

Strategies for Success: Landing Your First Academic Position and Navigating the Early Years—A Report from the American Society of Preventive Oncology's Early Career Investigator Special Interest Group



Saira Khan¹, Sheetal Hardikar^{2,3}, Katherine W. Reeves⁴, David W. Wetter^{2,3}, and Allison M. Burton-Chase⁵

ABSTRACT

As part of the 2019 American Society of Preventive Oncology (ASPO) annual meeting, the Early Career Investigator Special Interest Group organized a session entitled “Strategies for Success: Landing Your First Academic Position and Navigating the Early Years.”* This session was designed to provide senior doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows with strategies

for preparing successful faculty job applications. Furthermore, strategies and best practices to help guide early career faculty through the initial years of their academic positions were also discussed. This report summarizes the main themes of the session, including advice and recommendations from the panelists.

The Typical Timeline for an Academic Job Search

The academic job search process can be lengthy and time-consuming, and it is helpful to have an idea of what a typical timeline may look like (Fig. 1). However, it is important to stress that timelines can vary greatly between institutions, especially if you are applying to institutions that do not follow the traditional academic calendar (e.g., Cancer Centers). Regardless of the specific timeline, one important lesson is that this process will likely take longer than anticipated. Therefore, preparation of application materials should begin at least 1 year before the intended start date of the faculty position, and earlier if possible.

The Job Search: Getting Started

One of the first steps when planning for a job search is to make sure that the potential candidate is familiar with existing job-listing resources. For individuals interested in careers in cancer prevention and control, there are some excellent websites and listservs that advertise open faculty positions. ASPO maintains a listserv and also posts positions in cancer prevention and control to their website (<https://aspo.org/job-postings/>). Other sites that list academic job

openings include EpiMonitor (<http://epimonitor.net/JobBank.htm>), HigherEdJobs (<https://www.higheredjobs.com/>), Indeed (<https://www.indeed.com/>), Academic Keys (https://www.academickeys.com/all/choose_discipline.php?go=find_a_job), and The Chronicle of Higher Education (https://chroniclevitae.com/job_search/new). In addition to these web resources, potential candidates should regularly explore institutional websites for places that are of particular interest, talk to colleagues and mentors, and even consider directly e-mailing administrators and/or the Chair of departments that are of substantial interest. Networking at conferences, such as ASPO, can be very beneficial and helps spread the word to other members in similar fields that the candidate is on the job market.

The next step is preparing the application documents. Many academic job postings will require most, if not all, of the following: (i) curriculum vitae (CV), (ii) cover letter, (iii) research statement, (iv) teaching and mentoring statement, (v) diversity statement, and (vi) — three to five letters of recommendation/names of references. The application materials, including research, teaching, mentoring, and diversity statements, are highly important components of the application packet. It is recommended to seek as much feedback on these documents as possible. It also is generally acceptable to ask for examples of well-written statements from close colleagues, particularly those who have been successful on the job market in the last 1 to 3 years. The job talk is a critical piece in the application process, so it is important to devote a substantial amount of time to develop, practice, receive feedback, and revise the job talk. Keep in mind that the application materials as well as the job talk need to be tailored to each institution; search committees read a lot of these documents, and not using the institution/position name or having them be wrong (forgetting to change it from a different application) will be noticed. If a candidate identifies unique institutional resources that could enhance their research program, it may be beneficial to outline how those resources might be utilized in the application. The candidate may also find it worthwhile to reference faculty members whose research interests align with theirs as potential future collaborators. These details will demonstrate the candidate's initiative and interest in the position and that the candidate's research has a complementary fit with current faculty. It is important to note that most institutions are not seeking new faculty with identical research interests as current faculty,

¹Epidemiology Program, College of Health Sciences, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware. ²Department of Population Health Sciences, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah. ³Huntsman Cancer Institute, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah. ⁴Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, School of Public Health and Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, Massachusetts. ⁵Department of Population Health Sciences, Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Albany, New York.

