

Paris, 7-9 Oct 2008

Career Fair Partners



**Science**

AAAS Magazine News Signaling Careers Multimedia Collections

**Science Careers** From the journal *Science*

<a href="#">Jobs</a>	<a href="#">Funding</a>	<a href="#">Meetings and Events</a>	<a href="#">Career Development</a>	<a href="#">For Advertisers</a>	<a href="#">About Science Careers</a>
----------------------	-------------------------	-------------------------------------	------------------------------------	---------------------------------	---------------------------------------

[Science Home](#) > [Science Careers](#) > [Career Development](#) > [Previous Issues](#) > [2008](#) > [2008-07-18](#) > [Malisheski](#)

**CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES**

- [E-Mail This Article](#)
[Print This Article](#)
[Share This](#)
[Related Articles](#)



**Do You Wanna Be a VAP?**

Laura Stark Malisheski  
United States  
18 July 2008

If you're going on the academic job market this fall, you're probably already scanning the postings in *Science* and putting together your applications--CV, cover letter, research statement, letters of reference, maybe a budget for setting up your lab--even as you work to finish your postdoc.

But what if you've caught the teaching bug? In that case, a tenure-track faculty position at a top college focused on teaching is probably the ultimate prize. But such jobs are hard to come by, especially for those with little teaching experience. A pretty good backup plan, which could keep you on the right career trajectory for a high-level teaching gig, is a visiting assistant professor (VAP) position.

**WHAT IS A VISITING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR?**

When a professor is on sabbatical, what happens to the courses she normally teaches? At a major research university, colleagues can probably cover her responsibilities. But a smaller school--especially a small college where teaching loads are already high, departments

My "CV looked much better with all that teaching experience. Liberal arts colleges really do care about teaching, and I had good evaluations from my students at Bucknell." --Sarah Johnson

are small, and there's little overlap between professors' areas of expertise--has less flexibility. Often, a smaller college has to hire someone to teach the missing professor's courses.

A VAP will typically cover the course load of a permanent faculty member who is going on sabbatical or, sometimes, retiring. Occasionally, a VAP is hired to fill a brand-new position--when the department can't find a candidate it's comfortable making a tenure-track offer to, for example, or when the administration isn't yet ready to fund a position long-term. The psychology department at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, plans to hire a VAP

**BUSINESS OFFICE FEATURES**

[Focus On Europe: Research by the Numbers?](#)  
11 July 2008

[Industrial Postdocs: The Road Less Traveled](#)  
13 June 2008

[Packaging Yourself for Product Companies](#)  
23 May 2008

[More](#)

**CAREER TOOLS AND RESOURCES**

**Current Employers**

[Learn more about the employers advertising positions on our site.](#)

---

**Science Careers Forum**

[Post a question, get an answer on our online community](#)

---

**Graduate Programs**

[Browse our database of program profiles](#)

---

**How-To Guides**

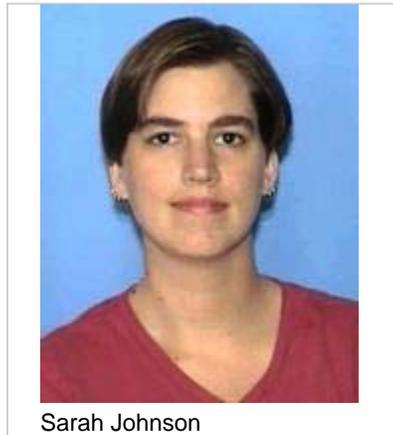
[Writing a resume/CV](#)

into just such a position, according to Owen Floody, a psychology professor there. "If the administration approves the tenure-track position, the VAP could be a strong candidate, though this is not guaranteed," Floody says.

Something similar happened in the physics department at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, where Lilian Childress was hired as a VAP to cover for a professor who was on leave. When the professor retired the following year, Childress was hired to the permanent post. VAP positions don't typically lead directly to tenure-track offers, but sometimes they do.

