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Learning from Others' CVs

December 14, 2012

By [Eszter Hargittai](#)

While much of academe can be a black box (Why did a particular person get that prestigious fellowship? Why did the search committee decide to interview certain candidates? What explains an applicant's successful outcome?), there is some information available for viewing about others' career trajectories that is usually there for easy consulting. It is the curriculum vitae, a document that is now often readily accessible through an online search. Even if a traditional C.V. is not available for a particular person of interest, bits and pieces of information from here and there can help develop a sense of a person's career path.

Does this sound like some creepy stalking behavior? Not at all. After all, would people be putting their C.V.s online if they did not want others to see them? Presumably this practice is common precisely so that people can spread word about their accomplishments. Looking at people's C.V.s can help you understand their intellectual background, identify their academic peer community, and appreciate the opportunities that may have played a role in getting them to where they are.

Graduate students – and others looking to make a move – often wonder how they can be viable candidates for certain fellowships and jobs, whether in academe or not. To address this, it can be helpful to take a look at the C.V.s of people who have recently gotten the types of distinctions and positions especially of interest. For example, do you have your eyes set on a particular department? While it is rather risky to have such specific career ambitions given the state of the general economy and the academic job market in particular, it cannot hurt to browse the C.V.s of the people who have recently been hired by certain programs of interest to get a sense for what credentials can result in a successful application. Needless to say, there are many factors that are not listed on people's C.V.s, including much of the politics of the hiring department. Nonetheless, in a process with so little transparency, every little bit can help shed some light on how things develop.

Looking at the publications list, the fellowships and grants, the prizes, the conference presentations, the teaching experiences, and types of service engagements of people in positions of interest to you will give you a good sense for what types of accomplishments can help in securing a certain type of job. But it can do much more than that. It can give you concrete ideas for where to send your work, what journals you might not have considered, and what conferences or workshop you might have overlooked. Additionally, the information on these C.V.s may point you to fellowship and grant opportunities as well as paper prizes that had not come across your radar.

Browsing people's C.V.s can also assist in understanding the norms in certain areas, whether those in your field or those of collaborators or areas to which you aspire. For example, do people tend to co-author papers or write them on their own in a particular community? Do they co-author with their advisers or with their peers? How many conferences do they attend annually? Do they go to big national meetings or smaller specialized workshops? While you can certainly get an idea of these issues from your adviser and local colleagues, depending on the accessibility of your mentors and the extent to which your own trajectory is likely to mirror theirs, it can be helpful to seek outside guidance as well.

In particular, most people earn their Ph.D.s at research universities since, by definition, those are the types of institutions that grant such degrees. Most faculty, i.e., doctoral students' mentors teaching at such schools have little to no experience working in other types of positions limiting the advice they can give on what kind of a C.V. will impress the search committee at a liberal arts college or a community college, not to mention at an industry research lab or nonprofit agency. Looking at people's C.V.s in positions of interest is an excellent way to learn about alternative career paths without imposing on people's time.

C.V.s can be a helpful resource not just to graduate students, but academics at different stages of the career path such as those looking toward tenure and promotion. In that case, perusing the C.V.s of local colleagues can be especially relevant as those are people who had successfully navigated the process in a very similar context. If departmental colleagues' C.V.s are hard to come by online, it is perfectly acceptable to ask them for a copy. It is fine to explain that you are looking to learn how one can be successful in the promotion process.

It is important to develop a habit of browsing C.V.s earlier rather than later. Consulting other people's C.V.s the year you are looking for a job or going up for tenure is too late to make a real difference in what you are able to list on your own curriculum vitae. Look at others' C.V.s early and often.

There are certain times when looking at people's C.V.s is a must. When you are preparing for a job interview, it is essential to look up information about department members. When you are about to host a speaker, it can also be helpful to have some basic background. Details gleaned from a C.V. can offer helpful jumping off points for conversation (e.g., recognizing mutual acquaintances through past collaboration or institutional affiliation, reflecting on shared experiences based on programs attended).

I want to highlight an important point that may be obvious, but is worth an explicit mention just in case. While C.V.s are full of people's successes and accomplishments, they do not tend to include failed attempts. Even the most successful academics have not been invited to interview for certain positions, have had their work rejected from journals and conferences, have received discouraging reviews, have gotten disappointing teaching evaluations, have not been the winners of various prizes and have been turned down for grants and fellowships. It is easy to forget this when looking at the C.V.s of the people who landed your dream job or won that coveted fellowship. But they, too, have had their share of disappointments along the way. I mention this to remain realistic and not to get too discouraged when viewing other people's list of achievements. They, too, had a short C.V. at one point or another. They tried and tried and eventually had items to add. Which items may be more or less relevant to pursue is where browsing C.V.s can prove to be a helpful endeavor.

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