

Applying and Interviewing for an Academic Position

Amy E. Childress

Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering
University of Southern California

Presentation to: USC PhD Students and Postdoctoral Scholars
November 1, 2013

My Background

💧 M.S. and Ph.D. from UCLA

- Worked briefly with CH2M Hill at Irvine Ranch Water District pilot facility
- Worked with Orange County Water District pilot and demonstration facility

💧 Professor and Chair at the University of Nevada, Reno

- Visiting research professor at the University of New South Wales in Australia
- Visiting professor at the National University of Costa Rica
- Recipient of NSF CAREER Award
- President of Association of Environmental Engineering and Science Professors (AEESP)
- **Hired 5 assistant professors and oversaw 5 P&T cases**

💧 Professor and Director of Environmental Engineering at USC

- Research lab under construction
- Ongoing projects with: Department of Energy, Bureau of Reclamation, SERDP, EPA, and WaterReuse Foundation
- **Currently searching for 2 environmental engineering faculty members**

Key Things to Do in PhD Program to Prepare for a Career in Academia

- Middle stage of PhD
 - Attend conferences AND have good conversations with people
 - Attend a few conferences consistently
 - Develop academic “friends” and mentors
 - Target a few big names in the field and keep introducing yourself to them
 - Take note of who is interested in your work – make a list of names
- Later stage of PhD
 - Send papers that have been accepted to your list of names
 - Compare your CV with those of your “friends” and those of academics you aspire to
 - Awards you can apply for
 - Conferences you should be attending
 - Where are you excelling – where do you need to focus efforts?
- Application to academic position
 - Ask your academic mentors and/or big names in the field if they are willing to write a strong letter for you (send your CV along with your request!)
 - Talk to your friends about their application – what are their do’s and don’ts – what are the trends

What Can Help an Application to Stand Out amongst the Competition

- Clean and clear
 - Your path from entering graduate school to present day should be clear
 - The committee should not have to “work” to understand your application
 - You can include impact factors of journals, number of citations
 - Highlight the areas you excel in and address or be prepared to address any deficiencies
- Standard
 - Follow directions, include all materials, remind your references
 - Read and reply to the search ad carefully. If something is "required" then you need to demonstrate that you satisfy it. And if things are "recommended" or "desired" then you point out as many of those that you can. Search committees usually put a lot of thought in the words and details of the ad
- Stand Out
 - Aesthetics and creativity – of your application, your webpage, anything committee can search electronically

Application Materials

- Research statement
 - What you want to do – not what you’ve done (that’s in your cover letter, CV, and reference letters)
 - Remember that your search committee could have external member(s) so start broad and then get specific
 - State resources existing at the school that you can use to advance your research
 - State possible collaborations
- Teaching statement
 - Likely you have never taught a class so hold off on your teaching “philosophy”
 - You can discuss your “mentoring philosophy” (assuming you have mentored or been a TA for students)
 - Discuss teaching interests as they pertain specifically to the program
 - See this as your first step in developing your teaching plan (CAREER application, teaching portfolio,...)

Interview Presentation

- Find out:
 - Who is your audience?
 - How long is your talk?
 - How long for Q&A?
- Remember:
 - The purpose is not to impress them with your research; they are already impressed – that is why they invited you. The purpose is to provide them with a sense of who you are, the scope of your work, and to some extent, an indication of your teaching/lecturing ability.
- Save some energy and enthusiasm if your talk is late in the day
- Prepare for questions from wide range of audience

Do's and Don't Dos

- Do

- Try to find out who the members of the search committee are
- Learn something about everyone that you will meet
- Wear a watch
- Prepare for long day(s)
- Expect that at least one person will ask where else you are interviewing

- Don't

- Ask each person the same question – they will get together and discuss what you say
- Underestimate individuals you meet with - (do expect your hardest questions to come from the person you did not expect them from)
- Expect that meeting with students will provide you with a little “down-time” during the interview – they can be ruthless!!
- Say anything that would limit your ability to negotiate a strong start-up package

Questions and Answers

- Questions

- For the Dean – How does my program fit into your vision for the college?
- For the Chair – Is department unified or split along disciplinary lines?
- For any faculty – What do you like best about being here?
- For junior faculty – Do you feel like you are supported by all levels of administration?
- For search committee members – When can I expect to hear back from you?
- For students – graduate and undergraduate – Why did you come here?

- Answers

- Where will you submit your first proposal?
- What is your niche in the field going to be?
- How will you separate yourself from your advisor(s)?

- Many more questions to ask – and to be prepared to can be found on the web – or by talking with your friends and mentors

Bits and Pieces

- You must have a sense of where the funding opportunities exist and how tight funding is – have discussions with your advisor and committee members – and your academic friends and mentors
- Listen to local news/read local paper in the day(s) before your interview to have interesting topics to discuss
- One thing that is quite compelling with any candidate is to know that they are competitive elsewhere and of interest to other high-quality universities
- Be technically savvy. Committees want to hire “young people” who will advance the technology state-of-the-art in their department
- Have enthusiasm and energy

Tenure Track Tips

- Set your own goals (that exceed those of your Department/College/University) – and achieve them
- Look at the career paths of others as you continually reformulate your own path
- Find your own mentors – don't expect the right ones to be assigned to you – and you need more than one
- Develop academic relationships from the beginning and maintain them
- Get comfortable promoting yourself



amyec@usc.edu