

## A Consumer's View of the "Meat Market"

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By Marc R. Feldesman (Portland State) and  
Robert T. Trotter II (Northern Arizona)*

In line with increasing professionalization of the discipline, we would like to offer some insight into the nature of the search and hiring processes for new academic anthropologists. Both of us chair moderate-sized departments. In the past five years we have collectively recruited for more than ten faculty positions. Our experiences at the recent AAA meeting in Phoenix, where we once again participated in the "meat market" atmosphere of the placement service, prompted this article. We would like to offer candidates a view of the search process from the other side, and invite comments from colleagues who have conducted similar searches. Faculty recruiting is a difficult and challenging process, but one whose outcome is vital to the well-being of our departments. We view recruiting as one of the most important responsibilities that anyone takes on within the context of an academic department.

Some will view our comments and observations as elementary, simplistic, and obvious. Were this the case we wouldn't waste your time or ours. We are motivated by the fact that we have seen too many applicants undermine their own candidacy by failing to recognize and observe these elementary, simplistic and obvious points.

### How Do Academic Positions Come About?

Understanding how departments capture tenure-track positions is crucial to understanding the search process. Tenure-track positions arise in two ways: as replacements (owing to death, resignation or retirement) and as new positions. Most result from the first condition, not the second. New positions require extensive justification; even replacement positions are not guaranteed. When a vacancy arises, we have to justify the replacement in terms of both short- and long-term departmental needs (in competition with the needs of other departments).

A great deal of thought goes into the preparation of a position justification. We must demonstrate how the particular position relates to the department's graduate and undergraduate programs, to present and future enrollment trends, to employment trends and to the institutional goals and mission.

Most departments go through an intense discussion to produce the position description and its associated ad copy. Contrary to what you may be told "on the street," there is no sense applying for a position that bears no relation to your training and experience. All departments must comply with federal and state affirmative action guidelines that preclude them from hiring someone whose background and experience do not match the approved job description. To do otherwise would place departments at legal and other risk, and jeopardize any federal and/or state funding that the university might receive.

### The Affirmative Action Process

The affirmative action process appropriately (and severely) limits our latitude in hiring. The process at both our institutions is similar. Once the administration approves the position, we work with the affirmative action office to draw up a plan for the search. We submit a job description, a set of candidate qualifications, advertising copy and a detailed plan to develop a pool of qualified applicants that meets the university's federally approved affirmative action guidelines. Affirmative action officers scrutinize the position description and advertising copy for proper legal language, and to insure that specific requirements relevant to the job (eg, education, experience, specializations and closing dates) are as explicit as possible.

The process allows little latitude for departments to go on "fishing expeditions" beyond the limits set in the advertisement. It follows that little is to be gained by candidates going on a "hunting expedition" for positions where they clearly lack the paper qualifications.



### The "Wired" Position

There is a widespread belief that some searches have foreordained outcomes and are conducted merely to appear to comply with affirmative action guidelines. We cannot speak for other departments, but assert that the nature of our search processes and the legal constraints under which we operate make it very difficult to conduct a search where the outcome is predetermined. Moreover, both of us find this kind of process distasteful and unethical. Nevertheless, many people suspect that this situation occurs. We would suggest that ads that are highly specific about the qualifications of the applicant are at least potentially suspect and deserve some background research. The more specific the ad, the fewer candidates to fill the position, the more likely that a candidate or a small group of candidates have already been identified to fill it.

A second clue to potentially "locked" positions is an extremely short deadline. One of us received an announcement last year for a tenure-track vacancy at a regional institution. The ad was dated January 4, had very specific job requirements and closed January 20. We maintain that no department serious about filling a tenure-track position would ever have that short a timetable, unless, of course, a candidate had already been identified.

### The Search Process

Once a position has been approved and the job advertised, the actual search begins. There are three phases in the process: initial screening of applicants, preliminary interviews of selected candidates and final interviews. Each stage successively narrows the list to candidates whose skills, interests, experience, future potential and collegiality offer the best match to the department's needs.

