

# How to Get a Teaching Job at a Primarily Undergraduate Institution

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## Introduction

While seeking a site for my second year as a Pew Teacher-Scholar Postdoctoral Fellow, I had the rare opportunity to visit and interview at eight colleges in the Midwest. This experience gave me a feel for the interview process and insights into the special qualities in prospective faculty members sought by undergraduate institutions. I would like to share what I learned during my time on these campuses, as well as what I have learned as a tenure track faculty member at a small college. There are both similarities and differences to the experiences of candidates interviewing for faculty positions at research universities.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Unfortunately, most PhD candidates and postdocs are chastised for any interest they have in teaching (sometimes referred to as the "T-word") and get little support from research mentors for such a career choice. There has been increasing awareness, however, that not everyone who gets a PhD wants to establish a research lab at a large university. In an attempt to assist those seeking "teaching" careers, I offer the following suggestions that may be helpful for those wishing to get a job at a primarily undergraduate institution.

## Career Tracks

If you know that teaching undergraduate students is why you are getting a PhD in the first place, then you want to think about the implications of choosing a particular lab for your thesis work. If you choose a lab that does only one technique and your project requires you to work with live Ebola virus, then you are not setting yourself up for a teaching job. Most primarily undergraduate institutions want a person who is versatile and can conduct research that has plenty of opportunity for student participation. Proficiency

with a single technique is too limited a technical repertoire and Ebola virus is too dangerous and expensive to manage at a primarily undergraduate institution. Inexpensive and short-term research projects are best suited to an undergraduate college. If you are still keen to choose the Ebola virus project, then recognize that a postdoctoral fellowship will be necessary to add breadth to your training.

Do you have to do a postdoc in order to teach? The answer is yes and no. In today's tight job market (about 100 applicants for each advertised job), those without postdoctoral experience are the exception. Postdoctoral training will be beneficial for several reasons: 1) you may learn more techniques and a different system, which should provide sufficient experience to teach at least one more course; 2) you should gain more experience with writing grants and increase your publication record; and 3) you will develop a degree of maturity that comes from having to adapt to a new area of research.

How do you select your postdoctoral experience? With a few Nobel Prize winning exceptions, the name of your postdoctoral mentor will not be easily recognized; most faculty members only recognize the names within their field. However, you might find that the name of the institution where you postdoc has a greater impact. This does not mean that the quality of your training will be better at a name-brand institution, but some people will find this attractive which may, in some small way, help you get an interview. You should determine before you begin your postdoc whether or not the principal investigator will allow you to take your research with you. The ideal project for a primarily undergraduate institution is one that is cheap, easy to learn, and not

subject to intense competition. If you want to teach molecular biology and use this in your research, it is understood that this is an expensive discipline but you might want to work with an inexpensive system such as *Chlamydomonas* or *Drosophila* instead of more expensive ones like mammals or tissue culture.

Should you tell a mentor that teaching is your long-term interest? It is a good idea to be honest up front because you will want a letter of recommendation from the principal investigator, so he or she will find out eventually. If you are considering a lab where the PI is hostile to teaching as a successful career for PhDs, it is better to find this out before you commit yourself to this lab. Do not subject yourself to a lab where the PI resents his or her "wasting time" on someone who will "just wind up teaching anyway". There are plenty of PIs who view teaching as an acceptable career.

One aspect that is often overlooked during doctoral training is teaching experience. Most PhD candidates have to teach for at least two semesters. Often, the courses are huge and allow little room for personal input and control of the course. If you know that teaching at a primarily undergraduate institution is your objective, try to teach more than the bare minimum. Offer to guest lecture for your mentor (very few mentors object to this). You might be able to teach a course for someone on sabbatical at a local college (either a 2-year or 4-year institution). As you gain more teaching experience, ask yourself again if you enjoyed the process. Is this what you want to do for the next 30 years?

Finally, where are teaching jobs advertised? This is the easiest part of the entire process; all jobs are listed either in *Science* or in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.









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