

*Swartz*



# American Economic Association

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## NEWSLETTER

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# A GUIDE TO THE ACADEMIC JOB MARKET FOR STUDENTS<sup>1</sup>

*Valerie Y. Suslow*  
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You are at least halfway through your thesis and Fall is approaching. It is time to make a decision, along with your thesis advisor, whether this is the year for you to go on the job market. Consider your advisor's opinion carefully. If she does not think you are ready, heed the advice. If she does think you will be ready, then get yourself set for the adventure of a lifetime!

The academic job market consists of seven distinct stages:

- Preparation of a paper and a seminar for the job market seminar;
- Initial contact with schools to request interviews;
- Calls from schools to set up interviews;
- The AEA Meeting, where the interviews take place;
- Flybacks to the schools for more interviews and a seminar;
- Job offers; and
- Total collapse.

This article will give you a brief tour of each of the stops on this job market trip and offer some helpful hints.

## Preparation

In order to go on the job market, you will need a paper (preferably a chapter from your thesis). Have your advisor and other committee members or faculty members at your department read it and give you feedback. At most, one person at each of the universities to which you send this paper will read it. Many more will skim it. Because of this last point, you need to pay particular attention to the introduction and conclusion. Make sure the introduction is well-written and summarizes the major points of the paper. You may want to include an abstract that emphasizes its major contributions. The paper should be ready for mailing by late October.

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<sup>1</sup> Although this article concerns academia, much of the advice in it applies to searching for jobs with research institutions or government agencies.

When you are invited to visit a school, you will be asked to give a seminar based on your paper. It is critical that this seminar be smooth and polished. Start giving seminars in your own department as soon as you have a paper in progress that you expect to be included in your thesis. Your seminar will improve with age. Not only that, but you will improve in your ability to anticipate and field questions, which is an important skill to develop.

### Contacting Schools

There are several ways that the initial contact can be made. Usually the first contact is made by the department when it sends out the curriculum vitae (and perhaps abstracts of papers) of all the graduate students who are looking for jobs.

Consult your advisor about which "fields of interest" to indicate. It is a mistake to define yourself too narrowly at this stage. Potential employers will survey this information and call or write asking for your paper. Some departments have a standardized form for their students' vitae. Sadly, many of these forms still ask you to list your marital status. You do not have to give out this information. If your department is still including it, approach the placement officer and ask that the form be changed for the benefit of future graduate students.

The second avenue for contacts to schools comes from your advisor or any other faculty member who knows you and your work. Personal recommendations are helpful at this stage. In the early Fall, you should compose a list of schools that you would like to contact. The American Economic Association's publication *Job Openings for Economists* is the major source for academic job listings. Certain advisors will be willing to write or call some of the schools on your list, while others will not, so be sure to ask. If more than one faculty member is willing to help, show them your list and ask if they would feel comfortable calling any of the schools listed. Make sure that those who are doing the calling know your work.

Finally, you will prepare "packets" containing a cover letter, vita, and paper to send to all of the schools contacted by faculty on your behalf, as well as any other schools that you have chosen. Arrange to have three letters of recommendation sent to each of these schools. If a school's search committee is highly organized, they will let you know if they are missing material to complete your file. Don't count on it. It is a very busy time of the year for all faculty and administrative personnel. Packets have gotten lost in the mail, or buried under a stack of *Wall Street Journals* in someone's office. It is **your responsibility** to make sure that the schools have all the information they need to make an informed decision.

### Setting Up Interviews

In early December, you should start getting calls from schools that would like to interview you at the AEA's annual meeting. Don't turn anything down yet, unless you are absolutely positive that you are not interested. You should already have registered for the meeting and have received information about the hotels being used for the conference as well as a small street map showing the various hotel locations. When setting up the interview, ask how long the interview

will be and in what hotel. Try hard not to schedule back-to-back interviews at different hotels if at all possible. The elevators are notoriously slow at these meetings, it takes more time than you think to get from one hotel to another, and some interviews start (and end) later than scheduled. You should also feel free to ask who will be present at the interview.

