

Long Odds of the Faculty Job Search [from the Chronicle]

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The Long Odds of the Faculty Job Search

Photo Illustration by Jonathan bBarkat for The Chronicle

By Audrey Williams June

It was classmate versus classmate, colleague versus colleague, and seasoned professor versus graduate student. In some cases, it was even adviser versus advisee.

Applicants for academic jobs, particularly in the humanities, know instinctively—and by the job offers that never materialize—that they face tough competition in trying to get tenure-track positions. And when the odds are sometimes as high as 600 to one, as they were for a recent opening for assistant professor in the department of political science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, candidates have no way of knowing exactly whom they are up against or how they stack up.

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Leonardo Carrizo for The Chronicle

Dinty W. Moore, chair of the search committee for the job in Ohio U.'s English department, says many of the candidates were worthy, and he wishes he could hire more of them.

To be a contender, they might wonder, do I need more than one published book? Have I presented my research at enough high-profile conferences? Will my teaching experience push me to the top?

Through an open-records request, *The Chronicle* obtained all of the CVs from two recent public-university searches for assistant professors. One was conducted by the English department at Ohio University and drew 117 applicants. In the other, 71 scholars vied for a spot in the linguistics department at the University of Florida.

Together, the applications provide unusual insight into the competitive nature of academic job searches. The CVs show that candidates are competing against people they know, and that applicants possess a wide range of credentials. They also reveal that the qualifications necessary for landing a tenure-track job are ever escalating.

At Ohio the search for a junior professor to teach fiction writing officially began just days before Christmas in 2011. Master's of fine arts or Ph.D. required, the job posting read. Must have published at least one book. Expected to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in fiction writing while publishing and directing creative work. Send a 20-page writing sample.

The first application arrived the same day the job was posted.

Plenty of well-qualified people entered the fray. There were applicants with books published by reputable presses. Fifteen people held an M.F.A. and a Ph.D. One applicant's novel had been adapted into a motion picture. More than a few had prestigious awards.

There were also applicants not quite ready for prime time, like the one whose qualifications mentioned "10 years of customer service" and another whose list of publications included a review of a Vietnamese restaurant that had run in a local newspaper. A number of CVs and cover letters had typographical errors—an automatic no-no for applicants hoping to teach writing. The candidates were competing against writers known and unknown. In at least two instances, an adviser was up against an advisee. (One of those advisees, the search-committee chairman said, had presented a glowing recommendation letter from an adviser who was also in the pool.) Two applicants—non-tenure-track professors at a public institution in the Midwest—were from the same department.

Ohio's search drew a considerable interest even though the seven-member search committee worried that posting the opening late in the academic hiring season, which typically begins in October, would generate slim pickings. (It garnered some attention on the Academic Jobs Wiki, but the site offered scant detail for job seekers.)

At one point, the English department wasn't sure that it would be able to hire at all. A senior colleague in the department had moved on to another position, but in the wake of the budget cuts and hiring freezes at many state universities after the recession, replacing a tenured professor in 2011-12 wasn't a given. The department had to make the case to the dean that the hire was necessary.

The needs of the English department won out. And the scramble to assemble a job posting for a fiction writer before the end of the year began.

As the 117 applications came rolling in, they were stuffed into file folders that were alphabetized and put on a big cart for the committee members to browse. Forty-five women and 72 men applied. Nearly three-quarters of the candidates were white.

At least half a dozen were journalists-turned-fiction-writers. One was a writer with two published books and a prior career as a professional musician, with four albums to his credit. Another was a high-school English teacher. Eighty-eight people had M.F.A.'s, including the three finalists. The committee said a Ph.D. in creative writing or a related field was an acceptable credential; 30 people had earned such degrees, with 13 more having completed all but their dissertation. Two people decided that the job's educational criteria were merely a suggestion and applied with only master's degrees. Twenty-eight people hadn't published a book and didn't have one forthcoming. Top M.F.A. programs, like those at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and the University of Iowa, were the training grounds of a good number of the applicants, including the person who was hired.

