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## **Searching and Moving: From Graduate Student to Faculty Member**

Alan Kalish

The forum in this issue of *Workplace* will focus on the job search process and the moves which most often follow on "success" in this hunt. The forum begins as an article based on recent research into the experiences of new faculty in English. This article has been structured in several threads, or sections, each of which includes several questions hyperlinked to responses from [who?]. Readers are invited to add their own responses and to raise additional questions as well by email to [Alan Kalish](mailto:Alan.Kalish).

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### **Thread One: Introduction--"Learning to Profess"**

In many ways, the profession of higher education functions as a culture with an established system for socializing new members. In a recent study of new faculty in English studies, I collected accounts from twelve new professors of their enculturation: their experiences of graduate school, in the job search, and as initial year faculty. These accounts, collected in surveys and interviews through their first year as tenure-track faculty, have allowed me to analyze how the discipline performs professional socialization of its new members. According to these informants, their graduate socialization was based on the outdated assumption that their careers would reproduce those of their professors, with tenure-track positions at research universities or elite colleges as the only imaginable goal. Although few PhDs will attain such positions, the system proceeds as if most will. The structures of socialization in English tend toward inertia, continuing as they have always done. Partly because the socializing aspect of graduate study is infrequently discussed, English faculty tend to socialize their students to seek the same outcomes that they have achieved, and students internalize these criteria of success.

Graduate study prepared my respondents for their immediate teaching needs as TAs, but did not do as well for the broader scope of teaching activities they would find themselves performing as faculty; the graduate programs seemed to assume that they would generalize without being told how. Generalizing from graduate experiences to faculty duties does not occur transparently. Anticipatory socialization cannot address all the tasks that new faculty will be asked to perform, but the current system, which often does not even acknowledge that there are differences, seems to assume that the academic capital that graduate students have or will accrue through their scholarship and the reputation of their graduate institution will unproblematically translate into professional success and satisfaction--which is most often defined in terms of receiving and keeping a tenure-track position that matches their skills and desires. Although some programs offer more explicit assistance than those described by my respondents, this aid is often part of what Teresa Sullivan (1991) calls the informal curriculum, and consequently many graduate students do not take advantage of this assistance as much as they should. Those of my informants who had developed better expectations of how their professional work lives would differ from their graduate activities, either

as part of their graduate school experience or in some intermediate position, made the transitions of their first year on the job more smoothly and successfully.

Graduate socialization remains silent on many professional issues, leaving them to be learned "on the job." But hiring departments often act as if the new PhDs they hire are "finished goods," coming with all they need to be successful professors. The stamp of approval of a "brand name" program may lead some lower prestige departments to assume that any product of that program is "finished." However, anticipatory socialization can never anticipate everything; new faculty need assistance to fit into their new institution, and as long as this is masked by the cachet of a brand name graduate school, new faculty will be left to accomplish important socialization on their own rather than by design.

### **Thread Two: Graduate School Creates Specific Expectations**

The first issue which my informants' experiences allow me to interrogate is the actual transition between graduate school and a faculty position: the job search. Marshall Gregory recounts one image of the transition in "From PhD Program to BA College." Gregory begins with an excerpt from John Updike's "A Sense of Shelter" that clearly presents an academic career as a seamless, unchanging "tunnel" that protects the scholar from disturbance. A high school student of the 1950s imagines his future success as an academic:

The study hall was a huge low room in the basement...The perforated acoustic tiling above his head seemed the lining of a long tube that would go all the way: high school merging into college, college into graduate school, graduate school into teaching at a college--section man, assistant, associate, full professor ...a man brilliant in his forties, wise in his fifties, renowned in his sixties, revered in his seventies, and then retired, sitting in a study lined with acoustical books until the time for the last transition from silence to silence, and he would die, like Tennyson, with a copy of *Cymbeline* beside him on the moon-drenched bed. (68)

Gregory tells us that this myth describes an attitude that was "fostered, not just allowed--among PhD candidates in [his cohort] in the 1960s at University of Chicago" (20). This myth, he claims, led generations of graduate students to expect that their careers would be very much like those of their graduate faculty advisors, an "effortless translation" from graduate library carrel to research university position. [1] Stanley Aronowitz, in a 1997 *SocialText* article, describes this culturally authorized goal of graduate education as "The Last Good Job in America." Yet, as Aronowitz says, such jobs are scarce and getting scarcer. Even for Aronowitz' and Gregory's generation, the expectation of such a career was not likely to work out. Even so, Gregory is right to say that "While no PhD programs today foster explicitly the expectation that a teaching life will be just like graduate school, it is possible that they sometimes implicitly teach this expectation...by the failure to hold up working in baccalaureate institutions as a desirable [or even a possible] alternative to..." the research university (21).

