

Notes on the Academic Job Market and Hiring Strategies¹

By Henry Walker

Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA 50112

walker@cs.grinnell.edu

Abstract

Today's tight job market challenges colleges and universities in hiring. This article reviews the current job market and suggests strategies for a successful hiring effort.

Introduction

With today's tight job market, many colleges and universities experience difficulty in filling CS faculty positions. Often, as an external reviewer or colleague, I am asked for advice on hiring. While I claim no special insights or knowledge on this subject (or most others), I have had occasion to discuss this situation with many people in recent years. Upon encouragement of friends, I offer these organized notes in case my thoughts and experiences might be of help to others.

The Academic Job Market

While anecdotal information suggests the academic job market in CS is tight, actual statistics indicate it is worse.

Supply: Traditionally, universities and colleges recruit newly graduated Ph.D.s as faculty. Table 1 shows this supply as estimated from the 1999 – 2000 Taulbee Survey [1], extrapolated to a 100% response rate with assigning “unknown” folk proportionally to those that whose first job is known. More details may be found in [2].

Of course, other Ph.D.s also may enter the applicant pool. Post-docs one year may take a regular teaching position a couple years later—although they also may continue in research or move to industry. The termination and outlook of dot-com companies may yield applicants, but such personnel may include relatively few Ph.D.'s and some of these may transfer to another company. Also, one might speculate that a disproportionate number of those originally listed as “unknown” eventually select academic jobs – but they might not.

Table 1: Taulbee Survey – Extrapolations to 100% [2]

Academic Positions	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000
Ph.D.-Granting Schools (Total)	300	380	425	405
Tenure Track	140	195	240	235
Research	60	80	70	75
Post Docs	70	75	70	60
Instructors	30	30	45	45
Other (Masters' and Bachelors') Schools	60	45	35	45
Industry/Self Employed	530	570	565	540
Government	35	40	20	20
Abroad	55	55	35	40
Unknown	20	20	20	20
Totals				
Known	980	1080	1080	1060
Overall	1000	1100	1100	1080

¹ Based on a talk given on August 11, 2001 to the Liberal Arts Computer Science Consortium (LACS) at Williams College. The author thanks Allen Tucker (Bowdoin College) for suggesting the publication of these notes, and to Allen, Kim Bruce (Williams College), Charles Keleman (Swarthmore College), Andrea Lawrence (Spelman College), and other members of LACS for their suggestions and comments through the session.

Demand; Many colleges and universities advertise positions in the *Communications of the ACM* (CACM), and traditionally most tenure-track positions appear between September and January. While many ads identify specific positions, a growing number mention only “multiple positions”. Counting these “multiple positions” as 2 (probably a very conservative estimate) yields [3]:

Tenure track positions for 2001-2002:	704
Total positions for 2001-2002:	754

These numbers represent only advertised positions in North America. (Relatively few schools outside North America advertise in the CACM) Since some colleges do not advertise in the CACM, and since some positions develop after January, these estimates are systematically low.

Basic Conclusions (for North America)

Overall, about 450 new Ph.Ds are available for over 750 academic positions. For the 1300+ colleges and universities offering only a Master’s or Bachelor’s degree, the supply of new Ph.Ds is about 45. [3]

While one may quibble about these specific counts and extrapolations, demand clearly outstrips supply by a considerable margin.

Hiring Strategies

The job market data provide a vital framework for the planning of job searches. *To reiterate for non-Ph.D. granting schools, only about 45 new Ph.Ds from North America are available for 1300+ schools.* Strategies, therefore, must consider how to attract these few people, or how to expand the pool to other categories of individuals. Here are some practical ideas that may help in developing those strategies.

- Allow flexibility to the extent possible; with a limited applicant pool, do not limit the field unnecessarily.
 - Advertise specialties only to the extent essential to the program.
 - Consider the degree requirements essential for the school and position – but ask for no more; advertise to maximize the number of applicants; filter to refine the pool once candidates apply.
 - Is a Ph.D. essential for tenure at the institution? If so, ethical consideration

requires this requirement to be stated; if not, the pool can be broader.

- Is a Ph.D. in CS essential to the program? A Ph.D. in a related discipline (e.g. psychology for HCI) may be adequate -- or maybe not.
- Would an MS in CS plus a PhD in physics, psychology,...be possible?
- Could industry experience be counted instead of a PhD?
- Under what circumstances would a PhD candidate lacking the thesis (an ABD) be acceptable?
- When advertising and during interviews, keep teaching assignments, elective offerings, etc. as open as possible. Candidates have different strengths and interests; tailoring a position to accommodate interests may make it more attractive.
- Consider applications on a rolling basis. State “Review of applications will begin on ... and continue until the position is filled.”
- Advertise for multiple academic ranks if possible (e.g. Assistant/Associate Professor).
- Start early, but do not let up.
 - A September start is desirable when needs are known in advance.
 - Continue to place ads to meet deadlines, even if an offer has been made (but not accepted). You can tell an applicant that ads will appear as a safeguard for you, even though you hope she/he will accept your offer. Failure to advertise may leave you without options if the offer is declined.
- Solicit leads
 - Contact alumni, friends, and contacts
 - When reviewing lists of PhD candidates (e.g. minority listings), contact advisors to determine if the listed person is on track to finish the degree, but also ask about any other appropriate leads.
 - Try to capitalize on personal or geographic factors; many (most?) successful searches these days come about from non-CS issues, at least in part.
 - [In contrast, for several recent searches, Grinnell has sent general letters to all Ph.D. granting departments in North America. This effort has yielded few, if any, applicants.]

