Applying for, and succeeding in, jobs at small liberal arts colleges

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Talk Outline:

1. Who am I and why am I here?
2. What is life like at a liberal arts college (LAC)?
3. Why would someone want a job at a LAC?
4. What does it take to get a job at a LAC?
5. How would someone succeed in a job at a LAC?
1. Who am I and why am I here?

Current Position:  Associate Professor of Biology and Neuroscience
    Pomona College, Claremont CA

Previous Position:  Helen Hay Whitney Postdoctoral Fellow
    Harvard Medical School – Van Vactor Laboratory

Graduate Degree:  PhD in Anatomy/Neuroscience
    Cambridge University – Holt Laboratory

Undergraduate Degree:  Biology with Honors
    Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA
2. What is life like at a liberal arts college (LAC)?

Balance between teaching and research
50% teaching, 40% research (and 10% service)

Teaching:
Major focus of first years is developing pedagogical skills
Generally spend 10-12 hours per week in front of class/laboratory
Preparation time is substantial, lab preparation can be onerous.
Major consideration for promotion and advancement.

Research:
First few years – spent setting up lab, writing grants, training students.
Expectations are that you apply for grants and publish in first three years.
Subsequently, one paper every 1-2 years is expected.

Generally similar to expectations at a major research institute, but:
Research is conducted at slower pace (no grad students, postdocs or techs)
Time dedicated to teaching/mentoring/supervising/advising is much higher.
3. Why would someone want a job at a LAC?

It’s not a universally appealing job!
You must be PASSIONATE about teaching to enjoy this job (> 50% of your time)

Why I sought a job teaching at a small liberal arts college:

1. I love working at the bench, supervising students and teaching.
2. Working with motivated, intelligent people is very important to me.
3. I enjoy the collegial and cooperative undergraduate atmosphere.
4. It’s important to me that I’m contributing to society in a tangible way.
5. I do not want to spend a substantial part of my day in an office writing grants.
6. Balancing family and work life is very important to me.
7. I value (and received) an education in the liberal arts.
8. The students are exceptional. My lab: 50% MD, 40% PhD, 10% other.
4. What does it take to get a job at a LAC?

A. Identify Liberal Arts Colleges that are hiring:

Search in Science Jobs issue – most LACs advertise here.
Search in “Academic Jobs Online” (academicjobsonline.org)
Make a list of your top choices, and look at the college’s website.
    Human resources, Dean’s office, or departmental websites list job offers.

Note: applications are generally due in October/November,
    Interviews in December/January, Job offers are made in January/February
    (for a position starting in July)
4. What does it take to get a job at a LAC?

The ten most important qualities in getting a teaching job:

1. Strong publications from graduate and postdoctoral work.
2. Experience TA-ing and supervising rotation or undergraduate projects.
3. A track record of successful grant writing (graduate and/or postdoctoral).
4. Four outstanding letters of recommendation.
   (It’s incredibly important to be able to get along with your peers.)
5. A research proposal that can be successful in the undergraduate context
   Identify your niche, have summer-student sized projects.
6. Knowledge of what the job is like, and why you want to do it.
7. A lab budget that is reasonable – startup packages rarely exceed $100K.
8. A good “fit” in the department - areas of research interest and teaching interest.
   (No major overlap with existing faculty ability to fill “gaps” in expertise)
9. Ability to communicate effectively with students and faculty.
10. A model organism that is suitable for a LAC environment. (No primates!)
4. What does it take to get a job at a LAC?

What are some misconceptions about applying for these jobs?

Myth: You need Cell, Science or Nature papers to get a job at a “good school”.
Reality: A steady publication record is crucial, as is a history of grantsmanship.
Personally: I had 2 papers from my postdoc (+5 from grad school) when I applied.

Myth: You have to have taught your own course/courses to get a tenure-track job.
Reality: Very few people have done this, but it would certainly help.
Personally: TA-ing and supervising rotation/undergraduate students can be enough.

Myth: A teaching job is for someone who can’t get a research job.
Reality: They’re very different jobs and require different skills.
Personally: Our last three searches have had >200 applicants each.

Myth: A job at a liberal arts college is committing “scientific suicide”
Reality: The pace of research is MUCH slower, but you will still (need to) publish!
Personally: My lab of 3-8 undergraduates publishes about 1 paper per year.
4. What does it take to get a job at a LAC?

Parts of the application:

Cover letter:
you, educational history, why teaching, why their college, why you?

CV:
tailored to small undergraduate college (focus on teaching)
educational history, teaching experience, research experience
honors and awards, fellowships, publications, presentations, references

Statement of research interests:
Start with big picture – few people will be in your field. Outline proposals,
and describe the suitability to undergraduate work. Two pages.

Teaching philosophy:
This is the hardest part because it’s so ill-defined. Why do you want to teach?
What made you decide? Why do you want to teach at this specific college?
What existing courses can you teach? What new courses can you develop?
Know if you’re a replacement or a new hire, and propose courses accordingly.
Interviewing on campus at a small liberal arts college:

*The on-campus interview:*

- It’s generally a two-day process (sometimes three)
  - Don’t overdress.
- Day 1: Meet with faculty, give research talk, dinner with faculty.
- Day 2: Meet with more faculty, the president, the dean, simulated lecture, dinner with students.

Ask questions! For example...

- What do the faculty like and not like about the college?
- How heavy are the teaching loads, research funding, sabbatical schedule?
- What are the available grants, collaborations, facilities?
- What’s the city like, how expensive is housing, where do faculty live?
- Is there shared common equipment?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the department/college?
- How many people get tenure? (the vast majority of people do!)
The on-campus interview: 3 Key parts

1. Research talk - starts with an introduction by the chair
   PITCH - most important part of interview.
   accessible to 2nd years, but directed to faculty.
   Lots of background information and describe the relevance of your work.
   Cover what you have done and what your lab will do if you get the job.
   50 minutes with questions DON’T GO OVER!!

2. Simulated lecture (provide audience with a summary handout)
   Put your lecture in the context of course (syllabus outline).
   again, PITCH is key - make it understandable to everyone.
   50 minutes – show how you like to teach - use your own style.
   ENGAGE students – initiate discussion - ask them questions.
   Prepare for questions from faculty.

3. Individual meetings – students and faculty
   PREPARATION! Know EVERYONE’s work. HAVE QUESTIONS.
   Read abstracts from their publications and have questions.
   Also meet with dean, president. Communicate relevance!

4. What does it take to get a job at a LAC?
Succeeding at a Liberal Arts college:
Good books on this subject:

- Tomorrow’s Professor. Richard M. Reis
- How to Succeed in Academics. Linda and Edward McCabe
- Good Start. Gerald Gibson

Another great reference:

How to get a teaching job at a primarily undergraduate institution
A. Malcolm Campbell, Biology Department, Davidson College