

HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATE THE SOCIAL WORK ACADEMIC JOB MARKET: SOME ADVICE FROM UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK DEANS AND FACULTY

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- Do your homework on the institutions in which you are interested. Look at curriculum and courses; peruse some foundational documents (for example, mission/vision statements, strategic plan summaries, or diversity/equity plans); and become familiar with faculty research interests/strengths.

This homework allows you to hone in on the specific strengths of the institution, to explore the organic “fit” between your own commitments and interests and those of the institution—and to answer some key questions: What courses can you teach? Where can you best contribute to the curriculum? Where are great opportunities for scholarly collaboration? And how will joining this particular institution strengthen your capacity to have the kind of impact you want your work and career to have?

Having a good sense of “fit” will help you to compose a compelling cover letter and other documents, and thoughtfully respond to questions in your interviews.

Keep in mind the hiring process is mostly about finding great “fit”: the better the fit, the happier and more productive you will be.

- Make sure the documents you share with search committees are well-crafted and vetted (for example, your cover letters, CV, statements on research, teaching, diversity). Ask your mentors to review your documents, and ask them for good examples of the kinds of materials you will be asked to produce. [Don’t reinvent any wheels!]
- Line up solid letters of reference—and if your references want it, offer to provide input so that there will be a planned complementarity across your reference letters.
- Do one or more virtual interview practice sessions. Ask for sample interview questions from your mentors, doctoral program, your School’s faculty recruitment committee if they are active, or recent grads who have secured faculty positions. Ask for unvarnished feedback from your mentors.
 - Prepare in advance for that final interview question, “Do you have any other questions for us?”ⁱ Avoid: (1) saying, “no, I don’t have any questions” or (2) posing questions

about salary, benefits, and course load. These are better saved for later in the process, when your dream school has expressed interest in hiring you and you are beginning negotiations with the dean/director.

Instead, use the “final” interview question to communicate something of your values and priorities—what you most care about, and how your interests align with that of the department, school or college.

Some examples from recent, successful faculty candidates at UW SSW:

“I saw from your website that the School is developing a long-term commitment to anti-racism work that you hope will transform its teaching, research and service missions. That’s so exciting! What are the best ways for a new faculty member to participate?”

“I am very interested in University of Washington’s Population Health Initiative—can you share with me some of the ways social work faculty and students have been involved?”

- Rehearse your job talk! This is particularly important now that most of these talks will be given via zoom or other virtual mechanisms. We think it’s a good idea to record a practice run to review. You want to check that your zoom set up is good, and that you are coming across the way you want to (for example, your energy level, pacing, and so forth).
- DO feel free to speak to the extraordinary moment in which we live, when the COVID 19 pandemic places the egregious health inequities caused by systemic racism into ever-sharper relief. DO share with us your reflections, your scholarship and lived experience, and your ideas about how your future scholarly work speaks to the challenges we currently face. We are listening, and we’re excited to hear you.

In your written and verbal communications, do emphasize the skills and experiences you have around remote and hybrid teaching methods, and express your willingness to be flexible and responsive to changes in teaching/learning modalities (remote, in person, and hybrid) necessitated by changing public health conditions.

- Make ample time for self-care, social support, sharing corny jokes and laughter, and balancing the demands of home and work life, particularly in the time of the pandemic.

KEEP IN MIND:

- While the academic job market has experienced turmoil and constriction this year—it won’t always be so.
- Consider back up alternatives, such as post doctoral positions or local research positions for a year or two. And be prepared to make the most of these transitional positions—continue

to network, learn more about remote and hybrid teaching methodologies, and advance your scholarly interests in ways that these positions permit.

- There are reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the future: unlike in other disciplines, the “demand” for social work faculty has for decades outstripped the “supply” of doctorates. While our market is changingⁱⁱ, a relatively high percentage of PhD graduates in social work continue to find success in the finding faculty positions. And there is reason to hope that the new year will bring a renewed national emphasis on repairing the social safety net, attacking systemic racism, enhancing health and behavioral health equity, and effective social programs. This will fortify the need/demand for social workers, social work researchers and policy analysts—as well as those who educate, train, and mentor them.

ⁱFrom Ann Amicucci, “Nailing that Final Interview Question”, Inside Higher Education, Nov. 3, 2020.

ⁱⁱSee Liz Lightfoot & Mingyang Zheng (2020): Research Note—A Snapshot of the Tightening Academic Job Market for Social Work Doctoral Students, Journal of Social Work Education, DOI: 10.1080/10437797.2020.1817826.