

## **Getting Yourself on the Shortlist: Observations and Thoughts on the Job Search From the Perspective of Members of a Faculty Search Committee**

Spencer Hall (sprhall@indiana.edu) and Leonie Moyle (lmoyle@indiana.edu)

Department of Biology, Indiana University

January 2007

### **Introduction and Caveats:**

This document is an informal collection of observations from two faculty members who have recently served on a faculty search committee (Ecological/Evolutionary Genetics, Fall 06). It is meant as a resource for graduate students and post-docs who intend to apply to faculty jobs at research universities such as Indiana.

Readers should realize that this informal document contains information that is highly opinionated and skewed to observations of individuals in this search and for jobs at institutions like Indiana. So, the advice should be taken skeptically, in the context of other advice offered by mentors, colleagues, etc. By no means is this document endorsed officially by Biology or IU.

A guiding theme throughout this document:

*Review of your application in the early round is \*extremely\* superficial.*

meaning that searchers cannot spend large amounts of time on any one application when faced with a filing cabinet full of them. Sad but true. Given this reality, your goal as a candidate is to get your application past the first couple of rounds of review.

Here are some thoughts on applications – those that made it to the short list, and those that did not.

### **(1). Publications:**

Publications offer an absolutely crucial index by which we judge applications. However, it is important to appreciate that search committee members look at them very superficially (shockingly so), particularly until we narrow the candidates to approximately the top ten. Here are some observations:

(A). Number: we quickly eliminated junior candidates who have not published at least 5-6 papers. (This number is not a rule – it may vary a lot with institution and with the degree of match of your interests to those of the search). This does not mean that people with 1-4 publications should not apply to jobs (since that can be a valuable experience). Just consider that your application may receive about 2 minutes of review time by the committee.

(B). Rate: We typically looked for solid publication rate over several years since candidates received their PhD (the clock definitely starts ticking once minted with the degree). We were typically most impressed by publication of several papers per year over 1-3 years post PhD. Such a rate, established over several years, is important because it indicates to us that the candidate will continue to produce over time. In general, unless a junior candidate is truly outstanding, they are unlikely to get an interview at a research one university without at least 1

strong first-authored publication from their postdoctoral work. You should bear this in mind when considering your publication priorities while postdoc'ing.

(C). Quality: Quantity is definitely not everything – quality is very important because it offers an index for potential impact and broadness of appeal of the applicant's science. Publications in *Nature* and *Science* are great, of course, but not necessarily required (i.e., Spencer has none as of Dec 2006). Great candidates publish in the top journals of their field. For Spencer, those journals are e.g., *Ecology*, *Ecology Letters*, and *American Naturalist*. For Leonie, these would include *Genetics*, *Evolution*, *Molecular Ecology*, *MBE*, and *Am. Nat.* Aim to send your work to similarly appropriate journals when possible. (Sending papers to these journals will mean receiving rejections from time to time, which is inevitable – but you cannot publish there if you do not submit them to these journals). Many papers published in minor journals do not necessarily help if unaccompanied by papers in those top disciplinary journals (they might even hurt a little bit). Book chapters do not count for much (in the eyes of the committee).

(D). Nature and Science: High profile papers are very valuable, but surprisingly, they are not everything. For instance, a *Science* paper does not grant you an interview necessarily (although sometimes this can be institution- or even committee-dependent). Several of our candidates who did not make the shortlist had published in those journals – these top papers must be accompanied with a solid publication record, and in Spencer's opinion, examples of deeper thinking that often permitted by space restrictions of the *Science/Nature* format. Also, be aware that papers published in *PNAS* may not impress committee members as much as you'd think IF a co-author of the paper is a member of the National Academy. (Academy members can submit papers through a different – and easier – route to *PNAS*). Leonie believes that two strong papers that establish your credentials, and your future research potential in a field, can often be regarded more favorably than a single *Science* or *Nature* article that has no future research legs.

Overall, the publication list (as the rest of the application) should establish the impression that you have a long-term successful and influential career in science ahead of you.