#### **Question One: [What other myths/expectations are promoted by graduate education?](#)**

That is to say, although this mythology may no longer be encouraged, and the appeal of Updike's depiction of the career is clearly limited by its use of blatantly gendered and generational stereotypes, the underlying attitude still influences the job searches and career satisfaction of many new PhDs, setting limits to the kind of positions some will find acceptable and creating an expectation of a seamless career. When this idea of a "seamless" career exists in juxtaposition with the metaphor of graduate education as an apprenticeship [2] , with all its implications of a process leading to guild membership and thus employment, graduate students are induced to hold unrealistic beliefs about the shape their careers will take. Even though most of my informants are quite aware of the paucity of academic positions available,

they simultaneously hold expectations and desires for careers in specific types of relatively elite institutions which would enable them to do research at a high level and to teach students with a strong level of motivation and preparation.

**Questions Two: Was this the expectation supported by the culture of your graduate program? How strong was it for you?**

In *Token Professionals and Master Critics* (1994), James Sosnoski describes these desires in terms of a "professorial template" of the "ideal professor of literature," by which, he claims, the lives and work of all English faculty are evaluated, by themselves or their peers (8). However, Sosnoski suggests that most English faculty are "token professionals," "instructors who are research professors in name only," rather than the "master critics" whose careers embody that template (xv; 4-6). The stories my respondents tell of their job searches and moves show that their lived experience is not so seamless and does not match the template they imagine; leaving graduate school, even in these cases where they all found jobs, creates a very large disjuncture in their lives.

Peter provides us with a clear example of lack of seamlessness, of an adjustment that required him to rethink his expectations. He is one of the three informants who mentioned the process of adjustment in response to my general question about how their first term had gone. Peter said that he found it "exhausting. Adjusting to a new institution, a new climate, a new 'culture,' and to full-time teaching made demands on my energy and my time far beyond what I had expected" (1) [3] He imagined smoothly moving into a position closely matching the template, which foregrounds scholarship, not initially realizing what his position would actually demand. Later in that response, he explained that, while he was adapting well to the professional demands of his new position, he was less positive about the changes in his personal life: "It [the first term in his new job] was the beginning of a difficult transition, which I do not think is over. I watched my partner look for work and not find it until late in December. I experienced some intense homesickness for the culture and life I left behind in [the location of his graduate school] and the northeast." And this is not the first break in his "seamless" career; before he felt displaced, he had first to seek out a job that would lead to that displacement. Before new PhDs come to experience the issues raised by moving, they must first successfully negotiate the job search. Peter's lack of realistic expectations for both how the job search process works and what he would face once he took a position contributed to the difficulties he describes. But Peter is not unique, and this transition is likely to be awkward for everyone who does not have realistic expectations of the new situation.

**Question Three: Will you share other accounts of disjuncture and mistaken expectation which effected someone's job search or adjustment to their new institution?**

Much of what is currently being written about the future of English studies focuses on the job search and the "collapse" of the academic job market. Journals like *ADE*, *Academe*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* regularly publish pieces bemoaning the lack of jobs for new PhDs or the lack of preparation of those PhDs for the jobs that exist, and offering advice on how to overcome these problems, either at the individual level of job search assistance or at the structural level of reforming graduate studies. Regardless of the value or practicability of these suggestions, the prevalence of these pieces shows how widespread the idea is of "the impossibility of finding an academic job." Of course, this idea is well founded in fact: even the MLA's numbers, which rely on self-reporting, show that fewer than half (47% in the 1993-1994 survey) of new PhDs get tenure-track positions (Huber, "The MLA's 1993-94 Survey of PhD Placement," 46). The fear that this causes is well documented elsewhere. [4] My respondents were the winners; they were all able to find tenure-track positions in their fields. But their stories show that this was not a clear, easy, "seamless" process.

**Thread Three: "We could hire God..."**

Tierney and Rhoads, in *Faculty Socialization as a Cultural Process: A Mirror of Institutional Commitment*, remind us that a rational recruitment process would aim "to match the departmental/organizational needs and interests with the talents, skills, and interests of the prospective faculty member" (34). But of course, the recruitment process is often far from rational. The "match" between institution and candidate is sometimes improved or distorted not only by the expectations Gregory and Sosnoski describe or by the searcher's fears and expectations, but also by the influence on these processes of the capital that candidates have acquired by attending certain graduate schools and working with certain advisors. This leads to what one of my respondents has referred to as the "we could hire God this year" syndrome. Mary tells how, after what she felt was a very good MLA interview with her present institution--a medium-sized, urban, public university in a central state--she was not invited for a campus interview until March. She describes the explanation she was given for the delay: "They told me that this year they could hire 'God' and had proceeded to offer the job to an Ivy League candidate who took a while to turn them down" (7). The initial candidate would probably not have been as good a "match" as Mary for the undergraduate teaching mission of *Central State U*, but the faculty seems to have been seduced by the public markers of academic capital instead of the personal qualities and experiences that might make a new faculty member a better colleague; Mary's mocking description of the perfect candidate, "someone from Stanford with ten books," is likely an exaggeration, but by how much? Academic pedigree, the "Ivy League" or "Stanford," she mentions, surely plays an important role in this process. So does the *curriculum vita* she implies; ten books is very unlikely for any applicant, let alone a new PhD, but several articles or a book contract for the dissertation might not be. Mary's tone in describing this hints at the resentment this situation is likely to cause; her ironic exaggeration is a way to displace those bad feelings and allow her to accept being the third or fourth choice of her new colleagues. Such resentment, if not overcome by better experiences once the new professor joins the department, seems likely to damage collegiality within the department and perhaps lead to a malaise, which might damage an otherwise promising career.

