

## Landing That Perfect Job: It Takes a Village

Jaime Clark-Soles, Southern Methodist University

I recently took a colleague to lunch and asked her how she liked it here. She exclaimed, “I’ve died and gone to academic heaven!” Back when I was on the market, a mentor warned me, “No institution is the kingdom of heaven.” I’ve learned, though, that some come reasonably close. How might you improve *your* chances of entering academic heaven on earth? Or at least a job that allows you to engage in meaningful work without too many obstacles? In what follows I’ll suggest some tips to get you started.

### *Prepare Ye*

Preparing well in advance will eliminate some stress for you and for those responsible for supporting your application (e.g., your recommenders, the dossier service); it will also keep you from making silly but costly errors.

#### **1. Know Thyself**

Okay, so it’s not an *original* thought, but it’s still a good one. Are you desperate for any job that you can get? Are you *most* suited to seminary teaching but would be happy in an undergraduate setting? Do they appeal equally? Do you want to teach doctoral students? Do you have geographical considerations? How does your family situation factor into the equation? Are you looking for a short-term job or for perpetuity?

#### **2. Get Organized**

Have a binder that outlines all of the application deadlines; multiple copies of necessary documents; lists of interview questions; and a page that lists your references (with their formal names, their accurate titles, and contact information).

#### **3. Your Dossier**

a. Make sure your dossier is in order well ahead of the application deadlines. See if your institution has a dossier service.

b. Review your transcript to make sure that all of the grades are there (remember that professor who NEVER returned your 25-page paper? Be sure he or she actually posted a grade and try not to worry about how the grade was determined, given that you never received that paper back).

c. Request more letters than you may actually need so that you can choose which ones to send to which school. Along with the personal essay, the recommendation letters are a crucial link in the process, so they need to be good. The more specific they can be the better. In addition to your dissertation adviser, you’ll want someone who can address your teaching ability and perhaps someone outside of your main field. For instance, though I’m a New Testament scholar, one of my references was a sociologist of religion who served as a secondary dissertation adviser. Provide your recommenders with a packet that includes the appropriate forms and a correctly stamped envelope; a list of all of the schools, their deadlines, and where the recommendation letter should go; a copy of

your personal essay; and teaching evaluations (provided they are positive on the whole). Make the process as painless as possible for them — they are very busy people and their work on your behalf will play no small part in your success. Unless the application specifically indicates a limit, in some cases you might find it useful to send four letters instead of the usual three. *Keep your letters current.*

#### **4. Your Curriculum Vitae**

This can be tricky since, as a graduate student, you probably don't have many, if any, publications. Many of our colleagues have their CVs posted on the Web. Refer to them. Consult those posted on the Web site of the institution to which you are applying to see how it is done there. Focus primarily on those only recently hired, since reviewing the CVs of senior scholars will only promote feelings of inadequacy!

#### **5. Your Teaching Portfolio**

Some schools want evidence that (a) you've thought about pedagogy and (b) you've taught well in the past. Provide a record of your teaching experience. How much have you taught and in what capacity? Include any syllabi you've developed; include teaching evaluations; provide quotations from the evaluations when addressing your ability.

### ***Apply***

1. **To begin, check job advertisements** in *Job Postings*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, society journals, and religious publications (such as *Christian Century*). Register with the AAR Annual Meeting Job Center.. If you're unsure, request help in decoding the job ads; know the meaning of "PhD is expected", "PhD or equivalent", and "should have completed all requirements."
2. **Your cover letter** should be composed with exquisite care.
  - a. Respect the genre. Don't be cute or too familiar because the search committee will get the impression that you don't know how to read a context correctly or that you believe yourself to be above the laws of application.
  - b. If you're going to name drop, do so carefully and in an uncontrived manner.
  - c. Include your scholarship competencies as well as trajectories.
  - d. Many programs have a particular method for which they are known. Demonstrate that you are *more* than your training and cannot be summarized without remainder by the name of your institution alone.
  - e. Provided that it's true, convey your **EXCITEMENT** about teaching.
  - f. Tailor your cover letter to the particular school; this means you must know things about the school. Is it a public institution and you went to a public institution yourself? Does it

take an unusual approach to something? Does its traditional approach particularly appeal to you?

g. VET, VET, VET. Have your letter vetted by people whom you know will tell you the truth.

3. **Order your dossier** promptly and check to make sure it arrived at its destination before the deadline.

### *Preparing for the Interview*

1. **Secure a list of possible questions** from multiple sources (such as professors or friends who have recently interviewed). Write out the answers and memorize them. I have included a list of sample questions (see sidebar).
2. **Know how you fit into the mission of the school** in a very specific way. Do you have a lot of overseas experience and they offer immersion trips? Do they have a seminary extension in Russia and you speak Russian?
3. **Participate in a mock interview** on your own campus. Your career services center may offer to conduct and videotape such an interview for you.

### *During the Interview*

1. **Give enough information** to be warm and personable but not too much.
2. **Avoid food poisoning and other illnesses.** Bring medications. Bring two pairs of shoes.