S. Khan and S. Hardikar contributed equally to this article.

Corresponding Author: Sheetal Hardikar, Huntsman Cancer Institute, 4-711, 2000 Circle of Hope Dr., Salt Lake City, UT 84112. Phone: 801-213-6238; E-mail: sheetal.hardikar@hci.utah.edu

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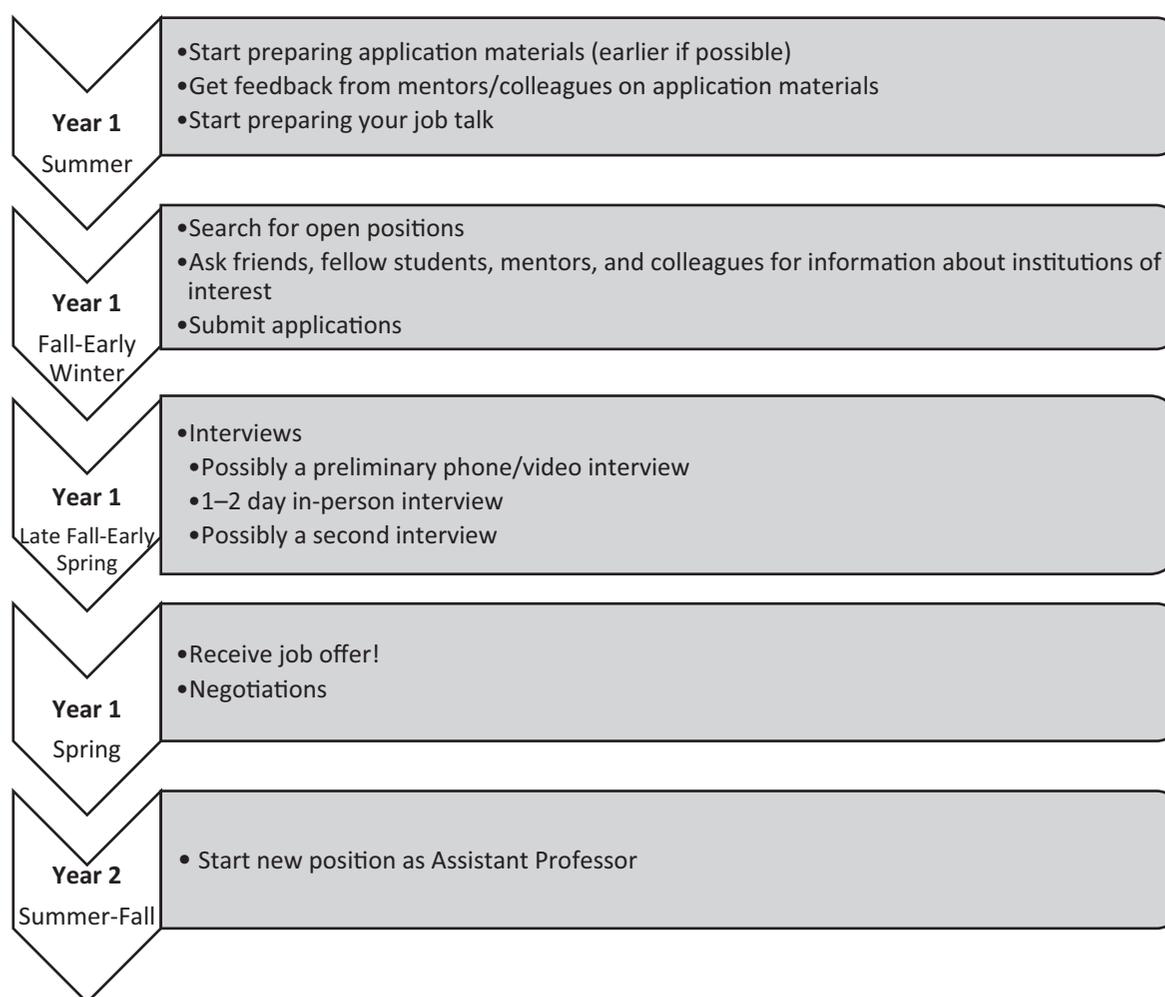


Figure 1.
Typical timeline for the academic job search process.

but rather they seek faculty with complementary methodological or substantive expertise that can build upon existing department research.

As for recommendation letters or names of recommenders, careful consideration should be given to providing as references individuals from different time points in the applicant's career. ASPO members that the candidate knows professionally or has interacted with at annual meetings can be great potential references. In addition, it is important that mentors listed on the applicant's CV or research statement be included in the list of recommenders; if these individuals are missing, search committees will notice and speculate about why a potential candidate either did not ask these key individuals or whether they declined and, if so, why. If there is a reason for this (e.g., the mentor has retired for health reasons), it is better to address it up front in the application materials to keep search committee members from speculating. Finally, applicants who are launching a new academic career should keep in mind that they will need reference letters for many years to come, and as such should try to cultivate relationships with individuals who can be strong references for the long-term.

