How to get a "Teaching" Position with an "R1" Ph.D.

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Abstract

When I began my job search, I was concerned that, as a Georgia Tech Ph.D. student, my research focus and limited teaching experience would make it difficult for me to find a job at a "teaching-focused" university. Fortunately, thanks to the advice of many colleagues, I was able to prepare a strong application and accepted a wonderful job at Grand Valley State University. In this document, I share my experience and offer advice on how students from Ph.D. programs at "research-focused" universities can effectively apply for "teaching-focused" academic positions.

Keywords

Interview, job search

1 Introduction

This spring, I took my research-oriented experience at Georgia Tech and searched for a teaching-oriented tenure-track position. In this document, I share my experience and offer advice on how students from Ph.D. programs at "research-focused" universities can effectively apply for "teaching-focused" academic positions. Specifically, I discuss (1) how to choose where to apply, (2) how to write a cover letter, (3) how to write a teaching statement, and (4) other ways a teaching-focused application and interview will differ from a research-focused application and interview.

2 Apply to the Right Places

When I began my job search, I naively assumed that any university with a Ph.D. program strongly emphasized research and every other university strongly emphasized teaching. I was surprised to learn that the teaching/research balance is a continuum from 99% research to 99% teaching. In this section, I describe several schools in the middle of this continuum.

2.1 50/50 Balance

Several schools (including the University of Richmond, Kalamazoo College, Colgate University, and Illinois Wesleyan University) actually maintain a 50/50 balance between teaching and research. A 50/50 balance does not mean mediocre teaching and mediocre research. Instead, these universities expect excellent teaching and excellent research. Of course, there are not enough hours in the day to do "R1"-level research (MIT, Berkeley, Stanford, CMU, etc.) and teach three or four classes every semester. Therefore, 50/50 universities expect professors to produce a lower quantity of high quality research. They expect the same quality of research done at the top-tier research universities, but only half as many publications.

Universities with a 50/50 balance provide both the teaching and research resources needed for success. First, the teaching load is typically four or five courses per year (or three to four lab courses). In addition, all the 50/50 universities at which I interviewed offered enough start-up funds to keep my Ph.D. research going at full speed. Several also offered guaranteed summer support.

50/50 universities are very good matches for those who enjoy R1-level research but want more teaching opportunities than are possible at schools like Georgia Tech. Realize, however, that these universities are not "Georgia Tech Lite". Instead, they are more like "Georgia Tech with Extra Teaching": The workload is not any easier or lighter than at an R1 university; instead professors at 50/50 schools simply trade some research output (in terms of papers and research dollars) for additional teaching load. You will need the same long-term research vision and grant-writing skills you would need to be successful at an R1 university. Therefore, a 50/50 university is probably not the best match for you unless you would enjoy working at a school like Georgia Tech.

2.2 75% Teaching / 25% Research

I accepted a position at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), which (in my opinion) has a 75% teaching emphasis and a 25% research emphasis. Indiana/Purdue at Fort Wayne (IPFW), Kettering University (Flint, Michigan), and Siena College (Loudonville, New York) also have a 75/25 balance.

At GVSU, there is no question that teaching is valued above all else. You earn the privilege of doing research when you have fulfilled your teaching duties. (In some
sense, research is "dessert"). Research is not yet officially a tenure requirement at many 75/25 universities. Instead, excellent teaching and excellent service will make a decent tenure case. However, some department chairs and deans are actively seeking faculty who will choose to do research. If they hire you to do research, I don't recommend you try to make your tenure case based on service.

In my opinion, the greatest benefit of working for a 75/25 university is that my success is almost 100% within my control: I can build a strong tenure case by teaching well, working hard, and including undergraduates in my research. I need not worry about how many grants I receive or how many papers are accepted for publication. As long as my students benefit from taking my classes and participating in my research projects, I will make the type of contribution that will earn me tenure.

The tradeoff is that the amount of financial support for research is much lower than at 50/50 universities. There is little or no start-up funding or money for summer salary (other than to teach summer classes). The comparatively low funding levels, of course, limit the type of research that is feasible. Fortunately, there is no lack of such research. (Consider theory and anything that can be researched using simulation).

