

# Just Visiting

*Joshua D. Laison*

## The Seven-Year Search

I received my Ph.D. from Dartmouth College in 2001 and started my search for an academic position in earnest in the fall of 2000. Little did I know it was a search that would eventually span seven years, hundreds of applications, and dozens of meetings with fellow math professors across the country. In the beginning, I wasn't sure what type of school I was interested in, and I applied my first year to over a hundred schools of all descriptions. After extensive research and many, many interviews, I began to understand more what I really wanted in my career, and I became more selective. Each year I applied to fewer schools while spending more time learning about each one. My goal was a position at a small liberal arts college with a commitment to promoting both high-quality teaching and research among its faculty, within an hour of a big city.

In 2007 I found my ideal match. Willamette University, in addition to meeting all of these criteria, has many more great qualities: It's located in the beautiful Willamette River Valley in northwestern Oregon; has a dynamic, vibrant, and exceptionally collegial mathematics department and faculty; a new building housing mathematics opening this year; and a new Research Experiences for Undergraduates grant in consortium with four other schools in the Willamette Valley. It's also a great location for my wife's career in environmental policy and planning.

I submit my file for tenure in fall 2010. In spite of the long road I traveled from my degree to the job I hope I'll keep until retirement, I consider my search to be a successful one. In fact, I think I'll stay at Willamette until they pry my cold dead hands from the whiteboard marker.

This year we had the last in a string of retirements in our department and hired a new colleague.

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After my years of searching, I found myself on the other side of the application process, reading applicant files, interviewing candidates at the Joint Meetings, and hosting interviews on the Willamette campus. This gave me a new perspective on the academic job market I thought I knew so well.

This past January, Aaron Luttmann, Raluca Gera, and I organized the panel *Finding Your  $n$ th Job for  $n \geq 2$*  at the Joint Meetings. In this panel I described some of my positive experiences as a visiting professor, and some advice for folks applying from their first, or second, or  $n$ th visiting position. While I'm definitely not an expert, and I don't even hold the record among my friends for the most years searching, in this article I'll describe a few things I've learned and some positive experiences I've had in my seven years on the market.

## The Joy of Visiting

Due to the recent difficult economic times, this past year has been particularly tough on candidates for academic employment. In the past year I've seen many highly qualified candidates struggle to find positions. One visiting professor I know, after failing to secure a position for 2009–2010, lost his visa and was forced to leave the United States. Another has started looking in the actuarial sciences and may not return to academia. Some luckier souls have had the option of a temporary position. In 2001 I was one of these lucky ones. I spent six years as a visiting assistant professor, first at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, then at Colorado College in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and finally at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

These six years were sometimes exhausting, particularly for our poor Honda Civic, which has gained 150,000 miles and some baseball-sized hail dents. It was frustrating and humbling when I was turned down for dream job after dream job. There were trying times for my wife and her career, as she extremely generously followed me through

four states. But this time was also immensely valuable and enjoyable. In many ways, I think of the knowledge and experience I've gained as a visiting professor as another academic degree. Certainly, I learned an enormous amount in those six years.

Although a tenure-track position straight out of graduate school at an institution that fits you well is the best possible result of an academic job search, those landing a visiting position have a lot to be thankful for. Here are some reasons why a visiting position can be a good thing.

### **A Much Better Application the Next Time Around**

The difference between an application from a new Ph.D. and a candidate with a few years' experience is dramatic. My own application materials improved greatly over the years I applied, enabling me to be considered for some positions that were previously out of reach. The most valuable addition to my file was a list of recommenders who could praise me as a colleague instead of as a student. After reading hundreds of applications, I know how much more impressive this type of recommendation letter typically is.

### **More Teaching Experience**

As a visiting professor, I taught many more courses, in a much wider variety, than when I was a graduate student. Hiring committees at liberal arts colleges look for demonstrated teaching effectiveness. In my experience reading files, a candidate has a distinct edge if he or she can talk about a teaching strategy that was successful in a course instead of one that he or she hopes to try in the future. A visiting position is an opportunity to implement and test these innovative strategies. Multiple visiting positions give you a chance to test them on different audiences!

