

My Imperfect Search

By JASON STONE

FIRST PERSON

Academics share their personal experiences

In hunting for an academic position, you've got to reconcile two things: (1) your dream job (you know, that perfect tenure-track position in the location of your choice) and (2) reality. As I discovered after a whirlwind year on the market, the two are vastly different.

I completed my Ph.D. in social psychology at a university in the Northeast in 2001. After interviewing for a number of postdoctoral positions, I found myself with almost unlimited choices. And let me tell you, it's great to be wanted.

I accepted a two-year postdoctoral research position at a university in the South. It was a great match for my interests, the pay was remarkably better than that for postdocs, and the department offered an option to stay for a third year if I wanted. My girlfriend grudgingly agreed to leave her urban digs to join, and, ultimately, marry me. So, we packed up the U-Haul, said goodbye to our family and friends, and promised each other we would be Southerners for two years, maximum.

Fast forward a year and a half. It's early fall 2002, and I anxiously await every professional publication in my field to scope out the job ads. My wife and I have become robotic about checking job Web sites, and our lives are consumed with nothing but talk about the potential move. I decide to apply for three positions at good-size universities in the East and Northeast, hoping to head back toward the cities we call home. Surely one of those departments would want to scoop me up as their new assistant professor, right?

Then I started to get the letters. "Thank you for your application," they would say, failing to provide any real details about the search. So I waited ... and waited. If one applies in October, and it's late January and one is still waiting to hear, is that a bad thing?

My wife and I somehow managed to convince ourselves that the search committees at these universities must be completely overwhelmed with the winter holidays. I mean, those after-Christmas sales put a dent in everyone's schedule, right? And the mail is just so slow these days. Surely they just hadn't gotten to my application yet.

By the end of January, I was going nuts. My wife was busy contacting real-estate agents

in anticipation of our move, and I realized that I had to find out what was going on before I was the proud owner of a three-bedroom colonial in a city where I didn't have a job.

Informally, I began to e-mail the search committees and ask for an update. Well, my "updates" were a little more like "downdates." I was ranked number four at one department, but it was only interviewing the top three. The two other departments gave me lukewarm answers that didn't sound promising.

So, I sheepishly told my wife that maybe we shouldn't be packing up the dishes just yet. The first mistake I made here is that I should have conducted a broader search. Applying to only three universities was probably in the neighborhood of seven too few. However, there weren't a ton of positions out there, and I was pretty stubborn about location. Texas? Nope. Alabama? It just wasn't for us.

And here is a question: Why are so many *great* universities located in the middle of *nowhere*?

With my options dwindling, I started to look half-heartedly at non-tenure-track positions as a faculty researcher. I thought that if one opened up in a desirable city, it might be worth looking into, and, in fact, one did open up at a small, Ivy League school in my wife's hometown.

Professionally, it was all of the things I didn't want -- soft money, zero teaching opportunities, no possibility of tenure. But we would be back with family and friends. I decided that I wasn't going down without a fight, and so I eliminated the research-faculty idea from my mind. I then applied for two more tenure-track positions, neither of them in the Northeast, but both in small cities that were more happening than where we were.

I wish I could tell you that the phone rang off the hook and I got a great offer from one of those departments. Instead, I got thrown a curveball that went like this: My adviser at my postdoc institution told me that a tenure-track position was opening in our department. He told me that many of the faculty members were hoping that I would apply, and that I would be a very strong candidate.

I gave him my answer immediately: No thanks. I very much appreciated him looking out for me, but I was still sure that we were moving to a bigger city. Shortly afterward, I received e-mail messages from those other two departments indicating some interest, but nothing firm.

I got to thinking. I knew what I wanted, but it simply did not seem to be out there, or, if it was, I might not be competitive enough to get it. Maybe my perfect job would not appear until 2008 or 2017, but waiting was not an option. I could stay in my postdoc another year and try the market again the following year, but would it be any better? Perhaps it would be worse.

Maybe I should not have been so quick to turn down the position at my postdoctoral institution. After a few marathon discussions with my wife, I decided to put in an application for it. I had some explaining to do, since I had initially rejected the idea (and yes, by that point, all of the faculty members thought that I had no intention of staying).

Even so, I was offered an interview, during which I explained my mixed feelings about whether my wife and I could make a home there. It was never a question of the quality of the department. In fact, it had been an excellent match since day one.

In the end, the department made me an offer, and I accepted. My wife and I have gradually started reprogramming our brains to think of this college town in a new way -- as our home.

And what about those last two departments that I applied to? Well, I am still waiting to hear from one of them. The other one did contact me, and actually offered an interview, but it was too little, too late.

So what have I learned from all of this, and what's my advice for others in a similar position? In case you haven't noticed, it's a jungle out there. So keep these things in mind:

- Thick skin: You've got to have it, because, statistically speaking, rejection is much more likely than success.
- Flexibility: You'll need this, too. Clearly, things don't always go the way you would like, so be prepared for anything.
- Bridges: Avoid burning them. Something you're not crazy about today could turn into a great opportunity tomorrow.
- Location: How important is this to you? Consider whether the perfect job in an imperfect location is better than the reverse. For me, in the end, it was.
- Planning ahead: Many postdocs get hired for regular faculty positions, so you may want to consider this when making choices about a postdoctoral position.

What can you do to make this process more bearable? Rely on your friends, family, and colleagues for advice and support, and thank them in every way that you can when it's all over. And someday, years from now, when you get to be the big, bad head of the search committee, try to remember the postdocs and graduate students sitting at home, waiting for that phone to ring.

Jason Stone is the pseudonym of a newly hired assistant professor at a university in the South.