The Interviews

As shown in **Fig. 1**, the interview process itself can be quite lengthy. One or two rounds of phone/video interviews followed by invitations for on-campus interviews should be expected. The most important advice for both phone/video and on-campus interviews is to prepare ahead of time. It is very important to practice the job talk and solicit feedback from mentors and colleagues before the in-person interview as well as prepare for expected questions. In addition, make sure to research the institution, including faculty and administrators, before the interview. Most institutions have detailed information online, and being informed will demonstrate the candidate's interest in the position, promote meaningful discussions, and enhance the candidate's ability to ask important questions. Using NIH RePORTER to find faculty members' funded NIH grants is a great way to familiarize oneself with faculty and departmental research interests. Some faculty may have Department of Defense (DOD) grants which can be searched for on these websites: (i) <https://cdmrp.army.mil/search.aspx> or (ii) <https://dodgrantawards.dtic.mil/grants/#/advancedSearch>.

Table 1 lists some common questions that are frequently asked during both phone and on-campus interviews. Questions generally fall

Table 1. Common interview questions.**Research**

- Tell me about your research.
- What populations and data sources do you need to conduct your research agenda?
- How do you see your research fitting in with this school/institution?
- Are there potential collaborators at this school that you can see yourself working with?
- Whom do you need to collaborate with to be successful?
- What is your grant-writing experience?
- What resources would you need to be successful?
- Do you do your own data analysis?
- What would be the topic of the first R01 (or K award) you would write if you came here?

Teaching

- Tell me more about your teaching/mentoring experience.
- What kind of courses would you be interested in teaching?
- What is your teaching philosophy?

Future Directions

- What are your next research questions/future directions?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What are the next grants you plan to apply for?

Miscellaneous

- Why do you want to come to this particular school/institution?
- What are you looking for in a faculty position?

into four broad categories including research, teaching, future directions, and miscellaneous questions designed to assess the candidate's overall "fit" with the institution.

One critical aspect to interviews is asking insightful questions of the search committee and other interviewers during on-campus interviews. Candidates sometimes lose sight of the fact that they are interviewing the institution as much as the institution is interviewing them. Ultimately, the position should be a good fit for both the interviewee and the institution. In addition, interviewers expect the candidate to ask questions of them and are often surprised when a candidate has nothing to ask at the end of either a phone or in-person interview.

Specific, relevant questions show genuine interest in the position and demonstrate preparedness. Candidates should ask questions regarding: (i) The balance of research and teaching including protected time for research, how many courses one is expected to teach per term, the ability to buy out of teaching if a grant is funded, and advising load (including when advising is first allowed, and number of master's and doctoral students typically advised), (ii) Percentage of salary that is expected to be supported through grants, especially during the first few years of the appointment, (iii) The tenure and promotion process, (iv) Institutional research resources available (e.g., biostatistics core, grant writing assistance including funding for external review, grant submission support, institutional and pilot grants available, internal start-up funds, or external sources of competitive start-up packages), (v) Mentoring process for new faculty, (vi) Potential for collaborations with other faculty both within and outside the department, and (vii) Service expectations such as standing departmental committees, faculty search committees, admission committees, or university-wide committees. Note that teaching and serving on doctoral exam committees is traditionally not considered service. Questions can go beyond simply asking what research support exists, but can also ask how well these support mechanisms work in practice. It is often helpful to ask different faculty the same questions to get multiple perspectives

and viewpoints on the same issue. Another often forgotten point is that the interview process begins at the start of the visit and continues until the candidate leaves the institution (i.e., breakfast, lunch, and dinner are also a part of the interview process); therefore, it is recommended that candidates conduct themselves in a professional manner throughout; this includes interactions with staff and students. Lastly, sending thank you e-mails after interviews is professional courtesy and can help leave a final positive impression.

Negotiation

The most important thing to understand about negotiating an academic offer is that it is more than just negotiating for salary. There are many other factors that can and will contribute to success in an academic position, including but not limited to start-up package, lab/research/office space, teaching/service responsibilities, academic assistance such as teaching or research assistant, summer salary, expectations regarding percentage of salary to be supported through grants, incentive programs for salaries on grants or indirect cost returns, and other resources at the institution including pre- and postaward grant support, statistical support, grant-writing programs, and appropriate mentorship. All of these components are potentially negotiable. Although the negotiation process can be intimidating and stressful, it is important to keep in mind that this is an expected part of the job search process. Seek advice from mentors and other recently hired faculty—they can help determine what is reasonable to ask for and can help identify items or components that may be missing from the offer. Public institutions often post current faculty salaries online. In addition, the American Association of Medical Colleges collects salary information for both public and private medical schools. This information is typically purchased by health science libraries, and reference librarians can help candidates access this information. The ability to see what other Assistant Professors in the department/area are earning can be particularly valuable with respect to determining a reasonable salary request. The negotiation conversations typically happen with the Department Chair or Dean, and they may also let the candidate know what components of the offer, if any, are nonnegotiable, e.g., the percent salary support offered by the department is often nonnegotiable. Although those with a competing offer are in a particularly strong position to negotiate, remember that everyone can and should negotiate their job offer per their specific priorities. We recommend that the candidate prioritize items most important to them and negotiate strongly on these, while allowing some flexibility in other components. Above all, it is important to remain polite and professional throughout the entire negotiation process as one is interacting with their potential future colleagues. For more specific details on the negotiation process, refer to Burton-Chase and colleagues (1).