In addition to strengthening my application, my teaching experience as a visiting professor was also rewarding and fun. I had the opportunity to work with some fantastic students, many of whom I'm still in touch with. A couple of them will be looking for academic jobs themselves soon!

### **More Research Experience**

There's a wide range of expectations for research at different institutions—and I speak from my own experience applying to schools that weigh research heavily in their decisions but not as heavily as teaching. For these institutions, it's most important that a future colleague have a continuing research program and be able to continue publishing beyond his or her dissertation work. A visiting position is an ideal way of demonstrating this quality. A research statement that includes a discussion of research done, or even begun, since the Ph.D.

carries a lot more weight than one that includes only plans for the future.

### **Opportunities for Mentorship**

At many colleges around the country and the world, a visiting position is like an apprenticeship. Just as a postdoctoral position gives a new Ph.D. an opportunity to develop his or her research program more fully, a visiting position at a college or university that values teaching highly is an excellent opportunity for a new Ph.D. to develop his or her teaching skills and learn from the knowledge and experience of his or her colleagues. I took advantage of this opportunity whenever I could. My favorite technique was to stop at an open doorway and listen for a few minutes to one of my colleagues teaching a class. You'd be surprised how interesting and useful these few minutes can be.

Many schools and math departments have official policies designed to further this mentorship. At St. Olaf I was assigned a faculty mentor from within the department, and we met regularly to talk about how my year was going. At Willamette I had an official faculty mentor from the chemistry department during my first year. I think these policies are an excellent idea, and I'd like to see us develop them even more in the wider academic community. As programs such as Project NExT have shown, there's a lot to learn about teaching and about developing a career in academia, and a supportive network of mentors and peers makes a huge difference. A visiting position (or three) can be a great way to develop such a network. Even if organized mentoring isn't available at your school, there are always helpful colleagues you can find who are willing to offer advice.

Note that there's a big difference between *visiting* positions and *adjunct* positions in this respect. For better or worse, adjunct instructors typically do not receive the same kind of mentorship. I think this distinction needs to be made clear on both sides: an advertised position that includes this more intensive mentorship deserves to be more competitive and more sought after among candidates, and a candidate with such a position on his or her CV should be more highly desired than one who held an adjunct position.

### **Opportunities to See the World**

My three visiting positions and ultimate tenure-track position took me back and forth across the country, from my graduate school in picturesque New England, to the rolling plains of the midwest, the red and brown mountains of the southwest, and finally the rain-nourished forests and vineyards of the northwest. On our way through the country, my wife and I spent time at the Grand Canyon, the lakes of upper Minnesota, Rocky Mountain

National Park, and many more beautiful places around the country. We could have been even more adventurous: A recent check of the employment listings on the AMS website found job postings all over the world, including in China, India, Australia, Wales, and Germany. Spending a year or more in one of these countries in a visiting position would be an amazing opportunity that you might not get again.

### **Opportunities to Obtain Different Perspectives**

One of the most valuable benefits of teaching at more than one school is the opportunity to get an inside look at how different institutions function. There are lots of departmental decisions which seem like no-brainers at one school and are hotly debated at another. Many departments are looking to get a fresh perspective from their new colleagues. Experience at a college or university that does things differently can be truly valuable.

### **Applications**

Applying to hundreds of schools over seven years, I picked up a few tips on the application process. Some of these took many years for me to figure out. I hope that others find them easier lessons to learn than I did!

### **Think About Getting Tenure at the Place You Want to Work**

What are the job requirements for a visiting professor? Often an institution has detailed guidelines, even workshops, explaining the expectations for tenure-track assistant professors seeking tenure. But for a visiting professor looking for a position elsewhere, the guidelines are not so clear. The key is to look for guidelines not from the institution where you work, but from the institution where you're applying. If, for example, you're interested in a position at a school that requires frequent publications for tenure, then try to keep to that standard, even if you're teaching at a school that requires fewer. This has a few advantages. First, your CV will be comparable to those of the professors reading your file. Second, if you do get the position, and a reduced tenure clock for your additional years of experience, you'll be well positioned in your quest for tenure. Finally, if you find that this pace of research really isn't for you, you have the opportunity to rethink where you'd like to work before you make a bad fit and are forced to apply again!

