Copyright American Psychological Association

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Profession!

So, you want to be a psychology professor! I may be biased, but I think that you have chosen a great profession. Psychology professors get to learn new things about the mind and behavior—the most fascinating topics imaginable—and then share their most interesting findings with other people, be it in the classroom or in the pages of an academic journal. For psychology professors, there is always more work to do and better ways to do it, but the cyclical nature of teaching and the cumulative nature of science provide career-long opportunities for growth and discovery.

What psychology-related skill do you want to hone for the rest of your career? Is it engaging students in the classroom? Perhaps it is brilliance in the lab? Or do you want to devote yourself to excellence in teaching *and* research? Well, the good news is that being a psychology professor allows you to emphasize the twin pillars of academic life—teaching and research—to the degree that best matches your skills and interests, at least if you can convince the right college to hire you, which is no easy feat. Thus, the purpose of this book is to help you decide what type of professor you want to be and then provide you with a framework for gathering, documenting,

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0000152-001
Becoming a Psychology Professor: Your Guide to Landing the Right Academic Job, by G. A. Boysen
Copyright © 2020 by the American Psychological Association. All rights reserved.

Copyright American Psychological Association

and communicating the set of experiences needed to get hired as that type of professor.

WHY THIS BOOK IS NECESSARY

Have you looked for a place to eat lately? I just searched online for restaurants near my suburban home and came up with 459 options. It would be absurd to leave the house hungry for pizza and think that any one of those restaurants will lead to an equally satisfying meal. Have you looked for places to work lately? There are more than 4,600 colleges in the United States (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2016), so it is also absurd to leave graduate school thinking that a job at any one of those colleges will lead to an equally satisfying career. The most important lesson in this book is becoming a psychology professor is all about fit—you, the college, and the position must all be aligned.

Finding the proper career alignment can be challenging because of the vast differences in faculty work between colleges. Consider a professor at a community college and one at a doctoral university. Each semester at a community college, the professor may be teaching half a dozen courses, advising dozens of students, and serving on multiple university committees. Down the road at a doctoral university, the professor may be teaching one small graduate seminar, advising a dissertation project, serving as a journal editor, and managing a multimillion-dollar research grant. These two jobs are not made for people with the same interests and talents. Nonetheless, students, mentors, and the writers of advice for landing academic jobs too often treat being a professor as if there is one track rather than many.

Professors come in different varieties, but advice about careers in academia almost exclusively emphasizes jobs at research-intensive institutions. The assumption is that everyone wants to be, and will become, a duplicate of their graduate school mentor. Although faculty at research-heavy doctoral universities represent a huge proportion of all psychology professors, not everyone wants to work in that setting; moreover, not everyone who wants to will get the opportunity. In fact, half of all full-time faculty work outside of doctoral universities and most faculty spend most of their time on teaching rather than research (American Association of University Professors, 2017; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1997; "The Almanac of Higher Education: 2017–18," 2017). Thus, the purpose of this book is to provide guidance for careers at all types of colleges, not just the research-intensive ones. Specifically, the book outlines the essential experiences and strategies

Copyright American Psychological Association

needed to land positions at doctoral universities, master's universities, baccalaureate colleges, and community colleges.

TYPES OF FACULTY POSITIONS

One of the central themes of this book is that professors have dramatically different jobs depending on the type of college where they work. However, each type of college employs faculty members with different titles and roles, and the job of being a professor is also dramatically different depending on these variations in position. In the eyes of students, "professors" of various brands are interchangeable. In the eyes of faculty, profound distinctions exist between the rights, responsibilities, and prestige of various faculty positions. If you doubt this, ask some tenured professors if they would be willing to give up their positions to take jobs as adjuncts. Their reactions to the very premise of the question will illustrate the importance of differences in positions. Aspiring faculty should take care in selecting institutions and in selecting positions.

Tenure Track and Continuing Contract

The type of faculty position that receives the most attention, and that most people have in mind when they think about being a professor, is tenure-track. A tenure-track position means that a new faculty member is hired and then given a certain time frame, typically 6 years, to accumulate a professional record of high-enough quality to be judged by a committee of faculty as worthy of tenure. Earning tenure generally means that a faculty member no longer needs to regularly establish his or her fitness for employment, and with this status comes exceptional freedom in the self-direction of scholarship and teaching. Tenure is often accompanied by promotion to the rank of associate professor from assistant professor, and it puts faculty on the track to apply eventually for promotion to professor, which is the highest rank faculty members can achieve. Earning tenure is stressful and time-consuming, but it comes with a high reward.