### WHY APPLY FOR A VAP?

On its face, a VAP position may not sound like a very good choice. VAPs lack prestige, and even if you're hired, you're back on the job market in a year or two



Sarah Johnson

(if you're lucky, three). Meanwhile, you'll be doing a lot of teaching and getting very little research done, probably none. So, why bother?

If you aspire to a research-focused faculty job, a VAP is a last resort. But if you know a career teaching undergraduates is right for you, it's a pretty good Plan B, after that tenure-track position you aspire to.

Sarah Johnson holds a Ph.D. in psychology from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and did a postdoc at the University of Oregon. Because she wanted to teach and do research at a college focused on undergraduates, she was thrilled to accept a VAP position at Bucknell, her undergraduate alma mater. Covering for four sabbaticals (including Floody's) over 2 years, she strengthened and broadened her repertoire, teaching courses and labs in sensation and perception, learning theory, cognition, and physiological psychology, all while developing an advanced seminar on forgetting. "I feel lucky because I got used to the hectic [lecture] preps at Bucknell," she says--so now the teaching load in her tenure-track position at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, feels easier.

Johnson believes that when she applied for tenure-track positions the second time around, her "CV looked much better with all that teaching experience. Liberal arts colleges really do care about teaching, and I had good evaluations from my students at Bucknell."

### WHAT IF YOU REALLY LOVE RESEARCH?

If you ultimately want to work in a high-powered research environment, stick to the postdoc route. Or plan to do another postdoc after your VAP to prove yourself again in the research realm.

Shannon Turley, now an assistant professor of pathology at Harvard Medical School and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, loved teaching in graduate school and was curious about the liberal arts option, so she took a VAP in the biology department at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. She did so well there that she was strongly encouraged to apply for a tenure-track position in the department. But she declined to apply and took a postdoc with the Joslin Diabetes Center at Harvard Medical School. She enjoyed the teaching immensely, but she wanted to pursue research at a higher level than was possible at a small college. She says that during her subsequent interviews for tenure-track positions, "some search committee

[Beating the interview](#)

[Getting funding](#)

[Managing a lab and staff](#)

[Building your network](#)

#### Salary Tools

[Find out how much you're worth with our salary calculator](#)

[To Advertise](#)

[Find Products](#)

members didn't even notice the Bowdoin position. Those who did were intrigued, but the VAP certainly wasn't held against me. However, it wouldn't have been viable to go straight from Bowdoin to a research-focused tenure-track job."

### WHAT IF YOU DON'T HAVE A CHOICE?

---

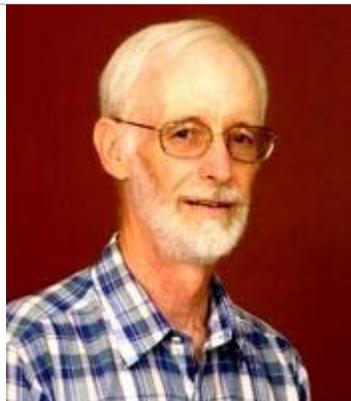
Sometimes the decision to take a VAP depends more on circumstance than strategy. Jennifer Bartlett's path was especially circuitous, as economic issues forced her to take not one but two VAP positions, both at Hampden-Sydney College in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia, before she finished her Ph.D.

Bartlett pursued her Ph.D. in astronomy at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, while working full-time as an engineer at Lockheed Martin and later at Litton Marine Systems. Both employers funded her graduate study, but eventually she had to give up her day job. Her graduate stipend didn't cover the mortgage and other expenses. Plus, she wanted to gain teaching experience. So, while her Ph.D. adviser was away at the National Science Foundation, Bartlett taught astronomy and physics at Hampden-Sydney. She took a second VAP as she completed and defended her Ph.D. It took her longer than most to finish graduate school, but she enjoyed the challenge, and the teaching experience made her more marketable for a faculty post at an undergraduate institution.

