



MESA's Committee on Precarity and Adjunctification was approved at the January 15, 2020 MESA Board Meeting and charged with looking into the changing demographics of academia, noting that 30% of academics are now in tenure-track lines.

Notes on the Misery of the Academic Job Cycle

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It's no secret that navigating today's academic job market is a spectacularly unpleasant experience.

On a practical level, the application process is at its best a time sucking exercise in redundancy. Multiple websites must be scanned continuously

for months to catch potential new openings. Opaque job postings must be interpreted and arcane details must be clarified – for instance, what is a statement of teaching purpose and how does it differ from a statement of teaching philosophy? And why does a department need both for a job that pays \$42,000 a year to teach a 5:5 load? Letters and statements must be written, copied, pasted, edited, and triple checked to ensure that the letter for Ohio no longer contains references to Michigan.

To manage the multiple moving parts simultaneously, the applicant must devise a 4 dimensional calendar system to monitor deadlines and allot time to particular applications, as well as to alert them when it is time to politely harass colleagues who so generously offered to provide letters of reference at earlier, more peaceful points in the semester. Naturally, application materials must be completed while the applicant continues teaching, writing, occasionally sleeping, and trying to piece together the tatters of their personal life.

Those of us who specialize in the Middle East have additional burdens to bear. In a good year, a maximum of 15 positions might be advertised that could be reasonably be deemed suitable for those with the broadest specializations. Perhaps 5 of those might be actual fits for any given candidate. In a bad year the pickings are slim. For many applicants, their fantastic dissertation topic might inadvertently pigeonhole them in the minds of committee members, getting them scratched from the

list in favor of a candidate working on something more amenable to the vagaries of the committee. Applications to non-specialized departments will inevitably fall into the hands of committee members who have little to no knowledge of the region, let alone current debates in the field. Many such jobs will contain “Islamic” in the title, and will have nothing to do with theology.

Alas.

The process is also an emotional meat grinder. Applicants must approach advisors, colleagues, and peers for recommendations, knowing in advance that their referee is likely writing the same letter for several colleagues applying to the same positions. After several job cycles, the applicant will cease to feel like a wretched Dickensian urchin asking for more and will merely feel like a burden on the lives of their letter writers. While early in one's job hunt the rejections can be cripplingly painful to bear, time and experience dull the sting of rejection. Eventually the applicant will be pleasantly surprised to find the rare rejection email in their inbox, even when it is a form letter that still contains the item “[insert name here].” As applicants move deeper into the hiring season without word from prospective schools, fit and location become less important than finding something to keep them afloat in the coming year.

This process is even more difficult for those who have taken non-traditional paths through academia, which despite its ideals still rewards the prestigious and the familiar over equally qualified candidates from a lower track.

A lucky few will get tenure track positions. Many who do will acquire a case of survivor's guilt to complement their usual early-career impostor's syndrome. Another lucky few will find temporary stability in multi-year visiting teaching positions or fellowships. Many others will find themselves farther down the scale of precarity, forced to start the process over again in a few short months. Many will find nothing.

I am particularly sensitive to this process because I have taken a particularly roundabout route into the field. I earned my Ph.D. in the Middle East and have spent most of my career in the region – partly by choice, partly by necessity. Over a four year period, I submitted close to 40 applications across three and a half job cycles. In my position in the United Arab Emirates, I also either chaired or sat on 7 different hiring committees. Though each encounter I had with the job cycle was unremittingly miserable, my experience on both sides of the hiring table gradually helped me hone my sense for what made some applicants successful and others not – excluding luck and circumstance, which secretly play an outsized role in any hiring process.

Over the years, I developed a few principles that helped me as I worked my way into the system. They may not apply to all cases and are not exhaustive by any means. Some are little more than detailed explanations of academic job hunt truisms, whereas others are simply based on personal observations. I like to share them whenever I feel they might be useful.

They are as follows:

1. Only apply to programs and jobs that are a good fit for you and tailor each application to the job call in a way that shows you know what you are applying for.

This is hard when you need a job, but it is important. Most job listings get dozens, if not hundreds of applications, and the committee's first task is to pare the initial pool down to a manageable list of a few dozen candidates. Unless your CV is too good to be true, statistically it is likely that you will not even reach the stage where anyone will actually read your meticulously prepared teaching statement.

Getting past this stage involves some luck, but it helps if you are a clear fit for the position. When I applied to my position in the Emirates, the committee initially listed me as unqualified because of my international Ph.D. However, one future colleague considered the fact that I had lived and studied in the region to be an advantage rather than a defect and convinced the rest of the committee members to add me back to the pool. Once I passed the initial hurdle, I could do more to help my candidacy, but the nebulous category of "fit" played a huge role in both of my tenure track hires. Likewise, as a committee member, it was easy to eliminate candidates for a position focused, say, on the Arab Middle East, if they solely specialized in Anatolian history.

In general, I learned to not waste time I did not have

applying to positions I did not fit (or want). This relates to my second point.

2. Spend lots of time on your application materials, especially your letter.

I am sure you would be shocked to know that members of hiring committees are sometimes distracted, lazy and prone to bias. They will scan your CV to see where you went to school and what you published, and maybe glance over your letter in search of typos or main themes in case someone asks them about you in a committee meeting.

They will also toss your application the first chance they get. As petty as it may sound, typos and small errors can be fatal to an otherwise good application. For instance, shortly after submitting an application to a top tier school, I noticed that I prominently misspelled something in the FIRST LINE of the letter (I somehow did not wither and die from my mortification).

