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LETTERS TO YOUNG SCIENTISTS



In the tough academic job market, two principles can help you maximize your chances

By [Jay J. Van Bavel](#), [Neil A. Lewis, Jr.](#), [William A. Cunningham](#) | Jul. 10, 2019, 2:15 PM

This time of year generates a wave of excitement and anxiety as many early-career scientists prepare to face the academic job market. There is usually a flood of advice to help clarify this terrifying process. But for every useful piece of advice, there are a dozen that are idiosyncratic to the person giving the advice or that are unique to their own institution. They might have secured a coveted tenure-track position, but it's not clear which things (a) helped them get the job or (b) are relevant to the jobs you plan to pursue.

The job market—both inside and outside of academia—is full of random events. There are major differences in the hiring processes between countries, between schools, between departments, between search committees in different years, and even between people within a single search committee in a given year. This noise in the system makes it difficult to determine exactly how decisions are made or what you can do to prepare.

And yet, there are often a few people who continually get multiple interviews (and offers) in a given year, suggesting that there is *some signal amid all the noise*. So like any good scientist, your goal is

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To increase your chances, it helps to understand your audience. Imagine being placed on a search committee where you are asked to review dozens, or even hundreds, of job applications in a few weeks. Many applications are lengthy and dense, including materials such as a cover letter, CV, research and teaching proposals, reference letters, and papers. Now, imagine that you have to review and rank a huge stack of these applications on top of your busy schedule of conducting research, teaching, mentoring, and doing service activities. This gives you a sense of the daunting task facing the search committee members who review job applications.

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Under these conditions, you can expect them to skim many of the materials while keeping an eye toward the features that stand out from the crowd or signal a candidate's fit for the position. Indeed, recruiters outside academia spend an **average of 6 seconds** reviewing each resume!

Keep this in mind when you are drafting your materials. Ask yourself, "What would an exhausted faculty member think if they quickly read or skim this application?" Then craft an application that highlights your fit and helps you stand out from the crowd at a glance.

There is no standard template for a job application, so you have the freedom to craft your cover letter, CV, and research and teaching statements in a way that highlights your unique strengths and fit for the position. For example, write a cover letter that describes your most impressive credentials, move these sections to the top of your CV, and add clear headers to ensure the reviewers can easily find anything they are looking for. Make these features jump off the page.

If you make it to the shortlist, the committee members—and perhaps the entire department—will start to dive into your materials. To be successful at this stage, you need to ensure your materials are logical, coherent, and compelling. It helps to read the materials from other successful applicants to see what works. But the key is that you need materials that work at a glance as well as a deep dive.

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market learn about the process and get to see sample materials that might be helpful if they want to apply for academic jobs in the future.

Minimize the noise

Unfortunately, luck plays a significant role in who gets an interview. But as a scientist, you should be no stranger to the notion of random noise. As with your research, the most powerful way to reduce the impact of noise is to increase your sample size. To minimize the impact of dumb luck on your career, apply for as many jobs as reasonable. (We recommend only applying to positions you are likely to accept if you receive an offer.) The more jobs you apply for, the better your chances.

Anything you can do to increase your job applications will play to your benefit. Consider jobs outside the discipline in which you were trained that may value your work. Ask around and try to find fields where your credentials may make you competitive and even give you an edge. If possible, also consider jobs in a variety of locations. This isn't an option for everyone, but there are many excellent positions around the globe that might be worth your consideration.

And don't ignore jobs at institutions unlike your training environment. By definition, most Ph.D.s are trained at research-intensive institutions, but the vast majority of academics actually work at institutions that don't confer Ph.D.s and that offer a greater balance between research and teaching. These schools are full of scientists who are doing great work and training the next generation of scholars. These positions also offer a better fit for many people. Just because folks in your department don't talk about jobs at these schools doesn't mean that you should overlook them. Do your research to see if you might find fulfillment on this career path.

Applying over multiple job cycles can also be helpful. Even if you aren't sure whether you are competitive yet, or even ready for a faculty position, it can be worth sending out your applications to schools just in case. If you get lucky and receive an offer, that's great! In many cases, you may even be able to negotiate a deferral to finish up work at your current institution. If things don't work out, you will already have a draft of your materials and you can go on the market again next year.

Overall, aim for places where you can be successful, feel fulfilled, and get your work done. Then, if you are happy and productive, you can stay for the long term. If it turns out that it's not a great fit, there is no shame in going back on the job market. Many people find the market easier to navigate once they already have a job because they can be more selective, and the experience may make them even more appealing candidates for the most competitive jobs. Indeed, when we look down the hallway, roughly half our colleagues came from a prior job before joining our departments.

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Jay J. Van Bavel

Jay J. Van Bavel is an associate professor of psychology and neural sciences at New York University in New York City.

[Twitter](#)

Neil A. Lewis, Jr.

Neil A. Lewis, Jr. is an assistant professor of communication and social behavior at Cornell University.

[Twitter](#)

William A. Cunningham

William A. Cunningham is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto in Canada.

[Twitter](#)

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