## **(2). Cover letter:**

The selection committee may have 100-200 applications to read. Thus, early on in the process, they may look at cover letters and then move straight to CVs to look at publications and grants. Given this superficial treatment, it is crucial that your cover letter:

- \* occupy only 1-1.5 pages (not a long two or three pages),
- \* get straight to the point about your research program
- \* give the search committee a “label” for you – they need some way to categorize you, so give yourself a label that is useful to the committee given the nature of the search. (For the search that hired Spencer: “I am a community ecologist who studies the interface of food web interactions and disease using experiments, observations, and mathematical theory”). The committee should not have to puzzle over what it is that you do.
- \* is easy to read, especially for non-specialists of your sub-discipline. It should have broad appeal. (For instance, if you study evolutionary genomics, can an ecologist understand your cover letter? An ecologist might be on the search panel. Of course, the reverse is completely true, too – can a genomics expert understand your letter about ecosystem processes?).

\* conveys enthusiasm for your research and for the position available (without appearing like a sycophant or using excessive punctuation!!!!)

The cover letter is a balancing act – you want to present yourself confidently but not in a way that turns off or irritates the committee members. So, sell yourself, but avoid calling yourself “the ideal candidate”, excessively praising the novelty and impact of your work, or over emphasizing money you’ve brought in – unless it truly is special (e.g., you won a NSF grant as a grad student). Your letters of recommendation should say that you walk on water, so you do not have to say that about yourself.

If you are worried that your letter seems too generic, adding one line that is specifically relevant to the institution to which you are applying, (e.g. "I am particularly enthusiastic about the opportunities offered by IU's IGERT program in 'Evolution, Genomics, and Development') can be helpful.

### **(3). Post-docs:**

Unless the application is truly amazing, we really like to see that candidates have post-doctoral experience. This time spend post-docing offers an opportunity to establish and maintain a track record of publications. Many potentially promising people were eliminated because they just did not have enough experience. So, plan on getting yourself a great post-doc or two – those that allows you to continue developing as a scientist but also allows you to keep publishing at a competitive rate. Remember: being a post-doc is (can be) wonderful...

... but be aware that you can post-doc too long. “Too long” depends upon the nature of the job market. However, the search committee begins to worry about candidates who have been post-docing for many years more than the norm. It makes us wonder “what is wrong with this candidate, why can’t (s)he find a job, etc.”

### **(4). Make a webpage:**

If you apply to a job, make sure that the search committee can easily find your webpage. If you do not have a webpage, make one – make one right now – you can throw up a very simple and basic one very quickly (e.g., look at Spencer’s very plain one). You may not expect it, but we want to see who you are, what you look like, how you present yourself, etc. Everyone needs a webpage.

### **(5). CVs:**

Make your CV easy to read and present the key information up front. Search committee members initially want to know about two main things, money and publications. They should easily see, without searching through your CV, how many pubs you have, which journals, and how much money your research program has been awarded (which is probably more key for more established candidates). List your papers in reverse chronological order – most recent papers first. Make it obvious where your name appears in the author string (bolding, underlining).

This means: do not put papers presented at conferences, service to departments or organizations, etc., before money and publications.

Also, try to avoid the temptation to include everything from your academic past in your professional CV. Unless it is extremely prestigious, or directly relevant to the job being applied for, the committee is unlikely to care about an award you received as a college freshman, for example. Including these kinds of elements can create an impression of academic immaturity.

#### **(6). Research and teaching statements:**

Research statements: Several of the comments written about cover letters apply here. In addition, make sure that:

- \* a broad audience can understand your statements (the genomics-ecologist comment above)
- \* it contains a solid statement about your future research directions – this is vital, since the committee must get the sense that your program is going somewhere in the next 5 year – and if you will be able to score a major grant. Weak statements of future direction can hurt candidates, especially young ones. (Remember that search committees have to gamble somewhat on academically young candidates, so do everything you can to reduce risk for them by writing a clear, compelling, concise, tangible statement of your future plans). In the research statement, as in the rest of the application, you are trying to convey a concrete sense of your future potential and the novelty of your projected contributions to the field.
- \* Consider adding pictures, cartoons, or easy-to-digest figures to your statements. Searchers have to read many of them, so anything that can capture the imagination of the reader can help your application.

