

Pedagogue Bonus: Job Market Advice (w/Les Hutchinson)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, we're joined by Les Hutchinson, first-generation scholar, Chicana and single mother. She is an assistant professor of English at Boise State University. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in the technical communication program that focus on social media, content management and cultural accessibility. Her research brings together cultural and digital rhetorics, particularly at the intersection of intellectual property and online safety. In this short episode we're going to talk about the job market, our experiences on the market, and potential strategies or tips for those going on the market. When I was on the job market, I was ABD, writing my dissertation. I was teaching two classes and I was adjuncting at another university, so I was teaching four classes between two schools. My wife and I had a baby at the end of September, so right in the middle of writing and submitting applications. I applied to around 80 jobs, mostly tenure track positions at all institutional levels, and I applied everywhere. Far West coast, East, North, South.

I remember a lot of fear, anxiety, uncertainty. Would anybody want me? Are my materials good enough? Are my letters of rec strong? What about my writing sample? Where would we end up?

A few weeks ago I emailed my wonderful colleagues and asked them to write something down for our graduate students about the job market. I'm fortunate enough to be the job placement coordinator so I'm always thinking and having conversations with students about academic and alt-ac positions, trying to better understand their interest and goals. My colleagues came up with a list of twelve tips. This list isn't ordered in any way, but here they are:

1. Have peers and mentors read your documents. Ask for feedback from a lot of people because these genres are strange and specific.
2. Think about how you want to talk about yourself as a specialist and generalist.
3. Get something published if you're on the academic job market.
4. Know your dissertation and area of study, but also know another area or have other interests. Show your range of curiosity.
5. Take care of yourself. Take breaks, ask for help.
6. You know more than you think you know and you're more impressive than you realize.
7. Research the institutions and programs and tailor each document to what makes your work and interests fit.
8. Don't be afraid to imagine yourself in different roles when asked to project future goals.
9. Apply for jobs you fit 50% or more of the criteria for.
10. Diversify your grad program experience if possible, take on an administrative role.
11. Write for an audience not in your specialization. Define and situate terms and approaches.

12. Interviewing is storytelling. Be prepared to give detailed examples that illustrate your investment in research, teaching and service, and don't underestimate the importance of mock interviews. You'll be more prepared and excited if you practice first.

So those are the tips my colleague shared.

SW: Les, I'm really curious about your experience on the job market. Can you talk about your experiences and then share advice that you would give graduate students on the market?

LH: These are big. I was terrified right before I was going on the job market because I knew how big it was. This was the end of my career, well, my graduate student career and the beginning of my career career, and I knew so much was going to get decided in this next year. Right? You're going into that year going, "I'm going to find out where I'm going to be, what my life is going to look like," but you have to spend a whole year not knowing that. So I had feelings about that, but I was also nervous because I'm a single parent so I was scared. Here I am, I have a teenager I need to find a life for, and a toddler. Both of them have different needs. Their schooling and their life and their future is important as mine, so I was really scared.

I was also scared of how am I going to juggle all this as a single parent. Who is going to take care of my kids when I go on campus visits? These were things I had to think about before I even started writing my cover letter. I reached out to a couple other single parents I know who have been on the market and asked their advice. I wanted to learn how they navigated and managed that. So I started the job market year like everyone else. We composed our documents. I'm very lucky in that at MSU we have an extraordinarily detailed and supportive graduate experience for the job market. We have a job market class that everyone who's going on the market that year has to attend. It's weekly – where we workshop our documents and all of the senior scholars in the department come and give us feedback on those things and they prepare us at every stage of the job market.

We have mock phone interviews, mock Skype interviews, mock campus visits, all of those things throughout the first semester and they're really teaching us how to respond at every level to any inquiries about our materials. So in that way I was very well prepared. It is also very intense on the flip side of that though, because MSU has very high expectations that we get great jobs. So they're, "We're giving you this infrastructure and support so you better do the best you can do." So there is a little bit of that pressure. They won't admit that but there is. So it's a lot. This is kind of what I tell other people. It doesn't matter what institution you're at, get the support you can. One thing Malea Powell told me at the very early beginning of the job market was, "Make sure you have a self-care plan well enabled before the market year." So there are things grad students should be doing in their first year. Not to put more pressure on grad students, but honestly there's first things you should be doing right at the beginning to prepare yourself for the market, which is thinking very clearly about what kind of job you want. Designing your PhD program around that. And so if you know there's a possibility of becoming alt-ac, do that. You know, create opportunities, find opportunities where that's supported. Start thinking about your CV in that way. Or if you know you want to do an R1, then you really need to start getting on some research teams.

If you're more teaching focused, you know, how can you build in those teaching opportunities and be looking for those? I think the best way to learn about that is really talking with folks at your institution and at other institutions. That's huge. Really, really. The one thing that helped me was I have a huge community of friends and colleagues all over the place and at all stages of our careers, so there are some tenured and full professors I consider my friends and then there are some master's students I consider my friends, so at every stage we're helping each other and giving each other that support. That's the best way you're going to get answers to the unique challenges that you're going to have on the market, and really try to understand what you want.

Yeah, there were some things, even... I prepared really well, but even on the market I went, "Oh, I don't want this kind of job. Well, I'm applying anyway, but I don't want to do this." Like, I don't want to do an R1. I'm trained for that, but that's not the life I wanted. I wanted more of a life, so the job I ended up getting is perfect because research is valued, but I also... My faculty mentor said my one task this year is to start saying "no" to things so that I have more family time. What? Family time? I get to have that now. And I went, "Yes, I know I'm in the right place," because that is something that I get to have now. And so yeah, really figuring out what kind of life do you want and what kind of job is going to help you get there. It doesn't matter what job it is, as long as you're happy. This is your life. It's too short. We're too stressed, you're working too hard. Make sure you have the ability to be happy and feel satisfied, and that's what's important at the end of the day because this work isn't going to be worth it if you don't feel those things.