This situation is very much like what Mary Burgan describes as "The Rookie of the Year" problem. Writing in the late 80's, when the job market seemed to be improving for a moment, Burgan noted that some English departments, perhaps allowed to hire for the first time in years, were competing for "that handful of standout new scholars who have been anointed by major departments as Rookies of the Year" (21). Burgan warns that acceptance of the big-time sports metaphor and the practices it leads to are dangerous to the profession. These problems become clearer when we realize that the sought-after Rookies of the Year number only "between fifteen and twenty five for the whole profession"; this out of close to a thousand new PhDs granted each year. While the recruiting efforts may be quite flattering for the fortunate few, it is or may be degrading to all the others. "So alluring are the chosen few," Burgan tells us, "that departments think of them only and neglect all other candidates" (22).

For my informant Mary, clearly not a Rookie of the Year, graduating from a Research II state university, the capital of her rivals was a handicap. Carol describes a similar situation. She says a factor in her hiring was that the job listing was "unattractive." It did not appear until February, and even then was a one-year position at an urban public university in the midwest that required teaching nine courses (three per quarter). Even so, Carol was told that she was their second choice, after a candidate from Berkeley "decided to withdraw his application after a campus visit" (7). For the universities that hired Mary and Carol, their own lack of capital causes a problem: given the current job situation, new PhDs from high-status graduate programs will often apply to many lower-status schools, but at least they are more likely than most not to accept these positions when offered. For these job seekers, the candidates Mary and Carol describe competing against, academic capital enables some choice which lower-status candidates lack.

**Question Four: Have you been aided by the "brand name" of your university and/or had to compete with candidates with stronger "brand name" appeal?**

For Sam, Rita, and Jane, and to a lesser extent Peter and Lola, the greater academic capital they derive from having received their doctorates from universities with high institutional capital [5] and/or having worked with professors of great renown may have been a help. Even so, only Jane and Sam mention this as a possible factor in finding a job. Jane credits "an expensive education which transpired in a serious cultural center.... If I hadn't had ties to the museum world, the art business, the ... public library, and metro-north commuter links to all major east-coast archives, my work [the dissertation and the scholarship which has grown from it] would have been seriously impossible, curtailed, and underinformed" (12). Sam says, "I'm sure that having the support of someone as prominent as [the very highly renowned scholar] who was my advisor helped. There's no doubt in my mind that he was able to at least get my foot in some doors" (12). Peter's academic capital does not come so much from his association with a prestigious graduate program; he worked to earn it. He mentions his "networking" at conferences as a possible factor in his being hired; he organized panels for professional conferences and managed to persuade well-known scholars to participate. His association with these scholars constitutes a measure of academic capital beyond that which accrues simply from having attended a respected graduate school. The confidence that allowed him to approach these scholars and to persuade them to participate in his sessions may have come, in part, from his association with a respected graduate school. It also arises from his long-standing identification with faculty rather than students. Even as an undergraduate, Peter tells me, he felt more a colleague of his professors than of his fellow students (12). So, without a doubt, some job searches are influenced by the candidates' possession of and connection to the kind of academic power Bourdieu describes.

**Question Five [What other sources of academic capital might job seekers call upon?](#)**

It is the desire to acquire this reflected reputation for their departments that leads hiring committees to go after the Rookies of the Year, to seek to "hire God." This strategy, however, can often lead to a mismatch, especially if the new faculty member feels that he or she has "married down." This feeling of displacement on the part of the new faculty member leads to what Clifford Geertz calls the "exile from Eden syndrome" and what James Sosnoski describes as the unlikely story of academics who "wrote their way out of 'bad' jobs" (*Local Knowledge* 159; *Token Professionals* xvii). That such mismatches occur so often, with hiring committees and new PhDs alike paying so much attention to reputation and so little to making connections that might last throughout a career, demonstrates that the culture of English studies is reproducing an ideal of the professorial career that is unrealistic and that this ideal, encoded as reflected prestige, disrupts and complicates both the job search and the career satisfaction of many of our new PhDs.

**Question Six: [Will you share other accounts of misfits between institution and new hire? How might we account for these cases?](#)**

**Thread Four: Advice and Support**

I expect that everyone reading this journal understands that the job search process is not easy. Recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles cite the increase of English positions listed in the October 1998 *MLA Job Information List* as an improvement in the job market (Magner, 9 December, 1998). In fact, the article cites the MLA as reporting a 28-per-cent increase over last year in the number of openings in the field of English, from 694 to 888. While this is indeed an increase from the previous year, it is a sizable reduction from the 1988-1989 peak of 2,020 [6]. And one must remember that the more than 1100 new PhDs graduated last year were not eligible for many of these positions, and others for which they might have been eligible went to more experienced individuals. For my initial survey, I identified 386 tenure-track positions open to new PhDs in the 1995-1996 *Job Information Lists*; while I received responses from 61 new assistant professors, 29 departments told me that they had either hired someone with more experience or had not hired at all. And there were 987 English PhDs awarded that year. Clearly, for reasons discussed at length in this and other journals, there is a major difference in the numbers of

graduate students and the number of PhD which our profession can or will employ. Even if we had a perfectly rational job placement system, the economics and structure of higher education today makes it impossible for all new PhDs in English to find full-time positions in higher education.