### The Preliminary Screening

Typically, an applicant for an academic vacancy declares interest in a position by sending a letter of application/interest along with a vita. This is a critical step in the process. Many otherwise good applicants sabotage themselves needlessly at this point.

The letter accompanying the vita is not a "throwaway." It will be read by every member of the search committee, if not the whole department. You are well advised to send a personal letter that speaks directly to the advertised position. The letter should contain a clear statement of your research and teaching interests and should tell how your qualifications match the department's advertised wants and needs.

Search committees are almost universally impressed with someone who takes the time to learn about the department. This research undoubtedly will be beneficial to you later in the search process, should you get that far. An hour in the library might repay you with long-term employment. Your letter should speak to specific courses that you are prepared to teach and new courses you might like to develop. A comment on how your interests complement those of specific faculty members might pay significant dividends.

Although it would seem obvious, it is absolutely imperative that you proofread the letter, run it through a spelling checker, and have someone else read it before you mail it. That way you can avoid egregious grammatical errors and sentences like "I received my PhD from Mead and Leakey University in 1898," (an almost verbatim slip that showed up in this year's search).

The vita is even more important. A vita is not a business resume; it is a factual account of your academic accomplishments. Unlike a resume, information on it (ie, educational history, employment history, research/publication history) should be listed in reverse chronological order. It should not be printed on flashy paper, nor printed in nonstandard fonts. Academics regard "cute" or "fancy" vitas as unprofessional. Make every effort to insure the accuracy of information on the vita. If you progress beyond the preliminary screening, everything on it is likely to be checked carefully; some universities actually require documentary proof of everything on the vita.

The two most important aspects of a vita are content and organization. Academic departments hire people who show potential to do the same things they will later receive merit, promotion and tenure for doing. Therefore the vita should contain all information that a search committee needs to decide whether you possess these attributes.

Search committees receive many (often more than a hundred) vitas for every vacancy. At the preliminary screening stage, search committees have limited time to ferret out essential information from a vita. You may have a first-rate record and be eliminated because you did not make that record stand out when a committee member has 50 vitas to review in an initial screening pass.

The first page of a vita should contain your name, address, and phone number. It should also contain an explicit listing of your major and minor areas of academic specialization, and recent work experience. If you are a social anthropologist specializing in political economy, this needs to be stated right up front. Don't make a review committee hunt. Somewhere in the vita you should include a clear explication of areas that you are prepared to teach. Provide a listing of your research record, your publication record and papers delivered. Do not pad your vita with extraneous information. We are not interested in every sundry lecture you ever gave, nor in every seminar paper you ever wrote.

Vitas traditionally include references, and at some time we may want to contact them. Ordinarily departments request names of three referees. Candidates who list more than three and who do not indicate their priority somewhere do so at their own peril. In these

cases we will contact the first three listed. Since it takes extra time to contact them, it is important that you provide us with complete information about those references, especially their full name, address and phone number. Many preliminary contacts are made by phone these days. While there may be some legitimate disagreement on this point, we do not view with favor those applicants who offer that "names of referees will be supplied on request." At the very best, this adds an extra step to an already hectic process, and at the worst, this phrase evokes questions about your openness and candor. If there is a justifiable reason for you not to want to supply this information initially, disarm us immediately by telling us why. Otherwise, we may reject your application.

In addition to the letter and vita, search committees have recently been deluged with supporting documentation. Rarely is this information helpful in the preliminary screening stage. It is sufficient to send one example of your writing and one or two course syllabi. Any more is overkill. The worst overkill is to send unpublished reports and xeroxed copies of presentations. If this material becomes necessary, we will request it. But in the early stages it takes up space and is only rarely read. You are better off summarizing some of these issues in your letter and vita.

## The Initial Interview

Whenever possible, we both conduct preliminary candidate interviews at the annual meeting. If you get an initial interview, you have already made it through a major sieve and should proceed accordingly. You have persuaded us that your candidacy should be considered seriously and you will be given 30-45 minutes to justify our selection. Please remember that at this point interview teams will have selected 20 to 25 candidates, each of whom will be given 30-45 minutes. These interviews are concentrated in a two- to three-day period, and after a while one candidate can all too easily blur into another. Be memorable. Make your answers crisp, focused and not soporific.