To reward your committee members, your letter should be clear and strategically organized. It should have something approximating a thesis that shows what you want to do and why you want to be there. Above all, it should show how you will be useful for the school and the department. Highlight things like life experiences and skills that are not on your CV to show how you will be a good little cog, but avoid narrating if the story does not boost a specific argument in favor of your candidacy.

Letter structure is also key, and for this you will need to be able to interpret the job call accurately. If the position is at a research institution, put your research focus at the front of your letter. If you are clearly applying to a teaching school, put your teaching first and emphasize this as a strength. Avoid overselling yourself as a researcher at a teaching school, because paradoxically someone may see your talent and assume you will be disgruntled or unwilling to contribute in the classroom. Always include something about your service or administrative skills and how you fit as a colleague.

Remember, the committee members, not other applicants, are the real enemy here. Avoid controversial statements or anything that may be construed as a red flag. Definitely refrain from attacking particular styles of research or teaching, even if they deserve it, because one of those people will inevitably be on the hiring committee.

The time required to create a truly effective application is yet another good reason to apply to fewer, better fitting posts.

Two related points: I have an anecdotal theory that the worst jobs will require the most application materials. Likewise, your last letters, which will always be for the positions you want least, will be the best. Alas.

3. Have a range of colleagues who can provide letters of recommendation.

Ideally choose people with professional or scholarly opinions of your work rather than your advisors, who may be tempted to talk about you as a student. I tried to have 5 people who I could ask for letters at any one time to avoid overwhelming any of them. My magic combination was: 1. Department head, 2. Prestigious scholar in the field who for some reason held me in high regard, 3. Colleague who could speak to my strengths as a teacher and administrator. These particular references would respectively corroborate my claims in the teaching, research and service portions of my application letter.

I truly do not know if anyone ever read the recommendations.

4. Make sure you represent yourself as a willing and able colleague.

One of the reasons I got my last job was that I made it clear several times that I am a team player who wants to help the department run smoothly (not a lie!). The wolfish look that this statement put on the dean's face should have been a warning sign. Alas.

Whether you like it or not, you are going to be saddled with tiresome service obligations if you are hired, so it is good practice to at least pretend that you would be happy – nay – eager, to take on a service role in your letter and interview if (knock wood) you get one.

5. Think internationally.

Looking at jobs across the globe will not only open up new options, it might provide interesting life experiences that you would never have imagined if you stuck to the States. In the final year of my Ph.D., I applied to 15 positions and got one interview, but no job offers. I managed to secure a temporary post, which allowed me to remain in Beirut, which I loved. In the next round, I was rejected by 14 schools, got one interview, and got a job in the UAE after the first candidate for the position dropped out. While I had never planned to live in the Gulf before I applied, my experience in the Emirates was personally and professionally rewarding and it allowed me to develop myself as a candidate for future applications.

The European job cycle is worth watching, especially if

you miss out on the Fall jobs. There, postings will often begin to emerge, groundhog like, around February, but they can continue to roll out much later. I forwarded one post in Amsterdam to a colleague as late as April. While some of the jobs pay worse than positions in the US, they are worth the effort if you are either a good fit, or that the job may provide a good base from which to plot future moves.

The late application season means another several months of misery, but it may also offer opportunities that you may miss if America is your only option. All of my jobs have been outside of America, and I couldn't be happier.

6. Keep your spirits up.

I hesitate to say that it's a game, but it is one. Success and failure are really just a matter of chance and luck. Many applicants are equally qualified, or differentiable by shades of preference rather than ability. I know amazing scholars and teachers who may never get a tenure track position and I have known people who never should have been hired in the first place who will occupy seats in the academy until they die.

You will not hear back from most jobs, but do not let that depress you or affect your self-worth. This is all a matter of odds, and those odds are never in your favor. However, that says more about the system than it does about you.

My final comments are about that system.

The academic job gauntlet disproportionately affects fresh graduates and young scholars stuck in short term positions. Those of us who are no longer either may feel as though this is no longer our problem. Some may even celebrate the wretchedness of the process as a final rite of passage into the ranks of our field. We must resist this.

While few of us bear any responsibility for the system as it was constructed, or of the alarming slide towards the normalization of cheap grad students and short term academic labor, we must still consider what we can do to mitigate the negative effects of this system on our colleagues entering the field. This is especially important since many of them have experienced two once-in-a-lifetime shocks in a single generation in the 2007 financial crisis and the COVID pandemic. Not only is the job market increasingly precarious – the job seekers are increasingly living in precarious, debt ridden situations as well.

In the absence of a clear path towards structural change, perhaps incremental change in the application process might minimize its impact on early career scholars. Where

we can, we should push for a simplified application process that does not penalize scholars for missing the tenure track on their first tries. Moreover, we should try to limit the paperwork that applicants submit in the initial round of the hiring process. (If a candidate passes the first round, then the committee could request additional documents like syllabi, letters of recommendation, teaching statements, and the like.)

Understandably, forcing change may be difficult, if not impossible. Some aspects of the application process are legally or institutionally mandated to prevent corruption and nepotism. Some of the more irritating bugs in the system (such as excessive application documentation) were likely intended to make the process fairer, or at least less openly biased in favor of Oxbridge and Ivy League graduates – though I may venture to suggest that if that was the goal, it has failed to produce the intended outcome.

Above all, we need to be empathetic and supportive despite our own time commitments and struggles. I would not be where I am without colleagues and mentors who were willing to take the time to help me succeed, and I am sure I am not the only one. If we forget this, we certainly do a disservice to our potential colleagues. However, we also do one to the field if it means we lose out on a future of brilliant scholarship over a process that is clearly problematic.

(Note: This article is an expanded version of my contributions to a discussion on a listserv about the application process)



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