**Question Seven:** What can be done about this problem without denying access to graduate education to qualified and interested students or perpetuating a set of unrealistic expectations of the field?

In that they all did receive tenure-track positions, my respondents can be seen as the "winners," but even for them the process was a struggle. Perhaps Peter struggled with this process the most. While five of the respondents were on the market for more than one year, Peter search for a job for four years in a row:

I had been on the market three years previous to the year of my interview with [my current institution]. Clearly mis-advised, I had started job searching far too early in my graduate school career--too early in the dissertation-writing process, so early that I ended up taking longer to write the dissertation (because I had wasted valuable time seeking a job). There's a circular problem for you. (7)

Each year Peter sent out 25 - 60 applications and traveled to the MLA for interviews. However, he calls these early interviews "abysmal" and says they showed both the search committee and himself how unprepared he was.

Having learned how unprepared he was for the job search, however, Peter "could not convince [his] mentors that [he] needed to wait..." (email). They wanted him to find a job quickly because of the length of time he had been in graduate school. This advice is doomed to backfire, leading to longer rather than shorter time to finish the degree as the job search takes time away from the dissertation. But Peter followed the advice anyway, continuing to apply for positions the next year. On his second time out, Peter was offered a position at a small, private college in a small town but had to turn the job down for financial reasons. "In a nutshell," he says, "my partner's salary and my TA stipends gave us a greater family income than we would have been able to secure had I accepted this job. (I was told rather bluntly that the local economy was not good, and that my partner might have had a hard time finding work there.)" [7] Nothing came of his third attempt, but in his fourth year on the market, Peter finally had enough of his dissertation completed and received a very quick offer from his current school. He was invited to campus two days after returning from the MLA Convention and offered the position within a week following the visit. He accepted right away, and in hindsight, wishes he had been given better advice about negotiating this part of the process.

I had, in fact, been told by one advisor that I should not hesitate to accept this job offer, should I receive it, because the department and job sounded so wonderful. I now think that this was not good advice: no one should be encouraged to accept a job offer without first exploring applications that were still "open," and before more careful thought about the location, the kind of institution, etc.

After I accepted [the] offer, I received three invitations for interviews with institutions in [the northeast and midwest]. I now realize that I should have contacted institutions where I had applications still under consideration *before* accepting the offer from [Southern Regional State]. I would have been able to make a better informed choice had I done that. (7)

**Question Eight:** What kind of advice you receive? Did your advisors understand the current job system? Was negotiation mentioned?

Peter also reported ineffectual formal institutional support for his job search, several meetings that were not very broad or helpful; in fact, he did not mention this program until he noticed in a draft of this dissertation that I claimed that he had received no organized support at all. These few, brief meetings focused primarily on "how-to" write a CV and a cover letter. The faculty member who organized this "spoke mostly to applications for research jobs and...fellowships and post-docs....He never really showed much understanding of teaching jobs and what applications for those jobs might look like" (email). Only those positions Aronowitz says are disappearing were acceptable goals in this culture. Not only did Peter find this formal job search help off target, but he was rightly dissatisfied with the informal advice he received as well. Of course Peter's naiveté and ineptness in the job search and the consistently poor advice he received added to his fear of never finding any position. His fear also led to his accepting the outrageous suggestion that he immediately accept the first offer he received, without contacting other institutions where he was still in the running or negotiating salary or any other conditions of his employment. Perhaps no formal advisory program would have helped him enough, but the advice he received was unusually poor. Rita and Lola also describe job search workshops which, like Peter's, covered the preparation of CVs and letters. Both also participated in mock interviews, and Lola mentions that, although she felt her professors expected their students to land jobs at research universities or prestigious liberal arts colleges, they did arrange to bring in visitors from other types of institutions (interviews).

**Question Nine:** [Did/does your graduate program have any organized institutional support for job seeker? What services do they offer? What kind of jobs are implied by this assistance? Was this program helpful?](#)

Irene, coming from a small, regional graduate university, received a few dossier requests, but no interviews in the first year she searched. She tells of finding the one-year job that has led to her current tenure-track position as a "fluke." The second time she applied for jobs, she had had several on-campus interviews for tenure-track positions, including one in California which "I REALLY wanted," when her dissertation advisor told her about an opening at a liberal arts college in a nearby state. When they invited her to visit, she at first said no because she was too busy; the chair of the hiring department called and "insisted I try to come--they really wanted me to--and they'd do whatever they could to facilitate the visit" (7).