If you are fortunate enough to get more interviews than you know what to do with, you may face the difficult dilemma of canceling an interview with a less preferred school in order to make room for another. While you should not abuse the ability to do this, you should make the difficult phone call to cancel the interview. It is not fair to the school or to other candidates to take up the time slot unnecessarily. However, if you have the time, keep all of the interviews. This job market process serves as your introduction to the profession, so take advantage of it. Faculty members actually remember these interviews for several years. If your first position does not work out to your satisfaction, you will be grateful that you had a chance to introduce yourself to a large number of schools.

### The AEA Meeting

The most important logistical fact to know is that hotels will not give out room numbers of individuals. You have to call and ask to be connected to the room in order to find out the room number. Don't expect anyone to be in the evening before the meetings start. You can call first thing in the morning (say, around 8:30 AM) to obtain the room numbers for your first few interviews. Allow some extra time for this if possible, since the phones will be jammed. Alternatively, some schools post their room or suite number on the message board located in the conference registration areas. Sometimes the school will tell you when the interview is set up that the room number will be posted under a certain person's name or even under a code name. You should also check with your own university's suite, if there is one. Other students may find some room numbers and pass the information along.

At the interview, you will be asked to give a short description of your thesis. Have about a ten minute talk prepared, but do not be surprised if you are interrupted with questions. Practice this talk with friends before the meeting, so that you are comfortable with it. Make sure that the description you give of your work is designed for a general audience. There may or may not be a faculty member in your research area at the interview. Also, be prepared to talk about what your research plans are beyond your thesis. Do not give a laundry list of topics. One or two well-thought-out ideas are more impressive. If your research is applied and you have empirical results to discuss, be sure you can attach some meaning to your numbers. Know the literature that you cite in your paper. It is likely to come up in the discussion and at least one of the interviewers may be familiar with it. Also be ready to discuss teaching. Finally, have a list of questions ready (in your mind, not necessarily written down). Salary is not discussed here, but teaching load and research support are common topics. More creative questions are always appreciated. Avoid questions that are stated in a challenging tone: although it is true that these interviews are a two-way street, you do not want to make the faculty interviewing you feel as though their credentials are being questioned. Realize that how you will fit in as a colleague is also being judged. At the end of the interview, the faculty will usually spend some

time telling you about the department, university, and geographic location.

Last but definitely not least: be sure to shake hands with everyone upon entering and leaving the room, and be sure that while you are talking you make eye contact with all of the faculty who are interviewing you.

### Flybacks or Visits to Schools

In January and February, schools will invite you to visit for more interviews and a seminar. If you do not hear from them, you can call or ask your advisor to call to find out what is happening. The goal is to ascertain if you are on their "short list" of interviewees that they plan to invite. If you receive an invitation to visit a school, you can call another school in the same area of the country and inform them that you will be "passing through." It never hurts to ask and they may decide to have you out if they are at all interested.

The flybacks are a wonderful way to meet people (not to mention the airline miles you can accumulate!). Try not to schedule too many in one week, and definitely try to travel light so that you don't have to check luggage. Practice your seminar again at your own school before you go out on the road--it is critical. If your research area is highly theoretical, be careful to know your audience. The entire department will be voting on you and you do not want to present a seminar that only one or two faculty members understand. Keep the equations to a minimum and have a handout prepared. Use easy to understand examples to illustrate the important points.

Throughout the day of your visit, you will be shuttled around to different faculty members' offices for half-hour or forty-five minute interviews. Some faculty will spend the time discussing substantive issues and asking you questions. Others will let you direct the interview and will indicate their willingness to answer your questions. Take advantage of these people! Talk to as many faculty as you can about the level of research support or the standard teaching load, so that you know what to ask for if you receive an offer.

### Negotiating a Job Offer

I will only say a few words here. Obviously, the strength of your bargaining power will depend on whether you have any other offers. As mentioned above, it is essential that you talk to other faculty members at the school so that you can be informed before beginning the bargaining process. Ask for everything up front--that is, a higher salary if you have a better offer, a moving allowance, a lower teaching load, summer money, funds for a research assistant, travel money for conferences, even specific course loads for the first year or two. Get as much of the agreement as you can in writing.

