

Summer PROFessional Development

Session 4: Why Hiring Committees at Primarily Undergraduate Institutions Want Faculty Candidates with Postdoctoral Research Experience.

Friday, July 24, 2015

This week included a panel discussion comprised of Luke Keller, Moria Chambers, and Carl Ferkinhoff on the topic “Why Hiring Committees at Primarily Undergraduate Institutions Prefer Candidates with Postdoc Experience.”

Luke Keller is a Professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Ithaca College. Having sat on several hiring committees he offers several important recommendations for job market candidates. First, candidates should note that a research postdoc is not a checkbox requirement for a job, but rather the postdoc is a way to show you can design and sustain your own independent research project. Second, the research postdoc allows a candidate to develop projects suitable for undergraduates at various stages of their own development. Luke suggests that candidates volunteer to mentor undergraduates or teach undergraduates during their research postdoc experience. Finally, Luke made special note that candidates who want to work at primarily undergraduate teaching universities should make a concerted effort to be the primary instructor of a full course. As a last note, Luke suggests asking several questions during the interview process: (1) ask what research resources are made available to newly hired faculty, and (2) ask how faculty interact and work with undergraduate students. In addition, he recommends candidates are prepared to answer the following: (1) what new course would you design for our department?, and (2) how would you approach teaching *course name*?

Moria Chambers is finishing up a postdoc at Cornell and will be starting as an Assistant Professor at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA in the fall. Moria suggests job candidates should structure their postdocs in a way to explore and design research projects amenable to undergraduate students. This may include finding projects that can be conducted on smaller budgets. Moria also recommends that the postdoc can be used as a means to engage undergraduate students. She set up a summer group which enabled undergraduates to engage in research early in their academic careers. Specific to the interview process, Moria recommends job candidates incorporate teaching into the research talk. During her interview with Muhlenberg College Moria engaged her audience with think pairs and questions during the research talk. As a final note, Moria recommends full honesty with supervisors during the postdoc experience; specifically, candidates who want to engage with undergraduates or teach during the postdoc should discuss these goals with their advisor early in the postdoc.

Carl Ferkinhoff is currently a postdoc at Max Planck Institute for Astronomy in Heidelberg Germany, but will begin a tenure-track position at Winona State University in January. Carl suggests that postdocs and graduate students should always be aware of potential job opportunities. He notes that while he wasn't looking for a new position, when Winona State University announced the available position he noticed the position met his job wish-list. He also notes that advisors of postdocs are aware that postdocs may leave early when they find an amenable match. Carl suggest candidates should use the postdoc to create projects that undergraduates can do and recommends collecting datasets that you can take to future undergraduate students. Carl recommends candidates think long-term about what you want to teach, and then use the postdoc as an experience to get ready for teaching undergraduates in that field.