Not all institutions offer tenure, but those that do not sometimes have an alternative type of continuing contract. After an initial probationary period during which faculty must undergo annual review of their work and reappointment to a full-time position, a continuing contract kicks in, and faculty are automatically hired for an additional year of work. Unlike tenure, continuing contracts have a definite endpoint, typically 5 years, after which

Copyright American Psychological Association

another contract must be extended by the college. Nonetheless, continuing-contract positions offer similar job stability as tenure-track positions.

Instructor and Lecturer

Instructors and lecturers are full-time faculty who are not on the tenure track. The specific title varies between institutions, but an essential characteristic of the position is that the guarantee of work lasts only as long as specified by a contract, typically 1 school year. Compared with their tenure-track colleagues, full-time instructors spend more time teaching and less time engaged in other professional duties (Morphew, Ward, & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). In fact, some university work, such as committees related to tenure and faculty governance, may specifically exclude faculty who are not on the tenure track. Although instructors may find time in their schedules to conduct research, they should not expect it to be part of their contractual duties or to receive much support from their university for doing so. An instructor position can be a great opportunity for individuals who do not want to be tied down by a long-term responsibility to an institution or who want to focus solely on teaching, but if the goal is to eventually land a tenure-track position, working for long periods as an instructor will hinder that plan if the exclusive focus on teaching prevents the professional development, service, or scholarship required to be a competitive tenure-track candidate.

Instructors With Tenure or Continuing Contracts

There is a small but significant number of professors whose faculty role represents a hybrid of the instructor and tenure or continuing contract positions. Titles associated with such positions include teaching professor, professor of practice, and clinical professor. What the various positions have in common is that they emphasize student instruction, often to the total exclusion of research, but offer opportunities for promotion and security of employment. In other words, some institutions, mostly doctoral universities with high research expectations, have decided to reward excellent instructors with tenure-like contracts.

Visiting Professor

One of the more prevalent variations of full-time, but not tenure-track, faculty is the visiting professor. The key idea of visiting professorships is that they are, by definition, time-limited. Depending on the position, the time

Copyright American Psychological Association

frame may be 1 year to 3 years, and occasionally there is an opportunity to apply for reappointment after the initial time frame concludes. There is an implicit assumption that visiting professor positions are for people in the early parts of their careers (there are some "distinguished" visiting positions for established scholars). For early-career psychologists, visiting positions represent a valuable chance to gain experience at a certain type of college before applying for tenure-track positions, or they are a fallback when a tenure-track position is not available. Overall, the operative word is *visiting*. A visiting professor must eventually move on to a more permanent position, and an extended series of visiting professorships does not make for a solid career foundation.

Adjunct

Adjuncts are non–tenure-track, part-time teachers who are paid on a per-course basis. Hiring adjuncts is a short-term scheme to save money because paying a flat rate to four adjuncts to teach four courses represents just a fraction of what it costs to hire one full-time faculty member to teach those same courses. Departments hire adjuncts to teach—nothing more. They may teach as many courses as full-time faculty (American Association of University Professors, 2014; Hurtado, Eagan, Pryor, Whang, & Tran, 2011), but they are not treated like full-time faculty members in terms of pay, benefits, support, or professional development opportunities. In one survey, 75% of adjuncts reported that they did not seek out the position by choice and would prefer to have a full-time position (Hurtado et al., 2011). Although many adjuncts see their teaching positions as a foot in the door to a full-time position, there is little reason to believe in the effectiveness of this strategy outside of institutions that are exclusively teaching-focused (Hurtado et al., 2011; Kelsky, 2015; Vick, Furlong, & Lurie, 2016). The problem faced by adjuncts in competing for full-time positions is that teaching eclipses all their other activities, and there is little chance to build up the professional record required to be an attractive hire for a full-time position.

The Default Position of This Book

One of the sobering facts about higher education is that the typical college professor is no longer on the tenure track, or even employed full time. Part-time instructors make up 40% of college teachers, 17% are full time but not tenure track, and 14% are graduate students (American Association of

Copyright American Psychological Association

University Professors, 2017). That leaves only 29% of full-time faculty who are tenured or on the tenure track.

Although tenure-track and continuing-contract professors represent a minority of the academic workforce, they serve as the default position types throughout this book. The main reason for this approach is that I believe they are the default positions in most people's minds. Think about yourself. When you set the career goal that led you to read this book, I bet you were imagining yourself as a tenure-track professor. Other types of positions can make for satisfying careers, but I think few people start off with the goal of being an instructor or an adjunct. Another reason for the default position is that graduate students may not immediately know the direction of their career path. As such, they should gather key experiences in scholarship, teaching, and service; this is the approach needed to obtain a tenure-track or continuing-contract position, and having a well-rounded professional record allows for the most flexibility when pursuing work as a professor. Aspiring faculty who are ready to compete for tenure-track and continuing-contract jobs will also be competitive for other positions.