## Total Collapse

With the end of the job market process comes exhaustion and anticipation of your new position. Take some time off to renew your strength and then batten down the hatches and get that thesis finished before you start teaching. It will be an enormous weight off your shoulders if you can finish. If you have a new course or two to prepare, you will find it difficult to budget time for your thesis once you start teaching. If you know you won't be able to finish (and you should never say this at the interview), then you might want to try to negotiate a course off or a fall semester or quarter off in your first year.

## *Notes for Women in the Job Market*

There are a few things that women should be aware of in preparing for the job market.

### At the Interview

- Dress appropriately: Either a suit or a nice dress with a jacket is acceptable. Loud colors (for example, hot pink) are not considered appropriate, but the suit does not have to be navy blue. Don't choose short, tight skirts or dramatic makeup.
- It is especially important for women to appear confident and self-assured at the interviews. The majority of the time, women and men candidates are assessed equally. But there are those who need convincing, so be positive!
- Some of you may have to face being asked what we all know are illegal questions. They can come in many forms: Are you married? Do you have any children? There are a variety of ways to handle them. One option is to avoid any conflict and answer the question. Another option is to challenge the interviewer in no uncertain terms. In between these two alternatives lies a third option: If you are comfortable doing so, you can say "Why do you ask?" This response lets them know that you are aware that they should not have asked that question and yet gives them the opportunity to say, for example, that they are willing to assist your spouse in finding a job.

### On the Flyback

- Find out how many women are in the department. Are there any senior women? This could be an important signal for the future.
- Along the same lines, seek out any women assistant professors and ask them for an honest assessment of the environment for women. Many women faculty will

make a special point of informing women candidates on these matters. This advice extends also to learning what you can negotiate over if offered a job.

- While visiting a school you may run into a male faculty member who makes inappropriate remarks (or jokes) in your presence. Realize that he is not representative of his colleagues, who will very likely be embarrassed at his remarks. It is probably best to ignore what was said: Just smile and let it pass. Do what you must to maintain your self-respect, but keep your own self-interest in mind as well.

## MENTORING AND BEING MENTORED

*Rebecca Blank  
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In the academic world, graduate students and junior faculty members are often greatly helped when a concerned senior colleague takes a personal interest in their work. Graduate student training is still largely based on an apprenticeship model, whereby graduate students learn how to do good research by working with and for their faculty advisor. Even after finishing a Ph.D., an advisor often serves as an ongoing source of support in the profession. Given the way promotion and tenure decisions are made, senior faculty are typically expected to serve as mentors and advisors to junior faculty in their field.

I have been fortunate to find a series of persons who have acted as mentors to me throughout my career, starting with my high school debate coach. All of these persons were men in a more senior position than myself. As I moved from being a junior to a senior colleague, I tried to identify what made the mentors in my life so effective and useful, as I have tried to find ways to be a mentor to my graduate students and to junior colleagues. While some persons are simply better at mentoring than others, there are things that institutions and individuals can do to improve the advising/mentoring role of senior colleagues.

What makes a good mentor? Probably the most visible characteristic is that a mentor takes a proactive interest in a student or junior colleague. Mentors do not just respond to requests for advice and help, they actively seek out their junior colleagues and ask after their current projects. They pass along their names to persons organizing seminars or looking for discussants. They essentially work as a "promoter" for the junior colleague in a useful way within the profession. Some of my best experiences as a graduate student or newly-minted Ph.D. came from being at conferences where I could never have invited myself, but where a senior colleague arranged for me to participate.

Sometimes good mentoring involves passing along information to students or junior colleagues that comes from greater experience or access in the profession. For instance, offering to read and comment on a junior colleague's first effort at a grant proposal can provide useful guidance. Telling graduate students about regional economics associations or groups like CSWEP can help tie them into professional networks. In many cases, graduate students or young economists don't really know when they can ask for help and when they should be able to "figure it out for themselves" or they are embarrassed to bother someone who is busy. Making it clear that you are available to be "bothered" -- on both substantive research issues and on career issues -- can lead to useful conversations.

