



# Community for Advancing Discovery Research in Education

## ***Navigating the Academic Job: Developing Your Identity as an Early Career Scholar***

“How does one complete their dissertation, closing that door; research and apply for positions, peeking through multiple other doors; and walk through a door and become part of the conversation in a new setting?”

At the 2017 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, faculty from different institutions<sup>1</sup> gathered to address this question during a Division C Fireside Chat session entitled “Navigating the Academic Job: Perspective from Deans, Late-Career Faculty, and New faculty at Varying Universities.” Division C, the Learning & Instruction Division, is dedicated to mentoring graduate students and early career scholars; the fireside chat format offers participants an open forum to discuss topics of interest with a particular group of professionals. This session was designed to offer graduate students insight into the journey from recent graduate to new faculty member. A panel of dissertation advisors, new assistant professors, late-career faculty, and deans discussed this seemingly daunting journey and provided diverse perspectives from both the applicant side and the committee side. While the stories from panelists and questions from the audience touched on a variety of subjects, one of the central themes focused on developing one’s identity as an early career scholar and presenting that identity to the world.

### **Is Academia Right for Me?**

From the time they enroll in a doctoral program, students should always be thinking ahead to that first job. One panelist reminded the audience that most of the available jobs are not at universities but rather non-academic institutions (nonprofits, industry, etc.); therefore, students should have a strong sense that academia is where they belong. Panelists expressed that many graduate students enter the job market theoretically and methodologically prepared for academia but without a great deal of experience with the actual tasks associated with the job, such as management or administrative duties. Panelists agreed that students could benefit from exposure to the day-to-day routines of faculty, and recommended that students arrange to shadow faculty members either at their current institution or an institution they might be considering for the future. This, they said, would give students a better idea of the responsibilities of the position and whether those responsibilities align with their career goals. Panelists also recommended that students ask their advisors for the opportunity to serve on a selection committee in order to gain a sense of what committees are looking for in new hires before they themselves go on the job market. This will shed light on what a faculty position entails, as well as offer insight into how best to present yourself to potential employers during the application process.

### **Choosing the Right Institution**

The panel advised graduate students to spend time determining their intellectual identity and deciding what kind of academic they want to be by considering questions such as: “What type of environment do

I want to be in?” and “Who do I want to surround myself with?” It’s also important for students to understand how they learn and how they produce work. If you have a sense of your long-term career and research goals, this will help you know what kinds of scholars you want to work with and what type of institution can help you grow in a way that aligns with those goals. It can take a while to develop your identity, so don’t get discouraged if you’re still figuring it out. You will grow and evolve over the course of your career, which will help strengthen your identity over time. One panelist explained, “If you’re not yet sure exactly what you want to do, cast a wide net and find your niche through process of elimination.” To determine likelihood of fit at an institution of interest, panelists recommended looking at the CVs of faculty at those institutions, reading articles by those faculty members, and reaching out to them for informational interviews. Talk to scholars at various places in their career trajectories to know what’s expected at different levels within an institution. After doing so, ask, “Do I see myself reflected in this kind of scholarship?”

Panelists understood the need to balance the urgency of getting hired with the desire to hold out for the perfect position. Waiting might not be an option of everyone. If circumstances require that you accept a position that is less than ideal, so long as you can see the potential for growth that aligns with your career and research goals, you’ll likely be okay. Still, if you know in your heart that an institution is not a good fit, it’s okay to say so and continue searching. Similarly, some students and recent graduates might be open to relocating anywhere for their first job, but panelists advised students to really think about where they want to be geographically and how important this is for their overall happiness and well-being. Some panelists recommended that students from minoritized groups give this particular consideration, especially queer or trans+ students or students of color. Still, these panelists also advised students not to make assumptions about a particular location before visiting the institution, explaining that they had found homes in places they’d least expected. Students were advised not to “stifle their passion,” but to also set boundaries and know what they’re willing to compromise on and what they’re not.