But that's not how things turned out. Instead, she took a research and operations position with a national observatory utilizing her specialized skills in astrometry, the measurement of celestial movements. Teaching is not an essential part of her work now, but she chooses to mentor students at the observatory in the summer.

### CAN YOU DO RESEARCH WHILE A VAP?

---



Owen Floody

"Bucknell will try to support a VAP's research efforts, but it isn't always a realistic expectation given the time required to teach three courses per semester," Floody notes. "It's difficult to pursue new research. Sometimes, the best strategy is to write up past research." Nearly every VAP interviewed for this article expressed regret about their research productivity during their VAP appointments, even if research time was ostensibly part of the deal.

Thomas Castonguay exemplifies the pendulum that swings between the demands of research and teaching in academia. Beginning in graduate school at the University of Vermont, Castonguay crafted his teaching and research experiences toward his goal of joining the faculty at an undergraduate institution.

As a graduate student, he pursued some projects in computational chemistry and realized that this is a fertile area for undergraduate-level research. Next, he took a "teaching postdoc" at Boston University (BU), where he taught general chemistry labs and lectures and, one semester, ran eight discussion sections. He was able to devote only about 15% of his time to research, so he took another short postdoc at BU during which he concentrated on research.

Now in his second year as a VAP in chemistry at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, Castonguay is preparing a manuscript for publication with some Hamilton undergraduates. So, although it's possible to bring research to fruition as a VAP--"set strict limits for office hours," Castonguay advises--"it's so easy to be consumed by teaching."

### RISKS OF THE VAP

---

Even as a qualification for faculty jobs at some liberal arts colleges, a postdoc might be a better choice than a VAP, because many such colleges expect you to establish a productive research program. When Johnson started at Moravian, it took her a long time to reestablish her research after getting "zero research done at Bucknell" during her VAP. "Those who came in directly

from a postdoc had an easier time ramping up."

Audeliz Matias partially attributes her failure to obtain a tenure-track position to her lack of research productivity as a VAP. Following her Ph.D. in geological sciences at Northwestern University, Matias took a combination postdoc/VAP at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York--a position designed to attract minority faculty candidates to participating colleges through the Consortium for Faculty Diversity. She originally intended to pursue research at Skidmore but found there wasn't sufficient support or time as she team-taught basic geosciences and developed four courses of her own.

Matias recently started a new position as Coordinator of Curriculum and Instructional Design for Empire State College in Saratoga Springs, New York, a nontraditional distance-learning institution. Whereas this new job allows her to pursue her interest in science education, her original career goal is almost certainly beyond her reach now.

If you want to teach at an undergraduate institution, the VAP may be just the thing. If you prefer high-powered research, the VAP might derail you, though you can rescue your research career with another postdoc. Even in a liberal arts environment, however, research is often highly valued, and the postdoc route might be the better choice, especially if you first need to establish a research agenda that's amenable to undergraduates and feasible in a small-college setting.

<p>Laura S. Malisheski, Ph.D., is the assistant director for graduate student and Ph.D. advising in the Office of Career Services at Harvard University.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback <a href="#">to our editor</a>.</p>
<p>Photos. Top: <a href="#">Gideon</a>. Middle: courtesy of Sarah Johnson. Bottom: courtesy of Owen Floody.</p>	<p>DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800107</p>

## RELATED CONTENT

### [Part-Time Science in Perspective](#)

7 December 2007,

### [Vibrant Visitors](#)

22 February 2002,

 [E-Mail This Article](#)  [Print This Article](#)  [Share This](#)  [Related Articles](#)

[Magazine](#) | [News](#) | [Signaling](#) | [Careers](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Collections](#) | [Help](#) | [Site Map](#) | [RSS](#)  
[Subscribe](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Privacy / Legal](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Contact Us](#)

© 2008 American Association for the Advancement of Science. All Rights Reserved.  
 AAAS is a partner of HINARI, AGORA, PatientInform, CrossRef, and COUNTER.