**Question Ten:** [What was to place of "luck" in your job search process?](#)

#### **Thread Five: Local Knowledge**

Irene took the one-year position, and observed from the inside the search for the tenure-track job for which she was eventually hired: "After a really rough year and an especially rough spring seeing all the candidates for "MY" job parade through...I was offered the job (after they'd already offered it to their first choice, who turned them down)." While Irene does not make explicit the pedigree of this first-choice candidate in detail, her account suggests to me that this was a Rookie of the Year offer to someone unlikely ever to accept. So, as Irene puts it, "it was a bit of a bittersweet victory at the time, knowing that I wasn't their unanimous first choice--but now I'm really, really happy to be here. Especially since my husband also now has a tenure-track position in the same department!!!" After a few years of persistent struggle, Irene was able to work her way into a department.

Rita's "post-doc" was the most traditional version of this type of job any of my informants experienced, a truly temporary position, without hope of turning into a permanent job. In her third year of the job search, she was widely interviewed; twelve MLA interviews led to eight campus invitations. By the time she was offered her current position, she had two other offers and two pending campus visits. She describes the

campus visit for her current position as "a nightmare:

I was never oriented with a tour or anything; my first meeting was with the VPAA [Vice-President for Academic Affairs] who asked "what do you think of our mission?" mystifyingly....I never figured out who anyone was; they had been very unclear about the presentation (which ... would have been awful the previous year [when she would not have had the experience gained in her post-doc to rely on] ); they did it all in one grueling day ...; they sent me to dinner with the crotchety old guys.... Poise was far more important than anything else. (7)

Not only was her academic capital important in her job search; it seems that her social capital was as well.

**Question Eleven: What is to place of social skill/class identification in the job search process?**

Rita chose to accept the position, even after the unpleasant interview, and even though she had other offers, for geographic and family reasons--she felt that she must remain on the East Coast if at all possible. Rita's mystification at being asked about the university's mission, even though the university is widely known as having a religious affiliation, points to her reliance on her academic capital, her expectation that she would easily acquire a desirable position without taking the responsibility to look into the local culture and conditions of the university before her interview. And in her case, her capital was sufficient; her not knowing about the institution did not prevent them from offering her the position.

**Question Twelve: How much "homework" should one do for an interview? How important is local knowledge?**

Both Lola and Nancy attribute their failure to find a position in their first year to searching too soon. Nancy says, "The first year, I was on [the job "market"] too early. I genuinely thought I could finish that year, or I would not have gone on [the "market"]...." Lola had no MLA interviews the first try; Nancy had five MLA interviews, but no campus visits. In the second year, Lola had what she characterizes as a "relatively painless job search" after having defended her dissertation. She had two MLA interviews that year, one at her "dream school," and the other for the position that she took. Nancy had four MLA interviews that led nowhere. She found her current position through an email posting forwarded to her by a friend. Her on-campus interview came in March; she was offered a two-year position at another college the next week and phoned the search committee chair at her current school only to be told the committee had voted to offer her the position that morning. Not only do both Lola and Nancy attribute their failure to find positions in their first year to searching too early, but both were told that the fact they had completed their degrees was key to their being hired on the second try (7). In a follow-up communication, Peter reinforces this idea that a completed (or very nearly completed) dissertation is important in the job search; his hiring institution required assurances that he would have defended prior to beginning the job. In fact, only Jane and Carol were hired (both conditionally) without the degree in hand (Peter email; Jane 7; Carol 7).

**Question Thirteen: Is completion or very near completion the *sine qua non* for hiring?**

Like Irene, Carol and Ken took temporary positions in order to work their way into a department. Carol had sent out letters in the fall, but had only one MLA interview, which she describes as "bleak." The position she took wasn't advertised until February, and Carol says she thinks the ad itself may have limited the number of applicants; "it listed the 9 course load [over 3 quarters], for a one-year position." Carol was one of two applicants invited to campus and, as I discuss above, was offered the position after a candidate from the high-prestige graduate school withdrew from consideration. Carol reports that willingness to relocate was also a factor in receiving the job offer (Carol interview). Carol spent two years as an adjunct

at *Downtown State*. Even though she had been told that the position would become tenure-track after one year, a hiring freeze delayed that until after her second year. Carol mentioned that support from her colleagues and her chair was vital to her receiving that position. The position was defined in ways that privileged her strengths and the search was oddly timed:

My chair seems to have cut a behind-the-scenes deal so that a search would be done last May for my tenure track position, although the position wouldn't become tenure track until the following year....And I think he really did do me a favor: by having a late-season search, and an oddly worded ad, he kept the number of applicants down. And, as pleased as they all have been with me, we all knew full well that they might easily get plenty of candidates whose CV's were more impressive than mine. (interview)

Carol does not describe quite as painful a situation as Irene does, watching others compete for "her" job. Only one other candidate was brought to campus; Carol says that she was told that person's job talk was "incomprehensible." So Carol moved to tenure-track after two years of working in the department, developing relationships, and building support.