Navigating the First Year in Your New Position

When the candidate successfully lands the faculty position, it is important to take some time to enjoy this accomplishment. However, soon, it will be necessary to also focus on how to successfully navigate through the first year. The early years of a faculty position can be a challenging experience, and it is very normal to feel overwhelmed by the multiple responsibilities and expectations. New faculty members have to juggle time between establishing their research program and teaching, mentoring, and service responsibilities. Moreover, as new faculty, there may be a perceived need to say "Yes" to everything and

soon a new faculty member may find themselves buried deep in tasks that do not further their research, teaching, or service responsibilities. Therefore, it is very important to learn to manage time from the get-go and to establish behaviors and develop strategies that will help maximize time spent on fruitful activities. An important skill that needs to be learned in this regard is prioritizing which things to accept responsibility for and saying “No,” where appropriate. Having a clear understanding of what is expected at the institution to achieve tenure (number and type of grants, number and quality of publications, teaching/mentoring metrics, amount of service) is of paramount importance. Some departments will have formal annual or retention evaluations to guide their faculty. However, ongoing, informal discussions with your mentors and Department Chair are very valuable and can be more informative than formal reviews. Ultimately, the onus is on the faculty member to make sure they are making progress toward promotion. Establishing a strong and diverse mentoring team, comprising senior tenured professors in your department, will help facilitate this. To help establish collaborations at a new institution, we recommend setting up introductory meetings with relevant faculty to talk about shared research interests. Although this is ongoing, one should keep collaborating with their postdoctoral group for continued publications. There are several new skills that need to be imbibed as a new faculty member, including but not limited to hiring staff, managing teams, crafting and managing grant budgets, designing courses, and effective mentoring. Institutions may have resources for training in these domains, and new faculty should take advantage of these resources if available. Finally, new faculty members should make sure to document everything they are working on, so that when the time comes, the promotion packet can be put together easily.

Conclusions

In summary, the academic job search process can be long and arduous, and although the process can be opaque, there are steps that the candidate can take to help ensure a successful job offer. Planning ahead and starting the application process early is key. Do not wait until the end of postdoctoral training to begin the job search process. Instead, it is advisable to have enough time for writing and getting feedback on the application materials, creating, practicing and refining the job talk, and adequately preparing for interviews. This will maximize chance of success.

On commencement of the new faculty position, it is important to understand the expectations for promotion, establish clear goals, and take concrete steps toward achieving them. Faculty members should continue pursuing funding for research through establishing new and

productive collaborations at their new institution. Time management is very important; be judicious in taking on administrative and service responsibilities. Keep in mind academic promotion is not achieved in isolation, so it is essential to reach out to mentors and colleagues when guidance is needed. Ultimately, success is likely if the new faculty member understands expectations and prioritizes responsibilities accordingly.

*Postscript

This report was written as a summary of one of the early career sessions at the 2019 ASPO National Meeting, before the current COVID-19 pandemic. These are uncertain times, making the faculty job search process even more fraught than usual. Despite this uncertainty, the authors recommend that those on the job market should try to utilize this time to make further progress with their career goals. It is important to keep writing and submitting papers. Candidates can get a head start on preparing their job application materials as well as the job talk, and use this time to solicit meaningful feedback on application materials. Although many universities currently have hiring freezes, there are still some open positions being advertised, and candidates should continue to apply to such positions. Interviews during this time will most likely be conducted remotely. As described in the manuscript, preparation will be key. The authors recommend practicing the interview and the job talk over a video-conferencing platform. Prior to the interview, candidates should ensure that they have access to a designated quiet place with a professional background to conduct the interview. It may be helpful to remember that this is a new and unprecedented situation not just for the candidate but for everyone involved, including the seasoned faculty and administrators. Therefore, maintaining clear communication is key.

Keep in mind that academic research has weathered many crises, including most recently the financial crisis of 2007–2008. As such, the authors of this report are hopeful that we will come out of this crisis stronger. Already, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the rapid development of new research and communication technologies that have the potential to enhance future collaborations. Collectively, we need to ensure that this current crisis does not unfairly exacerbate inequities in faculty hiring and success.

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