A dozen assistant professors and three associate professors were in the mix, but most of the pool, 67 people, were working off the tenure track as lecturers or visiting professors. Forty-four of those people earned their highest degree in 2009 or earlier. At least two candidates had worked in either full-time or part-time non-tenure-track jobs since the late 1990s. "We had a lot of people who were looking for their first tenure-track jobs who were fairly well seasoned," says Dinty W. Moore, chair of the search committee.

Skype interviews began in February, with about a dozen people making the first cut. Among the attributes that helped move people to the final rounds were evidence of teaching experience that spanned multiple genres, a proven track record of teaching both undergraduate and graduate students, and a writing sample that resonated with committee members.

The committee interviewed candidates over three days and agreed on three finalists to invite for campus visits in March. Four days after the last person left campus, the department took a vote. "Usually a week or 10 days passes before we vote, but we were worried about the timing," says Mr. Moore, a professor of creative writing who specializes in nonfiction. "I'm pretty sure that everybody we talked to was being interviewed by other schools."

Diana Boxer, who served as chair of her department's search for an assistant professor of second-language acquisition at the University of Florida, knew the competition for the job would be stiff.

"It's increasingly difficult for people with Ph.D.'s to get good tenure-track jobs," says Ms. Boxer, a professor of linguistics, whose academic career began more than two decades ago. "Things certainly have changed."

The number of applicants, 71, was about what she expected. Nearly 20 percent of the candidates had been educated at universities in other countries. Roughly half were expecting to earn Ph.D.'s a few months before August, when the job at Florida was slated to begin. More than half of the candidates were women.

Classmates competed for the position, including two candidates each from the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maryland at College Park, who had finished their coursework but not their dissertations (A.B.D.). Two applicants earned their degrees from the University of California at Los Angeles in the same year, 2009.

Caroline Payant remembers thinking that it might be too difficult for her to finish her dissertation and go on the market in 2011 at the same time. But she decided to apply for jobs anyway, including the position at Florida.

To stand out from the competition, Ms. Payant says, she positioned herself as a multilingualist, highlighting her specialty in French-, Spanish- and English-language acquisition. When she was applying for jobs, she had one article under review, one that had been submitted for review, one in preparation, and a book review that had been published a year earlier.

Hers wasn't nearly the publication record the committee was looking for. But as a graduate student, she focused on "attending conferences and presenting on different topics," she says. "I think I did a really good job in my graduate-school training of making myself readily available to work with other faculty and colleagues," she says. Indeed, Ms. Payant, who earned a Ph.D. in applied linguistics from Georgia State University last year, had presented refereed papers at 21 conferences at the time she applied.

Ms. Payant didn't get hired by Florida. But after applying to nearly 25 jobs, she landed five campus visits. She was hired as an assistant professor of applied linguistics at the University of Idaho.

In the Florida search, Ms. Payant and others like her faced off against scholars in their field with much more experience. Thirteen applicants were assistant professors, including two of the finalists. The other finalist was employed in a prestigious postdoctoral fellowship at an institution that belongs to the Association of American Universities, an elite group of research universities. One person who made one of the search's final rounds was A.B.D. but with roughly four dozen publications.

"The person we hired had a postdoc and a tenure-track position," Ms. Boxer says. "That's how competitive it has become." That hire was Stefanie Wulff, who says she was "generally happy" at the University of North Texas, her previous employer. But she wanted to work with Ph.D. students and have a wider selection of people with whom to collaborate on research. The job at Florida, along with a few select others to which she applied, offered her that chance.

As an assistant professor, Ms. Wulff had more publications on her CV than when she applied for jobs near the end of graduate school, in 2007. And after completing two years at North Texas, Ms. Wulff also had more extensive teaching experience, a well-defined research agenda studying how people learn idioms and grammar, and more service work to her credit.

"It's necessary for you to be at your best when it comes to research, service, and teaching. But that's not sufficient," Ms. Wulff says. "There are so many people who I'm confident were just as qualified as I was, especially when you look at their CVs. But I think it helps to be very aware of your audience as you apply to a particular position. I really tried to do my research and figure out how to draw a connection between what I was working on and the program."