Departments adopt different philosophies about conducting this preliminary interview. Northern Arizona, whenever possible, provides a substantial packet of material about the department and university prior to meeting with interviewees. These materials include statements of departmental mission, philosophy and resources, as well as course descriptions, faculty interest summaries, university bulletins, etc. In addition to the normal academic interest questions that are asked, NAU interviews tend to be structured around your reaction to and understanding of this material. If you encounter similar practices, we recommend that you make a concerted effort to assimilate the material and create personalized reactions to it.

Portland State, by contrast, does not provide this kind of information until the "short list" candidates are selected. Relevant information is provided during the preliminary interview, and the candidate is expected to react and respond to it "on the fly." PSU interviewers also expect that candidates who have a serious interest in the position will research the department independently and will ask thoughtful questions about the department during the interviews.

Both of us are interested in your future potential contribution to the discipline, your creativity and your potential contribution to our programmatic and academic orientations. You should be prepared to address the specifics of your qualifications for the advertised position and to talk more in detail about your research, teaching and vision for the future.

At some point, you will be expected to focus on your philosophy and style of teaching, to discuss the specifics (both in terms of what you have taught, what you are prepared to teach, and what you would *like* to teach), and what you see as the primary goals of your teaching.

You should also be prepared to discuss your current and future research. Consider discussing how your research interests complement those of faculty in the department

(this will again take some homework on your part). At this point interview teams are not interested in excruciating detail. In five minutes or less, we mainly want to know that you have an interesting and focused future research plan, that you can make significant contributions to the discipline and have the potential for enhancing the department's reputation.

Typically you will be given an opportunity to ask questions of the interviewers. There are no proscribed questions, but the ones you ask often tell far more about you than many of the answers you give to our other questions. Good questions include requests for information about university support for research; department and university policies on promotion and tenure; departmental philosophy toward students, teaching, research, publication and service; support for faculty travel; availability of released time for sponsored and unsponsored research; computer support; quality of library holdings; administrative attitudes toward the department and the demographic characteristics of the student body. Within the constraints of interview time, the more questions you ask, the more evident your interest.

A fair portion of the interview is impromptu, based on responses you give to our questions. Listen carefully and be prepared to answer the questions asked. One recent candidate we interviewed had outstanding speaking skills, but damaged his candidacy during the interview with poor listening skills. It does no good to give an unfocused answer to a focused question or to answer a different question than the one asked. Answer the questions honestly. Remember that most interviewers have been playing this game for a lot longer than you and are sensitized to dissembling answers.

## The "Short List" and Final Interviews

In our experience, three to six candidates will emerge as consensus "top candidates" from this preliminary interview pool. Interview teams develop a tacit model that would be difficult to articulate in the space available. Consistently in our experiences, independently written lists of candidates rarely differ by more than one or two individuals. Normally, interview teams will have the same candidates on their individual lists, but may rank order them slightly differently.

Once a long "short list" is distilled, you probably will be asked to provide more information. It is not uncommon for search committees to follow up written letters of recommendation with phone calls to the referees. For this reason, we cannot overemphasize the importance of selecting your referees very carefully. In addition, some departments will ask for complete dossiers of publications and papers. Some will also do a follow-up phone interview with the candidates, often conducted by faculty members not part of the preliminary interview team. Once this information is collected and evaluated, departments ordinarily select three candidates to bring to the campus for final interviews.

Once you make it to the short "short list" and are invited out for a final interview, the job is yours to win or lose. Expect a grueling two or three days, and try to remember that you are "on stage" at all times. Sometimes the final candidates are closely ranked and choosing among them is difficult. In these circumstances an offhand remark naively made at a casual social gathering may be all it takes to undermine your candidacy.