## **Application Process**

Panelists agreed that students should begin the job search at least one year before they are on the market. Once you’ve done the hard work of figuring out what kind of academic you want to be (understanding that this is can be an ongoing process) and what types of institutions might be a good fit, the first place to start looking for job announcements is through university or department websites and listservs. When assessing whether an open position is worth your time and energy, panelists suggested looking first at the required qualifications for the position. One panelist stated that the required qualifications are the absolute minimum and students should address all of them in their cover letters. Panelists agreed that while it is good to briefly highlight the recommended qualifications you have, it’s best to focus on the required qualifications at this stage. As one panelist stated, “Recommended qualifications won’t get you through the first round, but they can help you later on.”

A few students asked questions about how best to present themselves on an application if their professional histories appear “fragmented.” “Your application is your opportunity to share your story,” one panelist said. “You get to decide how you want to tell that story.” Another panelist suggested that students “try to find a common thread that waves your story together.” If your work history is fragmented, it’s okay to be honest about that. However, using your cover letter to explain why your career track shifted or how your professional experiences build on one another will result in a stronger application, especially if it might not be obvious from your CV. As one panelist explained, “Don’t make the committee piece together your story; tell them who you are.” Another panelist assured students

that while your professional background is important “committees are more interested in where you are going with the knowledge and experience you’ve gained than where you have been.”

### **Campus Visit and Job Talk**

Panelists reminded students that if they’ve completed a PhD program and made it through the first round of interviews, they’re qualified for academia. What a search committee is trying to determine during your campus visit is whether you are a good fit for the institution. Observe how the committee reacts to you during your interview and throughout the campus visit; this will help you gauge how well you would fit within the department/institution. Remember, you’re interviewing them, too! Panelists recommended that interviewees do their homework about the institution and faculty so that they can ask substantive, targeted questions. This will help you gain more information about the institution, while also demonstrating to the committee that you are serious about the process and the position.

One audience member asked how students can present their research effectively during a job talk if their work has many foci or they are still trying to narrow the scope of their research. Panelists expressed that it is possible to have more than one main focus - many academics do - but it helps to define the core question at the root of those interests and the common thread that connects them. A couple of panelists suggested using visuals (Venn diagrams, for example) to illustrate the connections between your areas of interest. Panelists recommended that applicants focus on the big ideas and less on the intricate details of their work. During the job talk, you are demonstrating your knowledge, experience, and passion for your work; how your research interests align with the work of the institution; and how your work contributes to the discipline more broadly. As one panelist put it, “Show excitement and authenticity. Demonstrate who you are theoretically and what you can do methodologically. Show the committee that you can be who you want to be.”

### **Does This Feel Like Home?**

Panelists seemed to agree that you’ll likely have a pretty good sense of how well you’d fit in at an institution by the end of your campus visit. If it seems like your interests align with the mission of the institution, you could collaborate well with your colleagues, and the institution can help you grow as a scholar, great! Hopefully things will work out in your favor. However, you should be honest with yourself and the committee if the position isn’t what you’re looking for. One panelist suggested communicating this to the committee as soon as possible so that they can focus their attention on other candidates. Students in the audience were advised to notice and trust any red flags they see during the campus visit. As one panelist half-jokingly put it, “Everyone is on their best behavior during the campus visit, so if something seems off, trust it.” It can be frightening to consider turning down a job when you don’t know how long it might take to receive another offer, but only you know what you need to be successful. For potential hires, one of the most important questions to consider of an institution and the surrounding community is: does this feel like home?

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<sup>1</sup> Panelists included: Donna E. Alvermann, University of Georgia – Athens; Kristin Cipollone, Ball State University; Patricia Clark, Ball State University; Kevin Lawrence Henry, University of Arizona; John E. Jacobson, Ball State University; Jill P. Koyama, University of Arizona; Danielle T. Ligocki, Oakland University; Ronald W. Marx, University of Arizona; Emery Marc Petchauer, Michigan State University; and Stephanie Anne Shelton, University of Alabama.