**Question Fourteen: [Are "temporary" positions really a way in? How often does this work? How many of these positions are really "permanently temporary"?](#)**

Ken was very methodical in his job search. Having completed his PhD and finding no full-time position, he decided to take more control of his search than the usual pattern of broadcast applications and MLA convention interviews allows. He moved back to his home state, choosing the move carefully to avoid competition for part-time teaching: "I was looking for a big town that didn't have a PhD program in English" (7). So, even without the kind of full-time, temporary position that Rita, Irene, and Carol had found, Ken was able to get a course or two at the local university and at a community college. After one year of multiple part-time, temporary teaching, Ken found his current position. His location in the big city nearest to the campus where he now works was a factor in his being hired. He says that the department was looking for someone with an understanding of the "regional culture" (7). Ken's account shows that not all search committees are seduced into trying to hire "God"; his existing connection to the region is a more realistic marker of a better match, of probable long-term success and satisfaction at the hiring institution, than the academic capital which marks the Rookies of the Year.

**Question Fifteen: [What other strategies have you tried or heard of that allow job seekers take more control of the process?](#)**

Betty, Jane, Sam, and Mary all found tenure-track positions their first year. Mary's search ended with her confronting the "we could hire God" situation; in describing the earlier stages of her search, she is quite eloquent about how alienating the MLA convention and the interview process can be: "MLA is not a fun place...." Sam and Jane describe the easiest job searches of the group. Coming from the highest prestige graduate programs, they both mention being able to eliminate jobs with 4/4 teaching loads from consideration. Sam also tells of not applying to some institutions because of locations: "There were places that I just didn't really imagine I could ever possibly live." Jane had four MLA interviews and was offered two campus visits. She says, "After I saw [her current institution, which was her first campus visit] I just prayed I wouldn't have to visit the other institution, and ...it worked" (7). Sam had six MLA interviews and three invitations to campuses, although not from his first choices among the six. Sam had two job offers and, on the advice of friends at his graduate school, was able to negotiate a slightly higher starting salary from his current institution than the one initially offered. Although, as we saw, Peter mentions wishing he had tried to negotiate, Sam was the only one who actually was able to use multiple offers to negotiate a higher salary. Heidi, as we will see, was also able to negotiate because she was already employed.

**Question Sixteen: What really is negotiable? What strategies can job seekers use to get the best "deal" possible, rather than take whatever is offered?**

Betty also had an exceptionally easy job search. She tells of sending out around forty letters because that was "what I thought I was supposed to do..." (7). Her current institution was the first to respond. It is quite close to her graduate school, so rather than travel to MLA, Betty's first interview there was a campus visit. She visited on a Wednesday and Thursday and was surprised to be offered the job on Monday. But the job was a good match for her interests and abilities: they wanted a specialist in Ethnic Studies and "someone who could help them establish some positive ties to the community." Betty also entertains the possibility that it may have helped that she is an African-American female, although as the only black woman in the department, she says one couldn't say that "they have been on a search mission for African-Americans" (17). Perhaps Betty is correct in reading the lack of other black women in her department as a sign of disinterest in affirmative hiring, but it is quite possible that the dearth of minorities on that faculty induced the consideration of increasing diversity as a factor in their search. More importantly, the community connection is key to understanding Betty's position; her research is intimately linked to her community service, something she says her department was very interested in when she was hired and something it continues to support strongly.

**Question Seventeen: What is the value of community connections? What is the importance of affirmative action, especially in light of the recent attacks on hiring for diversity?**

The last of my informants, Heidi, did not seek an academic position immediately on finishing her doctorate. Instead, she spent five years working in a community literacy center. Like Betty, Heidi's work in the community was and is central to her research. While she was doing interesting and important work in the community, she felt that she was "drifting further away from academia...." She missed that intellectual stimulation she remembered from graduate school and decided she needed "to get my foot back in academia...before I lost all connections with it" (7) Like Ken and especially Betty, Heidi had strong connections to her community and, while she wanted to return to academe to expand her opportunities, she applied for the position she took in part because it would not require a move. Since she already had a long-term, professional position, Heidi went to her interview with more confidence than she imagines many other applicants have. Five years of research and teaching, even though not in a university setting, still provided her with an impressive record. Heidi was also able to negotiate for a salary higher than her previous job (interview). Like Sam, she had employment alternatives that gave her standing to bargain. In the current market, this is understandably rare. Even so, most hiring departments or institutions have some flexibility in what they offer, if not in salary, then in research support, travel money, computer equipment, or first year reduction of load.

**Question Eighteen: Can working outside of mainstream academia help when one decides to return?**

When I asked why the subjects thought they had been able to find tenure track positions in a tight job market, there were a few common responses (17). Six of them mention the intellectual capital that they had accrued in graduate school: their academic training, their specialization or ability to function as generalists, and their publications. Intellectual capital leading to publication is, of course, the primary criterion for success endorsed by the profession. Five mention the variety of their teaching experiences, again one common prerequisite for most academic positions. But several of them mention feeling "lucky" to have found positions at all in the current market, one crediting God with her success. It is understandable that they feel lucky, and while chance (or God) may have a role in their success, they do each seem to have the scholarly and/or teaching credentials to qualify them for the positions that they found. Some also have significant academic and/or scholarly capital to aid them.