The process of getting you to the interview is not trivial. Usually departments have fairly firm timetables for initiating and completing final interviews. Give the department some latitude to schedule your visit. Don't box us in by giving us only one acceptable time for an interview. A recent candidate actually asked one of us to accommodate his ski vacation plans. That was taken as tacit disinterest and adversely affected his chances for the position. Our secretaries have to make arrangements for several candidates, and your inflexibility at this point could be costly.

There is considerable variation in reimbursement policies for interview expenses. Some departments pay everything; some only pay part of the costs; others pay only if you are hired. Some expect you to front the costs and reimburse you later; others bear all the expenses up front. It behooves you to ask what the policies are as soon as you have confirmed your interest in having an interview.

If you want to bring your spouse or "significant other" with you to the interview, that's fine with us and indicates a serious interest in the position. On the other hand, you should not expect us to pay for any of his/her expenses, nor should you expect us to entertain him/her while everyone is focused on the interview.

Most final interviews include events whose purpose it is to assess your social skills in an informal, nonacademic setting. Mingle with the crowd and try to talk to everyone in attendance. You don't know who influences the final decision. There are also informal interviews with various faculty members. These are often conducted at meals, coffee breaks and during office hours. Typically these are one-on-one meetings and are used to assess the degree to which you will make a good colleague.

Students can have significant input into the final candidate selection. If you are not allotted time to meet with students away from the faculty, don't be reticent to ask for it. Students are a font of information, and you will be able to learn a great deal about the department from them. They, in turn, are quite perceptive and may offer us unique insights about your suitability for the position.

Most candidates will meet with administrators, typically deans, whose interests are in the potential you would bring to the program and to the larger academic community. Administrators are busy; these meetings usually are short. You are advised to give crisp and concise answers to their questions.

Finally, following individual meetings with departmental faculty members, some departments bring the candidate and the entire faculty together for a free-wheeling question and answer session. While your reactions and answers will be important, these meetings can prove more informative to you than to the faculty. These types of meetings often expose factions within the department, animosities between faculty members and serious theoretical disagreements. This is the perfect time to be an anthropologist.

Every candidate will be expected to give some type of public presentation during the site visit. It is one of the most important things you will do during the interview. It is your one chance to show off your skills as a lecturer. Most departments use this presentation, which is typically a class-length lecture, to assess your potential teaching effectiveness. Construct your lecture carefully. You should find out in advance about the audience and use this information to tailor your lecture to its level. There is real skill involved here. You have to walk a tightrope between making your presentation too technical and making it too simplistic. Try to relate your particular research to the larger questions in your subdiscipline. In the final analysis, most of us will evaluate your presentation in terms of its organization, clarity, logic, cohesiveness, theoretical conceptualization and pedagogical effectiveness. If you lose us during the lecture or put us to sleep, you'll probably lose the job. Similarly, if you entertain us but say nothing, you'll also probably lose the job.

We have selfish reasons for sharing our experiences with the larger anthropological community. We want to see improvement in the search process. If our remarks spur even a few candidates to improve their job-seeking skills, then we will have accomplished one of our primary purposes in writing this article. At the same time, we are genuinely distressed that so many PhD-granting institutions completely ignore the need to educate their students in the ins and outs of job seeking, thereby putting excellent new scholars at a

distinct disadvantage in today's competitive job market. Improved job search skills are part of the professionalization of any discipline, and we feel strongly that producers of PhDs, not consumers, should have to bear the brunt of training and educating their progeny about the search process.

If you are not persuaded that these problems exist, the statistics recently collected by the AAA may prove sobering. In the last survey of recent PhDs, those who gained academic employment indicated that they spent in the neighborhood of 15 to 20 hours per week seeking employment, and those who missed out spent less than 10 hours per week. It takes time to write letters, research departments and develop a proper vita. The payoff for the time invested is obvious. We can attest that quality shows as much in job hunting as it does once you have been hired.

We hope that if you follow these suggestions and those to be found in Deneef et al's *The Academic's Handbook* (1988, Duke University Press) and van Leunen's *A Handbook for Scholars* (1979, Knopf) you will someday have the opportunity to be a consumer at the "meat market" rather than being left to "chill out" in the meat case.