THE JOB MARKET

Before dispensing advice for a career in academia, it is worth considering the overall health of the profession. No one wants to spend a decade or so training for a career only to find it dead on arrival. Worry not, because psychology professors are not going the way of travel agents or newspaper editors anytime soon. Starting with the overall field, being a college professor is a growing profession. There were 1,313,000 "postsecondary teaching" jobs in 2014, and this number is expected to increase by 13% before 2025 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Psychology especially is among the top academic areas in terms of growth of full-time faculty positions (Morphew et al., 2016). Members of academic departments in some fields fear that they will be shuttered or that outgoing faculty will not be replaced, but psychology is not among them. The number of psychology majors has increased each year since the 1970s, and the number of master's and doctorate degrees awarded is increasing as well (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Psychology education is in high demand.

That is the good news. The bad news is how college teaching jobs are being filled. Most college teachers are now hired on temporary contracts as adjuncts or instructors rather than on the tenure track (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2017). Tenure-track positions have

Copyright American Psychological Association

become a rare and highly sought-after commodity. Open tenure-track positions in psychology receive about 50 applicants on average, but that number rises to triple digits for the most desirable positions (Benson & Buskist, 2005; Brems, Lampman, & Johnson, 1995; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Gore, Murdock, & Haley, 1998; Sheehan & Haselhorst, 1999; Sheehan, McDevitt, & Ross, 1998; Troisi, Christopher, & Batsell, 2014). The next generation of psychology professors must be aware that competition for full-time positions has never been higher.

YOUR GUIDE TO SUCCESS IN THE JOB MARKET

The purpose of this book is to help aspiring professors find success on the academic job market. The first step toward success is setting the goal for what type of professor you aspire to be. To help you set that goal, Chapter 1 outlines the four major types of higher education institutions—doctoral universities, master's universities, baccalaureate colleges, and community colleges—and what it means to be a professor in each of these settings. Across institutions, research and teaching are the core components of faculty work, so Chapter 2 outlines the basic experiences all aspiring professors should have in those two areas. Although psychology departments want to hire accomplished scholars and teachers, they also want faculty who are responsible and collegial. Thus, Chapter 3 describes how service, mentorship, and networking lead to a positive professional reputation.

Who can benefit from the guidance in these chapters? If you are a graduate student who has started to think about the job-search process or if you already have a degree and are seeking to forge a new path in academia, Chapters 1 through 3 will help you assess your fit at different institutions and provide you with suggestions for increasing that fit. If you are just starting out in grad school, these first chapters will give you an understanding of different career paths in academia and help you map out the next 4 or 5 years of your professional life.

A strong curriculum vitae (CV) and a positive reputation are not enough to land a faculty job. Even the most accomplished applicants will be rejected if they apply for the wrong positions or if their applications send the wrong message. So, Chapter 4 describes the methods for finding positions and narrowing them down by fit. Chapter 5 on CVs and Chapter 6 on applications describe how to create application materials that will convince search committees that your credentials match the requirements of a position. Chapter 7 focuses on the interview process, how to prepare for it, and the

Copyright American Psychological Association

ways that interviews are different by institution. Finally, Chapter 8 is about handling job offers and negotiations, which is exactly where aspiring faculty want to find themselves in the end.

Chapters 4 through 8 are most relevant to people who are actively preparing for a job search. However, I also recommend them to graduate students who are just starting to consider an academic career. Figure out now what it takes to land a faculty job and use that information to guide your professional development.

Going beyond the first eight chapters, even more resources are available in the book's Appendix, as well as on this book's companion website (http://pubs.apa.org/books/supp/boysen/). The Appendix includes a detailed timeline to help you stay organized during the months-long process of going on the academic job market. To help graduate students who are still formulating their professional plans, the website includes self-assessment tools for exploring types of institutions and checklists for key experiences related to research, teaching, service, and professional connections. To help people who are actively searching for jobs, the website contains examples of what standard application materials look like when applying for teaching- and research-focused positions. There are also checklists to help prepare for the application and interview processes.

Although this book is primarily for job seekers, my hope is that faculty who are training the next generation of psychology professors will read it as well. Faculty mentors should acknowledge that most graduate students will not become their academic clones. As such, they should be prepared to offer advice about academic careers at all types of institutions, and this book is an excellent source for that advice.

CONCLUSION

Differences between academic positions are profound. To take the most extreme example, the job of being a professor at a community college and a doctoral university just barely overlap. As such, when searching for new faculty at those institutions, the top candidates at the very best doctoral universities would not make the short list of job candidates at a community college and vice versa—fit with position matters that much. Aspiring professors take note: You would not want it any other way. The variety in positions and the diversity of qualifications needed to be successful in those positions provides you with the opportunity to become exactly the type of psychology professor you want to be. I hope this book helps you take advantage of that opportunity.