiarized him- or herself with the students, the faculty, and the PUI. Be sure to refer to the institution by its correct name (some faculty get a little touchy about having their college or university referred to by the wrong name). A polished five-to-seven minute “elevator speech” will be an important part of your preparation. You should be able to succinctly articulate your teaching philosophy, your research plan, and how the two coincide. Depending on the size of the institution, a candidate will likely meet many, if not all, of the members of a given department as well as members of the administration (e.g., a Dean and/or President). The meetings may occur as small-group or one-on-one meetings. Meetings may last up to 30 minutes and may range from formal interviews to relaxed interactions. Whichever format your interviewer decides on, you should be aware that what you say, how you interact, how well you interview (i.e., making good eye contact, good composure, clarity of answers, etc.) will all play a role in the decision-making process. Whether you are in an interview setting, having dinner with faculty or students, or simply walking across campus with a host, be aware that you are on stage. And it is a long performance – typically a twelve-hour day of interview activities at many PUIs and the campus visit may be up to two days long. The faculty and administration have to make an important decision when making an offer to a prospective faculty member – after all, this is a colleague they may have for life – and they will want to gather as much information during your visit as possible before making that decision.

Frankly, a campus visit is a “two-way street.” A job candidate should use the campus visit to probe and to discover whether the institution is the right fit for him or her. A one- or two-day immersion in a campus is the best time to discover the nuances you need to know about the students, the faculty, and the institution – information that may not be readily gleaned from a website. The campus visit is a great time to explore the importance of the department’s or PUI’s mission statement to the life of the institution. Because of the long-term nature of faculty positions, one might ask about: the importance of your specialty in the department’s future; the ease with which institutional review boards or institutional animal care and use committees operate; the tenure and review policy; mentoring programs for junior faculty; support for grant-writing and submission; access to scholarly journals; and teaching and research expectations. When you are mining conversations for information, please keep in mind that these are personal interactions (not courtroom interrogations) so remaining cordial, diplomatic, and tactful would help your profile. Asking thoughtful questions is often interpreted as the seriousness with which a job candidate is considering a particular position.

The job talk at PUIs may have one or two versions: a standard research presentation and/or a teaching demonstration. A research seminar at a PUI is informative to the faculty for at least three reasons: First, the faculty and students will get an in-depth view of your research and its importance. Second, the faculty and students will be able to gauge your ability to translate complex material into a format that is accessible to non-experts and novices. Third, the faculty and students will get a snapshot of your ability to convey your excitement about your research to an undergraduate audience. At some institutions, prospective faculty members are asked to prepare a lecture or classroom experience in the typical 50-minute teaching block. Although approaches will vary across PUIs, the job candidate may be given a choice among several topics to prepare. Depending on the range of choices, you might consider choosing a topic that you feel most comfortable turning around in a relatively short period of time. This occasion may not be the right one to pick a topic that you know absolutely nothing about, but would be interested in preparing nonetheless – time constraints and competing responsibilities at your home institution while you are preparing the material may put a snag into your freedom to learn new material and to prepare an excellent classroom experience. While preparing the lecture, a competitive job applicant will have given substantial thought not only to the content, but to the pedagogical techniques that evidence from education literature suggests would make the experience most effective, such as use of active-learning techniques. Before crafting your lecture, you should feel comfortable asking about the audience that you will be addressing (e.g., whether the students will be largely from introductory level classes or from advanced classes). Because your responsibility at a PUI will be heavily focused on teaching, the faculty will be particularly interested in items such as how accessible you make the content to undergraduates, the extent to which you engage

with the students during the session, the organization of the lecture/experience, and the ease with which you interact with the students. Be sure to keep your presentation within the allotted time and approach the delivery of the experience as an actor approaches performing in a play: rehearse as often as is required so you feel comfortable with the delivery.

AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

What transpires at the negotiation stage for a new position is among the most important events that impact one’s career. Two areas in particular will be the focus of the negotiation: 1) starting salary and 2) seed money. To a large extent, the salary you begin your career with serves as a lodestar for the remainder of your career. Salary growth throughout your career (whether as a consequence of annual raises, salary adjustments because of promotion, or a move to another institution) will more often than not echo that starting point. Many PUIs have formulas that they use to determine the starting salary based on items such as years of experience and the specific field of the new hire. Nonetheless, a prospective faculty member would do well to diplomatically push the envelope on the starting salary. As mentioned earlier in this essay, information on the salaries of faculty according to rank are available in the March-April issue of *Academe* and you may find this useful as you gauge your salary offer. Asking for advice from mentors and trusted senior colleagues would be important at this phase of the hiring process.

