

# New post on **Small Pond Science**



## [On the breadth of faculty job applications](#)

by [Terry McGlynn](#)

Faculty job application season is building. If you're applying for jobs, how much time are you going to invest into the process, and how many applications will you be sending out?

The process can be a lot of work. Last year, Jeremy Yoder [made an infographic](#) showing what it took for him to land his current position up the road at Cal State Northridge, which involved 112 applications over the course of two years. Here are some unordered thoughts about how you might increase yield relative to effort.

-Before you go about this whole process, develop an idea of your priorities and what you want, and what you're willing to accept. Are there dealbreakers when it comes to geography or institution type?

-Are you applying to some jobs with the idea that they'd be "starter" faculty jobs? This strategy [sometimes doesn't turn out so well](#). It's totally fine to change jobs of course, but applying to a job with the notion that you'll be unhappy if you fail to trade "up" can be a bad idea.

-If you're not sure about [the kind of institution that you might want to work in](#), put in some effort to figure this out before you start applying for jobs. Ideally this means that you learn about the jobs that you might think you don't want, as well as the ones you think you want. Because you don't want to miss out on applying for jobs that could be great for you.

-Consider that some openings will get way more applications than others. Factors that will affect the number of applications include: 1) geographical favorability, 2) prestige, 3) teaching load, and 4) the breadth of the academic field. So an ad from a prestigious university on the coast with a low teaching load that isn't picky about the speciality will generate a metric ton of applicants. On the other hand, a non-prestigious teaching-focused institution, in a remote area where nobody would ever consider vacationing, that wants a someone in a narrow speciality, will not attract many applicants. If you're only applying to jobs that generate huge numbers of applicants, you're limiting your chances. Believe it or not, there are some great tenure-track faculty jobs that generate a mere handful of applicants -- and some of those applicants aren't even qualified! I'm just sayin', consider the odds.

-It's only worth your while to apply if you've taken the time to read up about the institution and the department, and substantially customize your application to address the specific demands of a particular position. Sure, you can increase the number of jobs that you apply to by having a single set of materials, but you'll be decreasing your yield. For example, if you're applying for job in my department and you send us the same materials that could land you an interview a big research university, then I'm here to tell you it's not even worth your time, because you wouldn't even make the first cut. On the other hand, if you show how your

research can fit our department and our students, that you know the courses in our catalog and which ones you can teach, and communicate an understanding of our university's mission, then you probably will avoid the first cut.

-Having been a student at a liberal arts college gives you almost no insight into what it would be like to be a professor at a small liberal arts college. If anything, it might give you a mistaken notion. It would help to go visit some of these campuses as a peer of the faculty and ask them about their jobs -- *before* you craft your application. You'll learn so much about things that were entirely off your radar as an undergrad.

-This should seem obvious, but only apply for jobs if there's a nonzero probability that you'll accept the job. It's okay to apply for a job with the notion that you might not want it -- that's what interviews are for! But if you are confident that you would never ever take the job (for whatever reason, including geography, religion, institution type), don't apply. It's not a good use of your time (or anybody else's), if you apply with the notion that you'd get interview practice or to get an offer that you would solely intend to use for counteroffer leverage. This is not only sleazy and overmanipulative, but also the odds of this actually helping you in some way are pretty low.

-It's not good that a lot of ads ask for letters of recommendation at the initial application phase, but please don't let this limit how many applications you are doing. When we agreed to be your letter-writer, we knew what we were getting into. You don't have to apologize for asking us to write so many letters. It's our job.

-Don't be too dissuaded by the speciality listed in a job ad. These job descriptions are often forged in compromise in a meeting among faculty and it's quite possible the department isn't entirely sure what it wants or needs, and won't know until they are sifting through applications. (It's also possible they have a highly specific set of needs, and won't consider anybody else outside that set of needs, but it's almost impossible to tell the difference based on the job ad.) So if you think you're a good fit for a department in a lot of ways but your specialty is a bit off, go ahead and apply anyway. Sure, it might get tossed right away, but on the other hand, if it's a job that you think you'd really like, well, then it might not be.

-Don't be dissuaded by open rank positions. In the eyes of search committees, potential is very attractive, and open rank searches frequently end up with brand new Assistant Professors, who got the job over senior faculty. Senior faculty often apply for these jobs not because they want them, but because they're looking for a raise or resources back at home. So these jobs often go to junior folks as a result.

-Getting it in before the deadline matters, but getting it in early doesn't matter. Because most folks don't really look at apps until they're all in. (If you've missed the deadline, you could call the department admin assistant to see if it's still worth your while.)

What did I miss?

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