

WISEST INITIATIVES / *POSTDOCTORAL PROGRAM* / *Post-doc Institute*

Preparing for the Job Search by Knowing the Hiring Process from the Other Side

An overview of the hiring process at a “Research I” university

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The timeline

Although it may vary somewhat from one discipline to another and from one institution to another, the search process timeline is roughly as follows:

1. Department seeks formal authorization from the administration (at UIC usually the dean and provost) to hire at a given rank and usually in a particular sub-field within the department.
2. If successful, the department is given authorization early in the spring, and a job announcement is approved by the department and the administration **before the end of the academic year**.
3. Tenure-track announcements begin to appear **in the summer and early fall for appointments starting the following fall semester** (but may continue to occur into the new year in some disciplines). The announcements appear in many venues (print, web, electronic newsletters) but for most disciplines there is one publication which carries all such announcements (for Chemistry all faculty job announcements appear in C&ENews, the magazine of the professional society, the American Chemical Society; for Chemical Engineering jobs it is Chemical Engineering Progress). In addition, there are some web sites which collect job announcements to include in their searchable data base. Standard language is “for fullest consideration” submit completed applications by a given date, however, “applications will be considered until the position is filled” is the loophole which permits late but strong applications to still be included in the short list, or as alternates when the first short list does not yield a successful hire. This means do not give up applying just because the posted deadline is past.
4. Interviews at annual professional meetings may or may not be a pre-requisite for getting an on-campus interview depending on the timing of the meetings and the tradition within the field. For example, for Chemical Engineering the November AIChE meeting is the standard venue and there is a Meet the Faculty Candidates poster session on the first day of the conference for this purpose.
5. On-campus interviews of 3-6 candidates generally occur between October and January (can stretch on through March in some disciplines). This means that you should plan to have a complete application package ready to send in by October, although you can continue to improve it for the later deadlines. Some institutions attempt to complete the process and make offers before Christmas (e.g., UIC Chemistry). In some disciplines three letters of recommendation sent separately by your references are required as part of the application package (e.g., Chemistry). Others require only a list of references and their contact information (e.g., Chemical Engineering) because they solicit letters only for those who end up on the long short list.
6. The prelude to an offer is made by phone. This is the negotiation stage, where the candidate (who usually has a list of requirements in equipment, space, teaching load, start-up dollar figure, etc.) and the negotiating party (the head of the department or the chair of the search committee) engage in trying to find out what each party wants. An offer, i.e., a written document specifying various conditions agreed upon during the negotiations is made only after the negotiations are

complete. Because the administration (dean, provost) usually provides part of the start-up package and has to approve commitment of resources by the head of the department, the written offer usually comes co-signed by a representative from the administration.

7. A second on-campus interview may occur during negotiations, at which time lab space is usually assigned and the last part of the courtship dance between candidate and search committee may include looking for possible housing. By early spring most of the tenure-track acceptances are in hand.

7. Non-tenure track appointments, limited term and sabbatical replacement appointments usually occur later in the job season than tenure-track hires.

The job announcement

The Berkeley web site warns, "The published job description is more a reflection of political compromises necessary to get it out the door or past the administration than an accurate description of what the department "really" wants." Even when the ad is very explicit about the subject area, the person eventually hired may not fit the description. This means that applicants should not necessarily shy away from ads which do not fit their background or interests perfectly. The members of the search committee may not be unanimous in the sub-field for the hire.

The hurdles

1. The search committee. Usually there are a large number of applications for each job (112 for one position in UIC ChemE in 2006, 245 for two positions in UIC Chemistry in 2007). Members of the search committee will usually whittle this down to a manageable size (10-20 per position) using various methods. Match to the sub-field and pedigree are two main criteria by which eliminate/keep decisions are made by individual members of the search committee. Your CV plays the key role in this elimination stage. What follows is a discussion/ranking of the manageable size of candidates to arrive at the list to send to OAE, from which interviewees are to be selected. Your reference letters and proposed research becomes important at this stage. Then a third meeting for discussion/ranking to arrive at the 3-5 candidates to invite. Whether the rest of the departmental faculty become involved at any stage before the offer varies with the search committee and the department.

2. The campus interview. The search committee, the rest of the department faculty and one or two administrators may be involved. In ChemE and Chemistry this is a two-day interview involving two seminars: a general research seminar and a "chalk talk", i.e., a proposal talk. Do not be deceived by the nomenclature, if a chalk talk is part of the interview process, this is usually the most important part. More than anything else, the interviewers are looking to see how well you handle yourself "under fire"; questions may interrupt your presentations. One-on-one faculty interviews (usually half-hour) may or may not involve the faculty member's research. It is a buying-selling process. They are buying and you are selling; they are selling and you are buying. Many faculty members in the department willingly participate in all interviews, trying to sell you the idea that their department is a wonderful place in which you should consider accepting a job. Others may be looking for answers to some particularly sticky point raised within the search committee's discussions about your candidacy. Yet others are simply arm-twisted to take part. A wise candidate checks her personal network to find out who are the strong players in the department (the faculty whose views are most often listened to) before arriving on campus. After the interview your qualifications on paper begin to recede and impressions formed during the interview take over.

3. The negotiations. Be prepared. You should have thought about your needs and also researched the resources of the institution before this phone call to find out roughly where the bottom line will likely lie. But once you have one offer in the works, you have a stronger hand. Try to get a sense of whether the institution has a strong second before you play hard-ball. Often, when a candidate says, sorry I have one more month of interviews and I intend to make a decision no earlier than my last interview, the institution quickly switches over to the second in line.

4. An offer is not yet an offer until it is in writing.

5. The acceptance.