As we all know, however, many young economists find themselves in situations where nobody voluntarily comes forward to act as a mentor. While one cannot force an older colleague to be a mentor, there are active steps that young economists can take to make mentoring more likely. In essence, not only are there good mentors, but there are also good "mentees."

Being mentored is not a passive activity; a good mentee gives something back to her mentor. Sometimes this is just the admiration and pleasure felt towards someone who has the good judgement to take an interest in your work. But most persons who have close relationships with advisors and senior colleagues are also proactive in the way they relate to those colleagues. This typically means that they are curious and intellectually interested in their mentor's research and range of interests. They ask good questions and engage in lively conversations. The students whom I find it easiest to work with are those who talk back to me, rather than listening quietly to my comments. Some of my best learning as a graduate student occurred during "bull sessions" in my advisor's office where we got completely off our scheduled topic of conversation and became engaged in extended arguments about topics in labor economics. Yes, I needed an advisor willing to give me his time and energy for these conversations. But I also needed to be willing to ask the questions and to risk presenting my own opinions in order to initiate these conversations.

Institutionally, departments can also encourage mentoring. For instance, here at Northwestern the department has just initiated a policy in which all junior colleagues are officially "assigned" mentors from among the senior faculty. This both reminds senior colleagues of their responsibilities and makes it a little easier for junior faculty to ask favors of their older colleagues, such as "will you read a draft of this grant proposal?"

In a predominantly male profession, women often experience more difficulty in finding good mentors than do men and this may make it harder for them at the beginnings of their career. While I can personally affirm the possibility of good mentoring relationships between men and women, I know that sometimes it is easier for many women to approach other women with questions. For instance, female students who are not in my field will often seek me out for conversations about career and professional issues. While, of course, this takes time away from other activities, this is usually time well spent. Mentors can provide assistance to younger economists that is often not available in any other way.

## THE JOINT JOB-HUNTING PROBLEM

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The following is based on conversations with an unscientific sample of department chairs and individuals who have made joint job searches.

Look candidly at the market for your specialty and your spouse's--are you competing with each other in the same field or subfield? If you are, look specifically for schools and communities that have several sources of jobs. Searching among universities that have both a business program and an economics department, communities that have more than one college or university within reasonable commuting distance, and geographic areas that have other employers who may hire economists will increase the probability of finding two jobs simultaneously.

Decide in advance whether you require two job offers in-hand simultaneously or whether you are willing to accept one while continuing a search for the other. It is likely that you will be faced with this tactical decision at some point in your search, and it will be less traumatic if you have thought through the risks and probabilities calmly in advance.

Be straightforward about your situation in the cover letters for applications and in interviews with potential employers. You might say: "My spouse, who has a Ph.D. in physics, will also be seeking employment in the Boston area (in the university)." Alternatively, if you are not prepared for a commuter marriage or other separate working situations, you might say: "My spouse has been offered a position at (campus/firm) and I am seeking a position that would enable us both to continue our careers in Cleveland;" or "My spouse, a professional engineer, is also seeking a position that would enable us both to come to Cleveland."

If you are silent about this issue, employers will assume that you are prepared to make a decision on the basis of your own position alone. They will not look kindly on side conditions and "complications" that emerge after an offer has been made. Conversely, employers who know that you're facing a joint job decision are more likely to be active in exploring opportunities for a spouse inside and outside their own organizations.

In universities, it is essential that the department chair or interviewing committee know if your spouse is also seeking an appointment in the university. Ask directly whether the department or committee would be willing to discuss the possibility of an appointment for a spouse with other departments.

Be resourceful and persistent -- do some research on other possible employers in the area, and at some suitable point ask your interviewers: "Do you know someone in the biology department at (campus/firm) that my spouse might contact for possible opportunities?"; or "Do you have contacts in the community that might help my spouse obtain an interview?"

Universities and other employers are encountering joint job searches with increasing frequency. Joint job hunters need to be persistent, straightforward, and creative in helping employers help them.