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ADVICE

Embrace Your Inner North Dakotan

Mark Shaver for The Chronicle

By David D. Perlmutter | AUGUST 12, 2012

The number of conversations about doctoral education and the chancy academic job market has reached saturation. Everyone agrees we need more transparency, more realism: Getting a Ph.D. is no guarantee of permanent full-time employment in higher education.

In certain fields the odds of finding yourself on the tenure track, without debt, are low. You could end up adjuncting on food stamps or, most humiliatingly, erasing the doctoral degree from your résumé (no longer a "curriculum vitae") to avoid appearing unqualified for a sales job.

At the same time, most graduate students already know those somber facts yet still want to pursue their intellectual dreams. And thousands will succeed each year, so the "lottery" analogy is somewhat overwrought. It's just that many thousands more won't.

But however realistic candidates are about the market, their dreams can have elements that are self-defeating. One that has become clichéd is: "I just don't want to end up teaching in North Dakota." Some job seekers who express that thought mean the actual North Dakota. But even more project North Dakota as metaphor: They don't want to teach at an institution or in a location below the level—or perceived level—of their doctoral institution and their native region or city.

Last month I wrote a column about how you can show a department with a position open that you really want the job. Now I turn to another variable in obtaining tenure-track or full-time employment in higher education: persuading yourself to appreciate

different—not "lower"—standards for your first job. If you are seeking employment, not martyrdom, then a shift in how you view your potential employers is crucial.

Suppress pride, because attitude counts (and shows). Some new scholars stumble in the job search because of a too-obvious sense of self-importance. Typical examples can arise from among those trained at top-ranked doctoral programs. They have been excellent students their entire lives, winning awards and acclaim. Their professors have told them they are among the best of the best. Objectively they are. Their advisers propagate a cultural expectation of "peer, better, or bust." That is, the only acceptable position would be at a prestigious and similarly ranked institution or higher.

But the reality of the job market sinks in, and graduate students and recent Ph.D.'s find themselves applying for jobs at regional state universities, small religious institutions, or community colleges. And they *do* want the jobs, but grudgingly. Their body language, their tone, even some of their phrasing leak a sense of superiority, if not arrogance.

Again, you may be the top candidate, but if you have told the hiring faculty—in gestures or careless words—that they are beneath you, it is unlikely you will be hired. (For more on this topic, read the columns

of Rob Jenkins advising doctoral students on how to apply for jobs at community colleges.)

Understand the odds, and accept them. There are few doctoral students left in North America who assume that they are guaranteed a tenure-track position at the exact institution and location of their choice. Yes, all human beings are capable of delusional exceptionalism: The job market is terrible, but I will conquer. And maybe you will—it does happen. Our department has hired seven assistant professors in the past three years, and I honestly think we fit the profile of the kind of place they really want to be. Dreams accomplished.

But the casinos stay in business because of people who "feel lucky."

So another step in expanding your range of job targets is to do research on the market from your earliest days of graduate education. How many openings come up a year, on average, in your field in the part of the country or the world where you want to live? Track down who got those jobs: How similar is your CV, or will it be, to theirs?

Next ponder what the narrowed numbers mean. If there are only 20 departments in the United States where you want to get a job, and only two are in places where you want to live, are you chasing a dream or an illusion?

Think about why you're limiting your search. Make a realistic assessment of the jobs and the types of institutions you're interested in. Then ask yourself some questions about the ones that are not on your list. Why aren't they?

Take North Dakota: Why don't you want to live someplace like that? Are you imposing class, regional, or political prejudices without investigation? Have you ever actually visited Fargo or just seen the movie (which was not set there, anyway)? Have you talked with someone there—like an assistant professor—for eyewitness testimony?

Whatever your discipline or preferred research method, you probably believe it is a good idea to look into something before pronouncing expertise on it. Once you know more, think about whether some aspects of the location might not grow on you. Here in Iowa City we have a saying: "If we can just get them to visit, they will want to stay." Some job finalists from the coasts stereotype Iowa as a backwater. Then they come and find a decent economy, affordable housing, low crime rates, a booming "creative corridor," plenty of arts, music, and entertainment, a low-stress off-work life, a very civil society—and they end up remaining for a lifetime.

So ask yourself, must you like every feature of a place to want to work there?

A is for affordable. I knew an academic couple who got good jobs at good institutions in the big Northeastern city of their dreams. One year later they were on the job market again. They learned that their ideal lifestyle was possible in this desired locale—if they just earned an extra $1-million a year. They ended up in the South in a much smaller town and are much happier. Cost of living means something to anyone of adult years, but

as time goes by the cost of housing matters more and more. For one thing, it is never too early to plan for college for your children and for your retirement; every extra dollar that goes into stratospheric rent is a dollar unsaved for the future.

So price that dream carefully, or it may become an expensive nightmare.

Remember, you will be *very busy.* I once spoke with some tenure-track faculty members who worked at a small college in a small town. They agreed that "there is not much to do around here at night." But they further contended that that state of affairs had an unforeseen benefit: fewer distractions—offline, anyway—from work. One admitted that she would probably not have gotten tenure if she had ended up in the big university on the coast that she'd hoped for. The temptations of night life would have been too great.

At least in the early part of your career, a lack of things to do in your new town can be an advantage.

Things change, and so do you. Many kinds of change can affect how you appreciate a location. In my own research, I have been interested in the theory of generational preferences. In the area of cultural taste, at least, the "likes" and "dislikes" we develop in our teens and 20s can stay with us forever. (I still listen to Bruce Springsteen and Bob Seger.)

If you are starting out on the tenure track, you are still acquiring new hobbies and interests. Who is to say you won't discover those in North Dakota? I have met academics from California or the Northeast who came to fancy fishing and hunting, kayaking and spelunking, or antiquing and gardening in their new hometowns in the Midwest, South, and Southwest.

So don't reject North Dakota because it may offer (or so you assume) less of some activity you like now. Maybe that activity will prove less interesting five years from now, and a Dakota-rich hobby will entice you.

The same principle may apply to your professional tastes. You may say now, "I don't mind teaching, but I find it's a grind. My research, meanwhile, is endlessly rewarding." So you cut teaching-oriented colleges out of your target list. But your teaching experience is

mostly in monster-sized intro-level courses. How do you know you won't enjoy pedagogy at a small liberal-arts college where the class sizes are smaller, the atmosphere is homey, and the pace less frantic?

And, of course, life circumstances change. The small town that seems like a trap when you are single and 27 may begin to look like a comfortable, safe, affordable place to raise a family when you are 32, married, and expecting twins. The bustling city center of your youth may become the clogged, long commute of your middle years.

Don't lock yourself out of job opportunities because you think your preferences will stay with you forever. Not every college, department, or town is right for everyone. But prejudices about places can be as irrational as those about groups of people. Our department's IT specialist, a North Dakota native whose spouse is a faculty member in the medical college, reflected to me: "North Dakota is not like New York or California, nor does it want to be. If you keep comparing your new institution with your old institution, implying that the old one did things the best way, you are failing to take the opportunity to look at your research and your outlook through the unique lens of your new location."

Indeed. The unhappiest people I know in academe are the ones who are stuck with a mismatch between their hopes and reality. But jobs today are scarce enough that you should not automatically refrain from applying for a position because, at first musing, you assume you will not like living in the area or teaching at that type of college. Think seriously about North Dakota before you reject it.

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