3 Cover Letter

With every application, send a customized cover letter that mentions at least three specific reasons why you are a good fit for the position. (1) Doing so may improve, but should never decrease, your chances of getting the job. Also, (2) writing the cover letter will help you determine where to apply.

3.1 It Can Only Help

Of the people I asked, about half recommended customized cover letters and half argued that cover letters were "just formalities" and "nobody reads them". Well, if nobody reads them, then it won't hurt you to include a cover letter. On the other hand, if somebody actually reads the cover letters, then a good cover letter will probably put your application at the top of the list, whereas a poorly written or "form letter" may get your entire application rejected.

Your cover letter is important because it gives you a chance to summarize your application and emphasize those unique qualities that warrant further consideration. I used my cover letter to emphasize (1) the fact, that I was searching specifically for a teaching position, and (2) that I wanted opportunities to do undergraduate research. I also mentioned one or two facts about each department that I found particularly attractive or complimentary to my career goals. (In many cases, these facts were related to the department's undergraduate research opportunities.) Consequently, a hiring committee could determine at a glance that (1) I had taken time to research the position and the school, and (2) that I was definitely interested in the position (and not simply applying for every open position).

3.2 Help Deciding Where to Apply

The process of writing the cover letter is an excellent opportunity to determine whether to apply to a given department. For every position that I thought I might want, I attempted to write a personalized cover letter specifically stating why I would be a good match. I sent applications to those universities for which I was able to complete the cover letter. If I couldn't think of any reasons why my research complemented their current research or advertised research needs, or if the only reason I wanted to work for the department was "I need a job somewhere", I didn't apply. This cut my list of potential applications in half; but, still left me with over thirty positions to apply for. If you can find three reasons why you would be a good fit, be sure to apply, even if think you wouldn't want the position.

1. Any impression you form of a school based on their job posting and website is probably wrong. Don't rule any position out until you have had the chance to talk with them on the phone and visit the campus in person. More than once, I found myself seriously considering a position that I had almost turned down before interviewing.

2. You don't really know what you want until you interview. Going into interview season, I was convinced I wanted a 50/50 job. It wasn't until I had visited several 50/50 and several 75/25 universities that I realized I would be happier at 75/25 university. Visiting schools and deciding you do not want to work there helps you more confidently decide where you do want to work.

3. Your colleagues and the local culture will have more influence on your happiness than the department's other strengths and weaknesses. You will probably hate even the most perfect job if you don't like your colleagues or you hate the local environment and culture. Likewise, enjoying the company of your colleagues and loving where you live will almost certainly compensate for a suboptimal work environment.

3.3 How to Write the Cover Letter

When I wrote my cover letters, I put my reasons for applying in a numbered list in the middle of the page. That way, the most eye-catching items in the letter were the statements:
1. "I want to teach",

2. "I want to do undergraduate research", and

3. "I see from your website that ....".

This clearly announced at a glance that my application was serious: I had researched the university and I was not using it as a "backup".

I applied for many jobs near family in Michigan. People had very strong opinions on whether my cover letter should mention my ties to the area. Almost every Georgia Tech person I asked recommended against it because they were concerned people would think I was applying only to be near family. Almost every GVSU person I asked recommended I do mention the family ties because it was a sign that I intended to stay at the university, as opposed to using it as a "stepping stone" to a more prestigious position.

In my opinion, you really need to know your audience. If the school regularly receives more than enough qualified applications and has few retention problems, don't mention ties to the area. The school gets and keeps good employees regardless of family ties. On the other hand, if applicants tend to use the university as a "backup" or a "stepping stone" to better positions, then the hiring committee may consider your application more seriously if they believe you want to stay in the area. In either case, however, mention your family ties only if your application very clearly indicates that you are a good fit for the job. If you are not a good fit for the job, any mention of ties to the area may send the message that you're applying only because family is nearby.

4 Statement of Teaching

You should spend most of your job search preparation here. Start early! Start writing your teaching statement as soon as Fall semester begins. It will take you much longer than you expect to find just the right words to describe your motivation for, and approach to, teaching.

