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In Person: Frequent Flyer

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 United States
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I logged 29,316 frequent flyer miles during my search for an academic position in chemistry. Although not without its stresses and strains, the journey did what journeys are supposed to do: I reached my destination and learned a lot about the world--the academic research world--during my travels. In the end, I found my ideal job, and I learned a lot about the job hunt along the way.

I began my search by compiling a list of about 65 possible academic jobs. I sought advice on how many universities I should apply to and got replies that varied from "no more than 20" to "100 would be too many." Everyone suggested I ask myself, "If this was my only offer, would I go here?" But that's a hard question to answer for someone at the beginning of their first faculty job search. I decided to apply to about 30 schools and ended up applying to 37.

There was a period of high anxiety between submitting my applications and getting that first call. The anxiety doubled after I scheduled my first interview. Other calls--and other interviews--followed, and soon I found myself struggling to schedule everything. Advisers suggested I prioritize the interviews based on preference. Instead, I ended up scheduling the interviews in the nearest available date. If I could do it again, I would have followed my advisers' advice.

Every interview was logistically different; some lasted a day whereas others lasted 2 days. Some places I gave a public seminar on my postdoc work (the research seminar) on the first day and a seminar on my future research plans (the proposal seminar) on the second day. During one interview, I gave the research seminar and the proposal seminar back to back at the start of the first day! During 1-day interviews, my "lunch" was often during the proposal seminar, which makes it difficult to actually eat.

The interview is not all about answering questions: One of the best pieces of advice I received was to make a list of questions about aspects of the job that were important to me and to ask them often. I also asked the assistant professors at each university if they were happy, and if not, why not. I was surprised at the candor of their answers.

After a while, it was difficult to keep the details straight. Each department differed in their tenure processes, facilities, lab space, support staff, size of graduate student pool, and amount of student support they were willing to provide. To battle the confusion and make the decision simpler, on return flights I asked myself, "Would I accept if I got an offer here?" I also wrote two summaries on the plane home. First, I summarized the whole experience, including the personalities of the colleagues I interacted with, the students, the facilities, and whatever I found remarkable. Next, I summarized the discussions from the seminars, which gave me the opportunity to revise and improve my presentations and ideas.



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In any adventure, there are bound to be unpleasant experiences. At one institution, I was late for my first appointment because no one picked me up at the hotel. At another, I missed the day's last flight home because I was dropped off 30 minutes before departure.

There were uncomfortable moments, such as being asked (more than once) if I was married and if I had children or being asked during the interview if I was still considering the job. One of the worst moments was when a faculty member made an obnoxious statement during the open-question period of my research seminar that had no possible response.

My productivity as a postdoc diminished to almost nothing during the job search, much to my and my adviser's disappointment.

Soon, I was exhausted and my performance suffered. Three interviews in 1 week are too many. It is tempting to squeeze them in, especially those requiring cross-country flights, but I would have been better off making another trip or staying over a weekend.

By mid-January, I had three offers, each with different deadlines. As the interviews wound down, I reflected on earlier ones and contacted previous search-committee chairs, either to get an update on my status or to withdraw my candidacy.

Second visits gave me the opportunity to see the lab space, meet more students, and interact with a wider range of colleagues. They also were a lot of fun, despite battling a miserable head cold at one place (while the temperature dipped to -10°F) and being snowed in for 2 days at another. Mostly, these second visits confirmed my initial impressions. In the end, I chose the job I thought offered the best overall fit, a decision that was multifaceted and highly personal. 29,316 miles later, I accepted a position as assistant professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Go Blue!

After making the decision, I experienced a gentle tug of war between preparing for the future and finishing my postdoctoral research. March was recruiting season; April brought the first grant deadlines; and May was occupied with purchasing equipment and advising (from a distance) my first two graduate students. It's amazing how quickly the transformation from job seeker to assistant professor occurs. It's good, finally, to focus on my career instead of just preparing for it.

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Anne McNeil has her feet firmly planted on the ground in Ann Arbor, where she's a first-year assistant professor in the chemistry department.

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Photos. Top: Hidde de Vries. Middle: Bryan Correira

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