So what does the landscape look like for finding tenure-track work as a linguist? When colleges are weathering budgets crunches, linguistic positions stand a good chance of being cut. Yet when it comes to second-language acquisition, a subfield, the outlook is not all bad, says Joan Kelly Hall, a professor of applied linguistics at Pennsylvania State University and president of the American Association for Applied Linguistics. "It's like any other job at an R1 institution," she says. "If you want a good position, you've got to publish."

As for creative writing, in 2011-12, the same year Ohio conducted its search, there were 130 tenure-track creative-writing jobs in the Association of Writers & Writing Programs job list. That's a 46-percent increase from six years earlier, when the list offered up 89 tenure-track jobs, according to the association's annual report on the academic job market.

The increase in jobs in the field is caused by the pace at which M.F.A. and Ph.D. programs have cropped up. In 1975, when the association began recording the number of degree-conferring programs in creative writing, there were 15 M.F.A. programs. By the fall of 2012, that number had mushroomed to 214.

The availability of the Ph.D. in creative writing has grown rapidly, too. A handful of Ph.D. programs in creative writing were around in 1975, compared with 40 in 2012. If Ohio's applicant

pool is any measure, some creative-writing job seekers see obtaining the Ph.D. as a way to gain an edge in the quest for a tenure-track position, particularly if it's in a different genre than their M.F.A.

"The new standard is having a Ph.D. in creative writing rather than the M.F.A.," says a faculty member who teaches off the tenure track at a regional public institution in the Midwest, and who applied for the Ohio job. (He didn't want his name used, because he's still on the job market.) "I think if you want to teach, you stand a better chance having a Ph.D."

When he applied for the job at Ohio, he was A.B.D. But he says he knew it was possible to get a job, since graduates of his Ph.D. program had recently landed tenure-track employment. He applied for nearly 80 openings, not all of them tenure-track positions. But his CV fell short in a way that forced him to be realistic about his chances.

"I didn't have a book, and I knew they wanted that," he says of Ohio's search committee. The attempts that applicants made to stand out took various forms. Many applicants listed all the courses they had taught, and often developed, to show committee members that they were able and willing to teach whatever the department needed. One applicant's CV included nearly a page of excerpts from reviews of his recently published book. Another decided that a CV was a good place to note the completion of two marathons. The lecturer at the college in the Midwest, who had not published a book, said he focused on highlighting his other strengths: scholarship, teaching, and service, including a stint on a hiring committee for a tenure-track assistant professor. While he didn't get the Ohio job, since then he has had a "real run on publications and journal articles," he says.

"Since I've been here, my book has been picked up, and it's going to be published next year," he continues. "My CV was woefully inadequate, but it's looking a lot better now." Publications weren't a problem for William F. Lantry, whose 14-page CV included what appeared to be an exhaustive list of them. A poet, his publications of poems and short stories date back to the early 1980s. Mr. Lantry's CV also underscored the unconventional twists in his career: a 13-year stint as director of academic-technology services at Catholic University of America, a list of four technology-related copyrights, and a trio of assistant-professor jobs he once held at small colleges.

"I've never been like all the other candidates," says Mr. Lantry, who earned a Ph.D. in literature and creative writing from the University of Houston in 1993. "Who leaves the tenure track to go do university administration? How many writers do you find being directors of academic technology? Who does a double dissertation in both fiction and in poetry? I'm not surprised that people in the field look at me and just can't figure me out."

Mr. Lantry applied for the Ohio job along with a couple of dozen other openings that year. He says he would have had no qualms about leaving behind the Washington area, where he lives with his wife, for the Midwest.

"

For a creative-writing job, I'd pick up and go," says Mr. Lantry, whose first full-length book of poetry, *The Structure of Desire*, was published last year.

Although teaching at Ohio didn't pan out for Mr. Lantry, he is not discouraged. He's applying for writing jobs nationally and for regional administrative jobs. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to find something."

