The Academic Job Search

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About Me

- Graduated from my PhD at Stanford University in June 2019

  - Worked on storage system design & resource management for cloud computing

- Currently a Research Scientist at Google Brain in Mountain View

  - Working at the intersection of computer systems and machine learning

- Assistant Professor in Computer Science at ETH Zurich, starting Aug. 2020

This Talk: Advice for the Academic Job Search

1. Before you apply
2. Applying
3. Interviewing
4. Getting the offer(s)

Preparing for Academia during your PhD

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- Get some teaching and mentorship experience
  - See how much you enjoy teaching/mentorship and build experience to discuss in your application

Deciding Where to Apply

- Only apply to schools you think you would accept an offer from
  - Ask yourself: "if this was my only academic offer, would I accept?"
  - Do not waste your time or other people's time.

- Know which criteria are important to you. Some to consider:
  - Research vs. teaching focus of the institution or position
  - Caliber of students the school attracts (often related to the school's ranking)
  - Faculty in the department you can collaborate with
  - Funding support and expectations
  - Opportunities for collaboration with industry
  - Geographic location
  - Personal factors

Applying for an Academic Job

- Materials to submit for an Assistant Prof. application at a research institution:
  - **Research statement**: 3-5 pages describing past and future work
  - **Reference letters**: 3-5 letters from faculty members and/or industry researchers
  - **Teaching statement**: 1-2 pages describing your teaching/mentoring experience & what you want to and are qualified to teach
  - **Curriculum Vitae**: include your degrees, awards, papers, talks, press, teaching, etc.
  - **Cover letter**: 1-1.5 page summary of your application and why you are a good fit

Advice for Putting Together Your Application

- Explain your work in simple terms. Emphasize the impact of your work.
  - Your application will be read by faculty from the whole department, not just experts in your field. Ask friends from other fields for feedback on your research statement.

- Spend time thinking about your future work directions.

- Read lots of example statements.
  - Sources can be your department, friends, mentors, online search, etc.

- Reach out to reference letter writers ~2 months before your earliest application deadline. Meet with them in person to discuss your application material.

Interviewing

- Interview format:
  - Usually 2 full days
  - 1hr public talk ("job talk") + Q&A about your work and future research plans
  - 1:1 meetings with faculty in the department (~30-45min each)
  - Meeting with Dean and/or Department Head
  - Meeting with graduate students
  - Breakfast, lunch, dinner

Advice for Academic Interviews

- The job talk is critical:
  - Emphasize the big-picture significance and impact of your work
  - T-shape structure: lots of breadth, but still demonstrate strong technical depth
  - Include ~7-10 min of future work discussion to get people excited about what you will do next
  - Watch multiple job talks as examples. My talk is online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uISJVvG5Zo&t=50s

- Ask for your interview schedule ahead of time
  - Look up the people you will meet with, make some notes about what to tell and ask them

- Prepare LOTS of questions to ask them!

- In 1:1s, highlight what makes you a good candidate, even if not asked this directly

- Go to the bathroom often between meetings, it is the only break you get!

- Be enthusiastic, genuine, curious. Enjoy the opportunity to chat with professors.

Common Interview Questions

- Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?
- What does success look like to you?
- Tell me about your future research directions.
- How large of a group do you want to have?
- What is your advising style?
- Why this school?
- What do you want to teach?
- Why do you want to be a professor? Why not go into industry?
- What do you consider your greatest (research) accomplishment?

Getting the Offer

- Go for a second visit
  - Great opportunity to ask more questions, meet with more faculty, explore the surrounding area, get a sense of housing options, etc.
  - Your partner/family is often invited to join too
- Negotiate
  - Everything is negotiable (salary, startup package, start date, partner's job opportunities, etc.)
  - Think about what will help you be most successful. It is also in the university's interest to help you be as successful as possible. Win-win.
- Timing
  - Do not get pressured into making a decision on short notice before you are ready.
  - It's ok to ask for an extension if you need it.

Making a Decision

- Hopefully, if all goes well, this will be the most difficult part :)

- Reflect about the criteria that are important to you and analyze how closely each option aligns with these criteria.

Final Thoughts

- There is a lot of randomness in the hiring process. Focus your attention on the things that you can control, rather than those outside of your control.

- Enjoy the process of telling the story of your research work and meeting with many brilliant professors with whom you may collaborate one day!

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