I went out to dinner with two people as part of an interview. During the meal, we (well, they) shared “worst interview experiences” and one person entertained us with a story of how she became very ill and had to leave the dinner table, only to find the women’s room locked. Into the men’s bathroom she went. She ended up having to wash her shoes in the sink in the men’s room and return to the dinner table for further interviewing. I quipped, “Well, that can’t happen to me because I only brought one pair of shoes.” Eight hours later, at 4 a.m., I awoke violently ill by myself in a hotel room in a city not my own. At 7 a.m., I descended in the elevator to have breakfast with graduate students in the hotel restaurant, where I sipped 7-Up, ingressed and egressed iteratively, and inquired about their interests, hopes, and fears.

This was followed by a full day of meeting with small groups (nursing Gatorade all the while, thanks to a very kind person on the staff) and delivering a job talk. Immediately after the lecture but before the questions, I retreated to the restroom where one of my current colleagues mopped my face with wet paper towels. I returned to field questions and we managed to keep the situation a secret from most parties. I got back to the hotel room and immediately the full effects of the day hit. This was complicated by the fact that I was 12 weeks pregnant, a detail I was reluctant to reveal. I called my doctor back

home and she insisted that I go to the emergency room immediately. I called the staff person of Gatorade fame and she took me to the hospital, sat through my rehydration IV treatments, and then took me to her home for the night. I flew home the next day. I got the job and I am proud to call the above characters my colleagues now.

Stick with pasta at dinner.

3. **Dress appropriately.**
4. **Be yourself.** Don't let nerves or job desperation make you act weird.
5. **The Job Talk:**
  - a. Understand the purpose and audience of the job talk(s). In some cases you'll be asked to teach a class to a typical group of students. In others you'll be asked to deliver a lecture to a mixture of faculty and students both within and outside of your area of specialization. In still others, you'll be asked to teach a class *and* to deliver a lecture to the faculty.
  - b. If possible, weave some of the school's own history or character into your talk.
  - c. Consider using multimedia. Do a dry run to make sure it works. Have a tech person there in case a problem arises.
  - d. Engage people in your lecture. Allow some room for dialogue. Perhaps begin with an exercise that allows them to float opinions in a nonthreatening fashion.
  - e. Do a dry run of the lecture with a mixed audience on your home campus. Have your peers and professors ask questions. Have someone else record the questions. Expect those same questions to be asked during the interview. If possible, have this dry run videotaped.
  - f. Try to avoid being a pawn in a faculty debate. Get advance information, if possible. Know people's "stance." Have integrity, but do your homework so that you can make yourself understood in that particular context.
  - g. Gear your talk to accomplish what they've asked you to, to engage specialists and, especially, nonspecialists.
6. **Have specific plans** for what you will do after the dissertation: Be able to speak intelligently about your next book project and two or three specific articles that you plan to write.
7. Have concrete, specific, and *interesting* questions for them — about their work and how your specialty would fit in, about the teaching environment, etc. When they ask, "Do you have any questions for us?", don't offer easy, quantitative queries, the answers to which

are right on the home page of their Web site. Instead, ask them what they find most stimulating about their work in that place; what they think is most important in the study of the humanities (if that is your area); and how their department tries to address itself to that.

### *After the Interview*

1. After the campus visit, **follow up with thank-you notes**. If you promised people you'd send articles or book titles you mentioned, be sure to follow through.
2. **Once you've been extended an offer:**
  - a. Ask questions. Do they have maternity or paternity leave? Have they ever heard of it? (One university VP who had a banner that read "A Woman's Place is Everywhere" explained to me, "Most of *our* women try to have their babies in the summer." I did not take a job there). What is the rate of tenure?
  - b. Read *Academe's* salary edition before negotiating a salary.
  - c. If possible, don't be rushed into burning bridges due to time lines. The dean who hired me here was kind enough to allow me to complete the process with one other school that I was seriously considering. He opined, wisely I believe, "I want faculty to work here because they want to work here, not because they can't get a job elsewhere." It's best not to have to second-guess for the rest of your life.
  - d. Do they cover moving expenses? (Yes, even particle board and sixth-generation grad school couches cost money to move, and more than you'd think!)
  - e. Be gracious; if you decline, say so and be polite. If they ask you why you declined, you have to decide how much you want to share and what gain is to be had by it for either party. For instance, one school that I really loved had no women of childbearing age in the religion department. They had no maternity leave policy (apart from a course-load reduction during the semester in which one gives birth). I decided not to mention that factor.

**REMEMBER:** Folks, in part, want to know whether or not they would enjoy having coffee with you. They are not just hiring a scholar, but a colleague.

### **Interview Questions: A Starter List**

- Why and how did you decide to pursue teaching and research?
- What makes you think a seminary [or an undergraduate or graduate setting] would be a good fit?

- What interests you about the mission of this institution and how do you envision yourself helping us carry out this mission?
- What makes you think this particular school would be a good fit?
- What courses would you like to teach and why?
- What are your plans for future research?
- How is the dissertation progressing and when will it be finished?
- Describe your philosophy and experiences as a teacher.
- What have been the greatest challenges you have faced in the classroom?
- Tell us about a great experience you've had with a student and then about a bad experience.
- What do you do for fun?
- What's the most interesting book you have read recently?
- Do you have any questions for us?

*Jaime Clark-Soles serves as Assistant Professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. She also teaches in the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at SMU. She is the author of Scripture Cannot Be Broken: The Social Function of the Use of Scripture in the Fourth Gospel (E. J. Brill, 2003). Presently, she is writing a book that addresses views of death and afterlife in the New Testament.*