Avoid reading other people's teaching statements until you have a complete draft of yours. Writing your teaching statement is your opportunity to reflect upon (1) why you want to teach, (2) how your teaching approach is unique and interesting, and (3) what you believe sets great teachers apart from good teachers. You want to find your own answers to these questions. If you read somebody else's statement, you run the risk of his or her ideas interfering with the development of your own. (Have you ever tried to solve a problem and found yourself repeatedly coming back to the same wrong answer you read earlier?)

1. **Why You Want to Teach:** Put considerable thought into this. Avoid trite answers like "Where would the world be without teachers?", or "I want to give back to the community." Many careers are vital (doctors, teachers, firemen), and there are many ways to give back to the community. Try to figure out why teaching is the important career you have chosen. Think about which of your qualities will make you a good teacher (as opposed to a good doctor, policeman, or fireman). Also, think about which aspects of teaching you find satisfying and why you wouldn't find other careers as satisfying. You need not include the answers to these questions in your statement; just use them to help you better understand why you want to teach.

2. **How Your Teaching Approach is Unique or Interesting:** What will set you apart from the 300 other people who apply for the same job?

3. **What Sets Great Teachers Apart From Good Teachers:** Hiring committees are looking for excellent teachers, not just competent teachers; therefore, discuss those qualities that set great teachers apart from good teachers. After you demonstrate that you know what it takes to be an excellent teacher, discuss those qualities you have that will make you a great teacher and how you will develop those qualities. (Your development plans are especially important if you have limited teaching experience.)

You may find it helpful to use professors as examples. One technique is to cite a professor's best quality, and explain how you plan to incorporate that quality into your teaching. Although our strongest memories of teaching may be examples of what not to do, never use a professor as a bad example. Making derogatory comments anywhere during the application and interview process may cost you the job. Instead, you should identify and discuss the corresponding good quality.

Your teaching statement should be approximately two pages long. Some schools will allow more; others will request less. One strategy is to put your most important points first. That way, people can read as much of the statement as they want and will have read the most important information, regardless of where they stop.

Have many different people from many different backgrounds critique your teaching statement. Your reviewers should include people from

- both research and teaching schools,
- both big and small departments,
- many different research areas, and
many different disciplines (math, biology, chemistry, engineering, humanities, etc.)

In addition, your set of reviewers should include full professors, new professors, graduate students, and undergraduates.

When faced with a tough hiring decision, some people will read between the lines to find subtle differences between candidates. Therefore, you want many different people to read your application materials and search for statements with which they disagree or interpret differently. By using reviewers with different backgrounds, you are more likely to hear about different interpretations. In addition, hiring committees are often comprised of faculty from different departments. You want to make sure that your statement doesn't unknowingly contain any controversial issues.

With many different reviewers, you will almost certainly receive conflicting advice. It is not possible to please everybody, but you should be aware of what the controversies are and avoid them when possible. If you do decide to make a controversial stand, be as clear and precise as possible. Then, be prepared to address the issue should it come up during an interview. Don't try to make everybody happy: Either avoid a controversy completely, or make a clear, unequivocal stand. When you receive conflicting advice about whether to mention a particular issue, give the most weight to reviewers from schools like those to which you are applying.

Finally, when you are trying to reconcile all the different conflicting advice, make sure that the resulting documents still reflect your beliefs and personality. You don't want to end up with an application that has a "walking on eggshells" or "I'm telling you what you want to hear" feel.

5 The Rest of Your Application

The rest of your application (CV, research statement, letters of recommendation, etc.) will be very similar to that of an application to a research university. The major difference is that an application to a teaching university should emphasize your teaching experience. Your CV should list teaching experience before research experience. Likewise, when taken as a whole, your letters of reference should emphasize your teaching.

5.1 Letters of Reference

At some research-focused universities, it may be difficult to find professors who will have much to say about your teaching. Therefore, I offer the following guidelines.

More than half of your letter writers should be impressed enough by your desire and enthusiasm for teaching to mention it in their letter. The remaining references may be, for example, advisors with whom you interact only in a research setting.