### **Thread Six: Summary--What Really Matters?**

From my informants' various accounts of their job searches, three factors aside from luck stand out as having important influence on success in acquiring a position: credentials, prestige, and awareness of the local culture. Proper credentials take the form of a completed doctorate in the appropriate area; not having finished one's dissertation is the most widely reported reason my participants give for not being hired, and both Peter and Mary mention that search committees asked their graduate professors for assurances that they would complete their degrees before their new duties began (Peter email; Mary 7). Only Jane and Carol were hired ABD and retention was conditional upon completion their degrees within a specified time-limit. In fact, Carol's position was initially a one-year renewable adjunct position. The prestige of Jane's top-ranked graduate program overcame her lack of a completed degree to enable her to be hired for a tenure-track position, but she understood that her contract would not be renewed if she did not finish her dissertation (7). Another sort of credential, of course, is proven scholarship; while Patricia Meyers Spacks and others might bemoan graduate students' focusing attention on publication and conference presentations as premature professionalism (3), those who have proven their work through publication very likely gain some advantage in the job market. However, of my informants, only Heidi and Peter specifically mention their prior publications as a factor in their acquiring positions, and neither believes it was the most important one (17). But the credentials of a completed degree and published scholarship are certainly valid requirements for screening potential new faculty, and they are in keeping with the widely held myths that academia functions as a meritocracy and the academic job search as a rational--or at least an explicable--process.

**Question Nineteen:** [Are completion of degree, "brand name" appeal of ones' graduate program, and local knowledge the key factors in your experience? What other factors are crucial to the job search process?](#)

The job search is not, however, a completely rational, meritocratic process. Prestige, especially the reputation of the graduate university, complicates things. For each of my respondents, finding a job was a difficult experience and moving to take up that position was also disruptive. Even though they all were aware that their careers and the type of institution that would house them would differ from the professorial template modeled by their dissertation directors, the desire to reproduce that template still seemed to have some force in their job searches, especially in the assumptions that underlie the assistance their graduate schools gave them in preparing to find jobs. As one of them said, the expectation in her program was that the students should desire positions only at research universities or prestigious liberal arts colleges, regardless of the likelihood of acquiring those positions.

Many search committees are influenced by Burgan's Rookie of the Year syndrome, pursuing high prestige candidates rather than those most likely to fit the needs and culture of their institution. Mary and Carol tell of how the competition of candidates with "brand name" degrees complicated their searches, while Sam and Jane were aided by the reflected capital of their graduate schools. The effect of academic reputation in these searches, while similar to that Bourdieu describes, is not nearly as important as he claims it was in the French system he studied. The current American system gives more influence to the capital of institutions than that of individuals. 3 Not only are the responses of hiring committee members to prospective new colleagues influenced by academic and social capital; the new PhDs respond to their prospective new institutions and to their prospective new home towns with these same kinds of filters in place. While the prestige and academic capital of their graduate programs may have helped Jane and Sam, the capital of their competitors seems to have at least disrupted the process for Mary and Carol, displaying the force of the "rookie of the year" or "we could hire God" narrative. And though Bourdieu's construction of the power of academic capital suggests that a degree from a premier program or the support of a dissertation director who is a first rank scholar assures a highly desirable job, this is called into question, both by the statistics of the current job market for English faculty in the US in general and Lola's situation

in particular. Although her dissertation advisor has a significant reputation, she was only able to find a position at a small, regional, comprehensive, state university, which was not her first choice of venue.

Completion of the degree is, not surprisingly, the most widespread criterion in professorial hiring; without the degree in hand, very few job candidates can succeed. Every one of my informants who had a multiple year search attributes the "dry" year to searching too soon. In a situation where hiring institutions have choice, it is not surprising that they insist that their new hires already have their credential, the "consecration" of the completed doctorate, when they begin their duties. Only Jane, coming from a top ten, "brand name" graduate school, was hired ABD. It seems that their understanding of the dearth of academic positions, constructed as the "collapse of the job market," frightened some of my respondents into looking for a job, any job, before they were ready for the conditions they would meet in the search.

Working one's way into a position is a variation on the archetypal job search pattern that may open possibilities for some new PhDs who might not be hired on the basis of the prestige of their graduate school. Rita's experience was a traditional version of this process, a one-year "post-doc" as a bridge to another institution. Ken chose a region and took part time work there until he could find a permanent position. Carol and Irene took temporary positions, which led them into tenure-track positions at those same universities; however, this was not a guaranteed conversion in either case. Both were required to compete in a second national search after the "year long job interview."