Hardy Jones Jr. was already on the tenure track when he applied to work at Ohio. But Mr. Jones saw the Ohio position as an upgrade, where he could teach solely in his specialty of creative writing and work with graduate students.

He expected the applicant pool to be deep, but "once I applied I just tried to put it out of my mind," says Mr. Jones, who earned a Ph.D. in creative writing from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2007 and an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Memphis in 2001. "Since so much is out of your control when you're an applicant, all you can do is put together the best cover letter that you can," he says. "Plus, when I was applying, my novel had just come out, so that helped."

More than two-thirds of the applicants who had M.F.A.'s earned them after Mr. Jones earned his. And 17 of the Ph.D.'s in the pool had doctoral degrees fresher than his. Yet Mr. Jones, a newly tenured professor of English at Cameron University, in Lawton, Okla., says professors like him "have a proven track record. They know I can handle everything that comes with being a full-time professor: teaching, writing, doing committee work, and doing work in the department." Being acutely aware of the competition is one of the stranger aspects of the job search today, some of the applicants for the Ohio job say.

"It seems like every time there's a job opening, I know at least 10 or a dozen people who are applying," says Jared Y. Sexton, who was a non-tenure-track professor in Ball State University's department of English when he applied to Ohio. "It's almost like a dance we do in conversation. You make small talk and then out of nowhere someone will say, 'Hey, did you apply to that Ohio job?' And then you compare notes about whether you've heard anything. It's all very strange." Mr. Sexton says he applied for a only few positions at the time, including his current job as an assistant professor of creative writing at Georgia Southern University. His search had a much different vibe than when he applied for jobs after graduate school.

"When I first got my M.F.A., I sent out a ton of applications," says Mr. Sexton, who graduated in 2008 from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Michael Croley, a visiting assistant professor at Denison University, applied for the Ohio job. "We know who's out there, who our competition is: writers I've seen in conferences who are friends and people I went to grad school with," says Mr. Croley, who has taught at Denison since 2011. "The part that *is* a mystery is why one candidate gets hired over another. That makes it seem like an absolute crap shoot."

Mr. Croley expected his odds of landing the Ohio job to be tough. Denison is a liberal-arts college and doesn't have a graduate program in creative writing. Also, his book, like Mr. Sexton's, had not yet been published, but it was forthcoming.

"I didn't go into this blind, not knowing it was going to be tough," says Mr. Croley, a 2007 graduate of the M.F.A. program at the University of Memphis. "I know a lot of people out there who are really good and end up losing out on jobs, so I don't feel alone."

In the end, Patrick O'Keeffe, a former visiting professor at the University of Cincinnati, got the Ohio job.

He was teaching and writing his second novel when he applied to work at Ohio. Mr. O'Keeffe published his first book with Viking Penguin in 2005 while an instructor at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. He earned his M.F.A. there in 2000, where he studied under Lee K. Abbott and Nicholas Delbanco. The book, a collection of long stories called *The Hill Road*, earned him the Story Prize and the Whiting Award, national accolades.

Mr. O'Keeffe said he had applied for about a dozen assistant-professor jobs in places where he thought he might want to live, including Athens, Ohio. Michigan was "a great place to learn to teach," he says, and while he was a lecturer there he taught a variety of classes, including creative writing, nonfiction writing, literature, and poetry. His versatility in the classroom drew the committee's attention.

"I feel incredibly fortunate to get this job," says Mr. O'Keeffe, whose second novel, *The Visitors*, also published by Viking Penguin, will be released in March 2014.

Mr. Moore, who says the department has been happy with Mr. O'Keeffe, says he understands why.

"There were people who I knew who applied. I knew they were good people and they had published well, and we ended up not even interviewing them," Mr. Moore says. "Some of the people we interviewed, it was clear they had been trying to move from a visiting-writer position or something similar for many years. It was heartbreaking. I wanted to hire 20 of them."

Correction (5/20/2013, 10:20 a.m.): The original version of this article incorrectly referred to the site of one search as the University of Ohio. It was Ohio University. The text has been corrected. Sydney Dunn and Jonah Newman contributed to this article.