- Actively work with candidates to communicate your needs and learn their interests.
 - After receiving an initial inquiry, follow up. In a relaxed job market, schools may not contact candidates until applications are complete. In the current market, however, schools may need to be more aggressive.
 - Contact candidates if statements, resumes, etc. are missing.
 - E-mail missing references (after contacting candidates). In recent experiences, letters often arrived electronically within 24 hours after e-mails were sent to recommenders.
 - Use the telephone interview to enhance communications.
 - Report your hiring schedule to candidates, and check if it is consistent with their plans.
 - Ask what local issues are a priority for the candidate (e.g. housing, schools, facilities). Acceptances of offers often rely on such factors, so collecting and communicating such information can be extremely helpful.
 - Use an on-campus interview to enhance communications and for public relations.
 - Listen carefully for hints regarding spouse's work/interests and follow up. In the United States, one cannot legally or ethically ask a candidate about family circumstances but one can react if information is offered. Even if interests emerge during a candidate's visit, sometimes a meeting for information can be arranged at the last minute.
 - If the campus has weekend activities, encourage/allow a candidate to stay over a weekend to present a full view of the school. Thus, a candidate may arrive on Friday or Saturday for formal interviews on Monday and Tuesday.
 - If you are proud of your students, ask them to give campus tours. Also, arrange meetings with students and candidates (e.g. at lunch).
- Talk to the Dean early and often regarding salary, office space, facilities, start-up funds, etc.
 - Be realistic about salary. With the small number of new Ph.D.'s entering the field, undergraduate colleges often compete Ph.D.-granting schools for applicants. Thus, while not directly applicable, the Taulbee Survey [1] for new Ph.D. salaries may provide some guidance for other schools as well.
 - After each candidate interviews with a Dean, check with the candidate for reactions, and tell the Dean of any misinterpretations or specific issues. A Dean may want to clarify statements with candidates or use a different approach with subsequent candidates.
 - Work to make an offer attractive. While matters of salary, workload, labs, offices, etc. probably cannot ensure success in hiring, weak qualities in any area may ensure failure.
 - Hold reasonably tight to response deadlines for offers if other reasonable candidates remain in the pool.
 - During the on-campus interview, review again the likely schedule, and check that it fits with the candidate's plans.
 - On-going extensions of response deadlines may result in lose of other candidates and ultimately failure for the search.

Alternative Sources for Permanent or Temporary Candidates

With rather few candidates in the traditional academic applicant pool, schools may want to expand their hunting grounds.

- Some sources for permanent CS faculty:
 - New CS Ph.D.'s (the traditional source),
 - CS faculty unhappy elsewhere (while I have ethical difficulties with raiding other departments, it seems appropriate to listen if faculty from elsewhere initiate the conversation),
 - Recently-retired CS faculty from elsewhere (perhaps wanting travel, diversity, new pedagogy, change of pace,...),
 - Industry folk wanting a change, and
 - MS folk seeking experience and a path to the PhD.; a school may negotiate with an MS applicant, so the person can teach some while pursuing a Ph.D.

Environmental Issues

While departments and schools always must work within constraints, finding creative solutions often requires advanced planning and communication.

➤ Additional Sources for Temporary CS

Faculty:

- Displaced data.com folk (often lacking the PhD),
- Dissatisfied industry folk wanting to test their possible interest in an academic career,
- CS faculty on sabbatical leave from elsewhere,
- A recent alumnus (particularly to help in labs), and
- Sabbatical programs for high school teachers in the region (e.g. APCS teachers). While learning current ideas, these experienced teachers could help in labs and might teach CS 1/2 sections in the spring. Teaching loads and salaries are likely to be consistent with college resources.

Conclusions

This is a trying job market for academic institutions, and success in hiring may require considerable flexibility and creativity. I hope these notes help in stimulating thinking and fostering fresh ideas.

Bibliography

1. Computing Research Association, 1999-2000 Taulbee Survey <http://www.cra.org>, March 2001.
2. Walker, Henry M., Extrapolations from the Taulbee Survey <http://www.cs.grinnell.edu/~walker/dept/taulbee-97-00.html>
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