At least one out of three (or two out of five) letters should emphasize teaching. Obtaining these letters requires some advance planning. If your primary adviser is 100% research-focused, establish a relationship with somebody more teaching-oriented. (For example, at Georgia Tech, the beginning programming courses are taught by professional instructors, not research faculty.) More importantly, when you get the opportunity to teach, make sure somebody observes you and offers feedback. If you didn't have any observations, give your evaluations to the professor writing your teaching reference. He or she can write a recommendation based on the evaluations.

5.2 Statement(s) of Research

Your statement of research should be of R1-quality. All universities, even those that primarily emphasize teaching, seek to hire the best faculty. Therefore, they will want to see that you have the same research vision as somebody hired by an R1 university. Be aware however, that if you want to work at a 100/0 or 75/25 university, you need to demonstrate that you understand the potential of your thesis research without sounding like you have your heart set on completely fulfilling your research vision. (Most 50/50 universities will provide the resources to fulfill even the most ambitious research vision.) In other words, you need to be clear that you will be perfectly happy working on only a small piece of your vision.

One technique for presenting a complete, yet reasonably scoped, research vision is to write two statements of research. The first is the full, long-term vision – the statement you would send to an R1 university. You can even present this as a "collaborative vision": the type of research you would do in collaboration with professors at other universities. Your second research statement can be a "statement of undergraduate research" in which you discuss those aspects of your research that are accessible to undergraduates and outline several potential summer research projects. The first statement demonstrates that you have a long-term vision and research direction, whereas the second demonstrates how you can use your vision to contribute to the teaching-oriented nature of the university.
5.3 Job Talk

As with your statement(s) of research, your talk should be similar to the one you would prepare for a research school with one important difference: You will be evaluated on both your research and teaching potential; therefore, forget the "third, third, third" rule (the first third of your talk should be understandable by everybody, the second third understandable by only people in your area, and the final third understandable by nobody). Instead, everybody should be able to understand at least two thirds of your talk; and any computer scientist should be able to understand the entire talk. At a teaching university, you are not trying to impress them with your technical knowledge. Instead, you are trying to demonstrate that you can make a complicated concept (i.e. your research) accessible to an audience.

Even if a university asks you to both give a research talk and teach a lesson, they will evaluate your teaching at both talks. Therefore, avoid turning on the "fire hose of information" during your research talk.

5.4 Interview

Standard interviewing advice applies to both teaching schools and research schools. There is a lot of interviewing advice in the literature, so I will only mention the highlights:

1. **Practice:** You need three practice talks minimum. Even then your first job talk will be terrible. Avoid scheduling your most desired interview first.

2. **Be yourself:** Be on your best behavior; but, remember: Telling people what they want to hear may get you the job; however, in the long run, nobody will be happy if you're not a good personality match.

3. **Be prepared to talk about your research:** Even teaching-focused universities want to hire professors with ambitious, long-term goals.

4. **Insist upon a student meeting without faculty present:** This meeting will give you the best feeling for the culture of the department and university. I preferred having a 90 minute lunch with the students.

6 Summary

With a little preparation and a lot of enthusiasm, graduates of research-focused universities, such as Georgia Tech, should have no trouble getting a job at a teaching-focused university. Most teaching-focused universities welcome the opportunity to hire faculty with strong research experience and interest. Such faculty provide useful advice and experience to those students who have aspirations for a career in research. In addition, research helps raise the university's profile. You need only demonstrate a serious enthusiasm for the university. By this, I mean (1) a genuine enthusiasm for teaching, and (2) a realistic research plan that incorporates undergraduates. Together these points should convince anybody on the hiring committee that you are seriously interested in working at a teaching university and not simply using the school as a "backup".

Only your statement of teaching will differ greatly from an application to a research school. However, your entire application should emphasize teaching. Take care, however, not to exclude research. Schools will expect you to demonstrate a long-term research vision, even if your actual research opportunities will be limited.

Finally, throughout the application and interview process, remember to be yourself. All universities, especially smaller universities, are looking for a good "fit" as well as technical competence. Therefore, make sure your application materials as well as your interview reflect your personality.

Happy hunting :)