This combination of experience, local knowledge, and connection to the community is a third influence in the job search. Some of the advisory articles in the literature recommend that job seekers research the institutions to which they apply, that knowledge of the local situation can help. [8] Betty, Heidi, and Ken all got the positions they did because they had a connection to the communities that house their new institutions and a knowledge of the local or regional culture. Their accounts demonstrate that not all search committees succumb to the urge to attempt to hire "God." Instead, their hiring institutions valued their local knowledge, believing that this connection would help the newly hired faculty fit into the department and institution better. Their connections, however, were deeper than the superficial research that many pundits suggest. Betty and Heidi had associations with these communities for many years; Ken re-established his local connection by moving back for a year of intermediate employment, a sort of self-designed "post-doc."

In addition to community knowledge, teaching experience in venues similar to the hiring institution seems to count as this sort of capital as well. Given the growth of universities' reliance on adjunct, temporary, and part-time faculty in recent years, it will be important to follow the future of these positions, as it seems likely to be useful in maintaining the pool of applicants for these positions by feeding their hopes of conversion to full faculty status. The value of teaching experience and local connections in these searches suggests that some sort of post-doctoral, intermediate position might allow some new English PhDs to acquire this different kind of capital. While post-doctoral research fellowships have long been established in the sciences as a valuable and important means for young scholars to establish themselves, "post-docs" in English are usually temporary positions that carry exploitative teaching loads without offering much opportunity to develop one's own courses or to do much scholarly work. Ken, Mary, and Rita were able to capitalize on this teaching experience, and Ken and Mary did gain this valuable experience as "freeway fliers," teaching at several institutions at once. However, many of the English PhDs who take such positions are not able to use them as a springboard to full-time employment as my respondents did. Instead, many find themselves in such positions year after year. It is this exploitation of temporary and part-time instructors that leads Robert Bellah to describe them as part of the "academic underclass" (24).

If a non-exploitative version of post-doctoral fellowship could be instituted, and there are of course financial obstacles to this, the profession of English studies could benefit from having a legitimate, accepted means by which some new PhDs could acquire valuable experience. These positions should

allow their incumbents to teach and design at least one of their own courses, in a venue different from their graduate institutions.

**Question Twenty:** [How typical are the my twelve respondents? Do their accounts of the job search resonate?](#)

**Question Twenty-one:** [What solutions might be tried to "fix" the current job search system and to alleviate some of the human costs of the graduate English machine? What would a post-doc or "bridge" position have to provide to be legitimate?](#)

**Question Twenty-two:** [Graduate education may prepare us as scholars, but much else about the profession, including as shown here, the means of entry, are often ignored. What changes are needed?](#)

[What did we miss? What are the other important questions?](#)

Notes

1. The differing objects of desire between Updike's character and Gregory and his peers is a reflection of the differing views of what it means to be a successful professor held by the general public and by members of the profession: the "comfortable, tweedy, avuncular *college* teacher as opposed to the intellectually powerful and highly reputed *university* researcher. It is interesting to note that Gregory makes the transformation silently, assuming his audience of *ADE* readers will share his construction of the accepted career goal. [back](#)

2. For an interesting explication of this metaphor, see Steve Watt, "On Apprentices and Company Towns." *Will Teach for Food*. Ed. Cary Nelson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997, 229-53. [back](#)

3. Here and throughout this work, I shall cite responses to my questionnaires using this system: survey number.question number. Thus (3.1) here is survey 3, question 1. [Email](#) me if you'd like the text of the questions from all of the surveys. When I cite an informant's interview (held either face-to-face at the 1995 MLA convention or via telephone), I note that as (interview); information communicated by electronic mail, which I used extensively for follow-up and clarification, I cite as (email). [back](#)

4. See, for example, earlier issues of *Workplace*, Nelson and Bžrubž, Guillory, Curren and many others. [back](#)

5. For an early version of this concept, see Bourdieu, Pierre. *Homo Academicus*. Trans. by. Peter Collier. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988. Trans. of *Homo Academicus*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984. Of course differences in time and national culture require some adjustment to apply Bourdieu's idea here. [back](#)

6. As all of the MLA's data is generated through the self-reports of departments and of members seeking jobs and the compilation of jobs advertised in the *JIL*, one must consider it less than perfectly reliable. Also, the peak in the number of positions in the late 1980's was an anomaly, a statistical outlier. Though the number of positions has gone up and down each year, looked at in the long term, the job situation in English has been out of balance and in collapse since the early 1970's. [back](#)

7. Curiously, this is one of very few mentions of the financial aspects of this transition, although the difference between a TA or part-timer's stipend and a faculty salary can be significant. Other than this, only Peter's later mention of failing to negotiate and Sam's story of successfully negotiating about the

details of salary touch on this issue. Student loan indebtedness is another financial issue I expected to hear about that did not arise in the responses, perhaps as grace periods allowed some of my participants to avoid thinking about them until late in the year. [back](#)

8. See for example, Eleanor H. Green's "The Job Search: Observations of a Reader of 177 Letters of Application," Nona Fienberg's "The Most of It: Hiring at a Nonelite College," Anne Warner's "What a BA College Needs to Know," and Libby Bay's "Teaching in a Community College: Rerouting a Career." All provide advice about what some institutions want in a job candidate. [back](#)

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