#### Teaching statements:

- \* Spencer is embarrassed to say that he spent very little time reading over these. For institutions like Indiana, they probably do not get as much attention as other portions of the application.
- \* Nonetheless, it is still wise to write this section carefully, since certain search members may care passionately about, say, interest in undergraduate teaching.
- \* There are many potential ways to write a teaching statement, and these are possibly the most variable components of a job application (see notes about these in the job guides, links below). However, unless you are applying for a position at a teaching college, resist the temptation to spend 1.5 pages waxing lyrical about your "exuberant desire to nurture the minds of a future generation of scientists..." etc., etc.. Chances are that this will not be appreciated by a busy search committee. In Leonie's opinion, for an application to a research one institution it is more useful to:
  1. clearly identify your past teaching experience (including AI positions, guest lectures, etc. as well as any individual classes you might have developed or taught)
  2. clearly identify several 'core' courses that you would like to teach and/or are qualified to teach (be careful to not claim you can teach, for example, ecology, if you are a molecular biologist);
  3. outline 2 to 3 brief synopses of potential upper-level undergraduate or graduate level courses that you would like to teach.

\* For other types of institutions, especially teaching schools, it might be worthwhile researching their specific teaching philosophy and incorporating key elements into your statement. These philosophies are often summarized somewhere on the institution's website.

\* It is worth looking at classes taught by existing faculty at the institution to which you are applying – for instance, it does not pay to inadvertently indicate that you want to steal a committee member's speciation or theoretical ecology class. Consider saying which classes you would like to teach (which might include speciation or theoretical ecology), and what opportunities you see available at the particular institution (probably not speciation at IU).

### **(7). Recommendation Letters:**

For junior candidates, that haven't necessarily established a national reputation or a long string of publications, letters of recommendation can be quite influential for search committees. Make sure that you ask for letters of recommendation from people who are, first, appropriate for you and, second, likely to write you a strong letter. This requires that you have a reasonably strong (and positive) relationship with at least three academics, preferably four. Bear this in mind during your graduate school career. Think twice about asking a recommender for a letter that you suspect may not glow. There is no faster kiss of death for an application than a negative (or even flat/tepid) letter from a recommender.

Except in very rare circumstances, the committee is expecting your graduate and postdoctoral advisors to be among your recommenders. In fact, it looks very strange when they do not write you a letter.

It is also good to avoid making the search committee chase down your recommenders for letters. To do this, ask for your letters early (well before the due date), provide clear contact details for where the letters should be sent, and send them a friendly reminder a week before the due date.

### **(8). Miscellaneous:**

Interpersonal stuff – the world of Ecology and Evolution is a very small one. People know each other, from meetings, from grad school, through the grapevine. Appreciate that fact that everyone with whom you interact at meetings, at school, etc., will form opinions of you – and that can help you or hurt you. So, just consider how you act in professional settings as a student and post-doc. This does not mean to constantly act in a political manner ... but it does mean that if you are a jerk, arrogant, or difficult to get along with, the search committee may/probably will find out about it through their networks of friends and colleagues. Remember: groups want to hire great scientists who are also will be personable colleagues. It also means that the more 'exposure' you have at conferences – giving talks or posters, or meeting with people – the greater the chances that someone on the search committee will have already heard about your great research before they see your application.

More on the gossip mill/job circuit – Also please be aware that people talk to their friends all of the time about jobs – who has what job, who applied, etc. This means that it is important to do your best when you interview at institutions and be on your best behavior (see Alan Tessier's thoughts on the socio-intellectual side of interviewing [[PDF](#)] for some helpful hints here)... even

if you discover that you really dislike the institution where you are interviewing once on the ground. Please realize that people \*talk\* about interviews that went particularly badly. Bad interviews can undermine your chances at getting more interviews.

More resources – On Spencer’s Grad Resources page [[HTML](#)], there are some fantastic guides for academic job searches, check them out:

- (1) Anurag Agrawal’s extensive and wonderful guide [[PDF](#)]
- (2) Armin Moczek’s equally great and complementary guide [[PDF](#)]
- (3) Alan Tessier’s thoughts on the socio-intellectual side of interviewing [[PDF](#)]
- (4) A complimentary list of questions to ask while interviewing [[PDF](#)]