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Peter McNamara

Credits

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How to Craft a Research Statement for a Position at a Liberal Arts College

Jennifer Schaefer

When seeking positions in academia, a well-crafted research statement is an essential part of your application packet. You will not only use this statement to describe your current work, but you will also utilize it to convince the reader of your work's importance and to pose questions for future consideration. As a graduate student, you probably have a lot of experience speaking about these topics, both with your advisor and with other specialists in your field through seminars, workshops, or conferences. However, if your ambition is to obtain a tenure-track position at a liberal arts college, you will need to craft your research statement for a different audience and with distinct expectations and realities in mind.

Mathematics departments at liberal arts colleges are usually quite small, so the probability is high that no one reading your research statement will share your specific research area. Thus, you will want to explain your work as though you are speaking to a non-specialist. Many suggest starting your research statement by first placing your current

work into the context of the field. How is it connected to other areas of mathematics? What are the big questions scholars in your area are trying to answer? How is your work related to the important questions of the field? Provide basic definitions, examples, or visuals, anything that you think would help a general mathematical audience understand the value of your work.

Your research statement should not only describe your current project(s) but should also demonstrate plans for future work and independence. Liberal arts colleges are often located in rural areas without easy access to large universities with research seminars, graduate students, and postdocs. This, coupled with the reality that your departmental colleagues will more than likely not share your research area, means the search committee will be looking for confirmation that you will be able to sustain a research agenda at their college. Use your research statement to show the committee that you have ideas for future projects and have begun to develop a network of collaborators outside your advisor and your intended institution.

Doing research with undergraduate students is especially valued at liberal arts colleges and at some institutions it will be a requirement of the job. So, the search committee will be looking for new colleagues that are genuinely interested in working with undergraduate students. If you have had the opportunity to advise undergraduate research projects, please describe these experiences. What did your students do? What was your role? What did you learn about advising such projects that you could implement in the future? Regardless of whether you have had experience advising undergraduate research, you will want to explain how your research can be broken down into accessible projects for undergraduates with limited mathematics backgrounds. If you have ideas for projects ready to go, by all means provide a list!

Finally, keep your research statement brief. Most recommend a length of three to five pages. Top liberal arts colleges receive hundreds of applications (500+) for a tenure-track position. To ensure your research statement gets the attention it deserves, be descriptive, present your passion for your work, but be concise.



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Photo of Jennifer Schaefer is courtesy of Dickinson College.

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