Within the PUI environment the amount of seed money to launch a laboratory is a one-time windfall that should be carefully considered. The seed money offered at PUIs will range widely according to the specialty of the prospective faculty member, the department, and the fiscal capacity of the PUI – it is not unlikely that those institutions with the largest endowments and donor-bases may be in a better position to offer larger start-up packages. The range of these funds at PUIs may be as little as \$5,000 to well over \$100,000. An honest appraisal of your needs in a PUI environment is essential. The funding you agree to should enable you to conduct research with undergraduates to properly educate them and to position you for a successful career as a teaching scholar with good prospects for tenure. As is the case with the starting salary offer, a prospective faculty member should push the envelope diplomatically on the start-up package as dictated by the needs of his or her research enterprise. If there is considerable distance between the start-up offer and what is actually needed to do the work, one strategy would be to negotiate for the distribution of funds over a two- or three-year period so the PUI is not strained by the initial outlay of funds, but you ultimately get the funds necessary to launch your laboratory and to begin educating your students.

Aside from salary and start-up funds, a number of other items deserve attention during the negotiation stage. Since a laboratory will be required to actually conduct research, before leaving campus a job candidate should have a clear understanding of the research space that will be allocated to the new hire. If new spaces are in a planning stage, it would be reasonable to view the plans to

make certain that your research program can be conducted in the proposed space. Many PUIs offer financial support for teaching, travel, and research. Clarifying whether funds will be available to ensure that a solid budget is available to support teaching laboratories during the academic year, to assist the new faculty member to attend professional meetings, and to support summer research with students early in the negotiation process would be advisable. Moving expenses are often covered by institutions bringing in new hires, so a prospective faculty member should inquire about the funds available for the relocation expenses. Finally, get all agreements in writing; this will protect both you and the institution in the event that memories of conversations fade over time.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

The successes you have already demonstrated in achieving the Ph.D. or in bringing your postdoctoral research to fruition should be taken as clear evidence that you have made tremendous progress in your career path. Despite the fact that the journey from job-seeker to assistant professor can sometimes be nerve-racking and plagued with self-doubt; when you finally transition from graduate student or postdoctoral fellow to assistant professor, you will have unequivocal affirmation that the risks you took and the hours you dedicated to your career were all well worth the effort. As a professor at a PUI, you will have the opportunity to mold the next generation of scientists as they embark on their own paths to discovery – few professions are as noble, important, and enriching.

RESOURCES

American Association of University Professors (retrieved 2 March 2016) The annual report on the economic status of the profession. *Academe*, March-April 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.aaup.org/article/busting-myths-annual-report-economic-status-profession-2014-15#.VtdEGCi9dsQ>.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) Occupational outlook handbook: postsecondary teachers. Retrieved on 2016 March 2 from <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/postsecondary-teachers.htm>.

Bushey MN, Crawford, I, Lycan DE, Videtich PE (2015) How to Get a Tenure-Track Position at a Predominantly Undergraduate Institution. Washington DC: Council on Undergraduate Research.

Campbell AM (1996) How to get a teaching job at a primarily undergraduate institution. Bethesda, MD: The American Society of Cell Biology.

Campbell AM (retrieved 2 March 2016) Life at a Primarily Undergraduate Institution (PUI). Retrieved from <http://www.ibiology.org/ibiomagazine/issue-8/a-malcolm-campbell-life-at-a-primarily-undergraduate-institution-pui.html>.

CareerCast.com (retrieved 2 March 2016) Jobs rated 2014: Ranking 200 jobs from best to worst. Retrieved from <http://www.careercast.com/jobs-rated/jobs-rated-2014-ranking-200-jobs-best-worst>.

Paine T (2016) Do you want a job at a primarily undergraduate institution (PUI)? *FUN Newsletter* 3(1):2-3.

Reis RM (1997) *Tomorrow's professor: preparing for academic careers in science and engineering*. New York, NY: Wiley-IEEE Press.

Rosato D, Braverman B, Jeffries A (2009, November) The 50 best jobs in America. *Money Magazine*, pp 88-96.

Steinmetz K (2016) How to get a job at a PUI. *FUN Newsletter* 3(1):5-7.

U. S. News & World Report (retrieved 2 March 2016) U.S. News College Rankings. Retrieved from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges?int=978d08&int=97bc08>.

Vick JM, Furlong JS, Lurie R (2016) *The academic job search handbook*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Received March 04, 2016; revised March 27, 2016; accepted March 27, 2016.

Acknowledgement: The author is very grateful to Drs. Pamela Hay, Bruce Johnson, and Karen Parfitt for valuable suggestions on this essay.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Julio J. Ramirez, Psychology Department, Box 7017, Davidson College, Davidson, NC 28035-7017. Email: [juramirez@davidson.edu](mailto:juramirez@ davidson.edu)

Copyright © 2016 Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience
www.funjournal.org