### **Make Connections**

Over the years I've gotten in the habit of meeting as many mathematicians as I can. You never know who might be sitting across the table in the employment center, and indeed my connections helped me a lot in my job search. A friend can't offer

you a job, but he or she can tell you whether the department really needs an applied mathematician or whether you're still in the running. I've also found that knowing a lot of mathematicians has had some very nice and sometimes unexpected consequences. For example, it's great to have so many friends I can call to fill an empty slot in our department colloquium series.

A visiting position comes with the opportunity to get to know members of the math department at your school, as well as nearby schools, through regional conferences or colloquium talks. Such a position often also has travel funds available to make research connections with mathematicians worldwide.

### **Balance Time Between Your Current Job and Your Future Job**

Teaching is hard work, and teaching a full semester load often results in long evenings preparing classes. Like most professors I know, I don't like to reduce this preparation time, since I want to give my students the best possible learning experience. But if you're applying for another position and also spending countless hours working on applications and flying to interviews, it's easy to run out of time and sleep. Too often I found myself inadequately prepared, or inadequately rested, or both, when it came time to impress potential future colleagues. Please learn from my mistakes. Don't give up on your current students, but remember to be dedicated to your own career as well.

### **Don't Lick the Envelopes**

The administrative tasks that go along with applying for jobs can be a big burden, and you should do whatever you can to make them easier. For example, after a few years of a variety of envelope-sticking options, I discovered that I could just put a big piece of tape over the flap of the envelope, and ignore the adhesive completely. This may seem like a small thing, but tasks like licking envelopes can suck away time and energy already in short supply. Sites such as [mathjobs.org](http://mathjobs.org) that offer an electronic application process will significantly reduce this administrative burden in the long run but in the next few years will make it even heavier by providing multiple application methods.

### **Remember That Members of a Hiring Committee Are Not Experts in the Hiring Process**

A hiring committee is mostly a bunch of math professors. They don't hire other professors for a living and have little or no training in this field. For example, those few paragraphs in the job announcement describing the position and their ideal candidate may have been the outcome of hours of thoughtful discussion by the committee, or hours of heated debate, or possibly pulled with



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**Requirements** : A PhD in Mathematics/Applied Mathematics/Statistics with an excellent research record.

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#### **Information and Application**

Further information on the posts and the University is available at <http://www.cityu.edu.hk>, or from the Human Resources Office, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong [Fax : (852) 2788 1154 or (852) 3442 0311/email: [hrojob@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:hrojob@cityu.edu.hk)]. Please send the application with a current curriculum vitae to Human Resources Office. **Applications will be considered until positions are filled.** Please quote the reference of the post in the application and on the envelope. The University reserves the right to consider late applications, and not to fill the positions. Personal data provided by applicants will be used for recruitment and other employment-related purposes.

a few quick modifications from the search a few years before. A mention of the use of technology in the classroom may reflect the consensus of a department committed to the technology ideal, or two adamant department members, or one persuasive dean. Members of the hiring committee may have significantly different opinions about what qualities they want in a new colleague, and those opinions may change significantly during the hiring process. This means, in part, that an impressive candidate can change their minds about what they consider to be important qualities. If you have a particular strength as a candidate and it doesn't seem to match the job description, don't give up hope, and don't radically change your image in your application. It also means that it's useful to have multiple sources of information about an institution before making up your mind. Don't be afraid to ask the same question of many different people. And remember that the folks on the other side of the interview table are human, and they make mistakes.

#### **Don't Take It Personally**

There are many quirky and unusual reasons why one candidate is eventually chosen over another. A linear ordering of all the candidates for a particular position would be impossible, and it's not the way a hiring committee works. As a candidate, it's difficult to believe the countless rejection letters informing you that you're one of a large number of excellent candidates. After serving on a search committee, I know that it's really true. Remember that not getting a position or an interview does not mean that the faculty on that committee don't think highly of you and won't value working with you in the future. This is just as important to remember when you're a member of a hiring committee yourself and a candidate turns down a position at your institution.

#### **Future Directions**

There are reasons you might be discouraged when you're forced to take a visiting position instead of a permanent one, but there are also reasons to celebrate. If you're lucky enough to land a visiting position this year, or a second or a third one, remember that there's light at the end of the tunnel, and make sure you enjoy the journey until you get there.