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Essay on writing a cover letter for an academic job at a teaching institution

Submitted by Terry McGlynn on January 24, 2014 - 3:00am

What is the role of a cover letter in the application for a faculty job at a teaching institution?

The primary function of the cover letter is to help you make the short list. Many search committee members use cover letters to cull the tower of applications to a workable height. If your cover letter doesn't communicate a good fit, then it's easy for your application to be tossed aside.

Once you're on the short list, your application will get scrutinized in more detail. Your cover letter, along with your C.V., is your foot in the door, before the door slams shut.

Because cover letters are used for culling, the absence of negatives in the letter is particularly important. In addition, there are a number of required elements showing that you are a potential good fit. Your letter can't have things that rule you out, and it needs to have things that take you to the next level.

It doesn't take a paleocytogeneticist to figure out that you need to identify the traits that are seen as essential, negative, and positive by the institution to which you are applying. You can do some research, but what a department thinks is often mysterious, even to the members of the department.

Regardless, there are a number of commonalities among most teaching institutions in how they pick candidates.

Required elements: These are needed to make the short list.

You are capable of teaching what the job requires. You have to be qualified to teach the courses in the job ad, and then some. If you haven't taught these

courses already, that's O.K. Be sure to explain what you have already taught, where you've taught it, and that you're fully prepared, and excited, to teach what is in the job ad.

You are focused on teaching. There are different ways to communicate this fact, but it has to clearly emerge throughout the letter that teaching is your highest priority.

You are serious about research, and discuss it in the context of undergraduate mentorship. Be clear that student research experiences are integral to your research. This doesn't have to be the purpose of your research, but nearly every undergraduate institution is expecting its new faculty, especially in the sciences, to substantially engage students in research.

Your research program is workable on campus. Nobody is going to want to interview anyone whose research looks like it isn't compatible with the campus. It needs to be obvious that your research can continue after you move. If your work has involved specialized locations or facilities, you need to make it clear that you have a way to continue a productive research agenda after the moving. (For example, since my research is based in a different country, then I have to mention that I always do my fieldwork in summer and winter break. Another approach would be to indicate that I'm prepared to operate my research program locally.)

You're not a weirdo. Being a weirdo isn't just a negative; you have to actively not be a weirdo to get on the short list. What does a weirdo look like in a cover letter? Well, a weirdo has a weird cover letter, meaning that it appreciably deviates from the norm. Be normal in the cover letter, just do it in an excellent way. One exception is if the search committee is composed of weirdos. This is academe, after all.

Negatives: Stay away from these things in the cover letter.

Research comes before teaching. At a teaching institution, teaching comes first. That means, literally, that teaching should be mentioned first. Don't be more excited about research than about teaching.

Research gets more verbiage than teaching. You're being hired to teach. I understand that describing your research program in the level of detail you wish might take three paragraphs. But that would require at least three better paragraphs on teaching. And if you did that, your letter would be too long.

Not doing your homework. There could be many small things that could suggest that the applicant hasn't taken the time to learn the basics of the campus. Don't mention that you really want to teach a specific class that is clearly the territory of someone else. Don't say that you would like to teach the laboratory of a course which is offered without a lab. Don't refer to a department-less program as a department, and don't use acronyms or names for things on campus unless you know those are in common use.

Typos. One can be overlooked, but two is mighty bad. Be careful to avoid cut-and-paste errors that show traces of other applications. Of course everybody knows that applicants apply for many jobs, and this isn't fatal, but it obviously doesn't look good.

Educational mumbo-jumbo. It would be great if your teaching included quickthinks, think-pair-share, formative assessments, and used Bloom's taxonomy to formally establish expectations. To many academics at teaching institutions, especially in science, you'd be overbearing if you wrote about it in your cover letter. You might not even want to mention clickers unless you know the department has already adopted them. Many scientists, even at teaching institutions, are threatened by other scientists who are progressive in finding effective modes of teaching. You can present yourself as a progressive, experienced and innovative instructor without making the recalcitrant relics in the department think that you've gone to the dark side of education.

Namedropping. Let your C.V. and reference letters speak for themselves, especially if you were blessed with a pedigree including Dr. Famous. Keep in mind that small campuses have people in such divergent fields that Dr. Famous might not even matter to your audience.

Boasting. The cover letter is not the place to mention awards you've received, big papers you've published, or big grants you've landed. That's on your C.V. and it can speak for itself. Discuss your projects, but not the amount of money

connected or who funded it. If you have a record of external funding, then say in your cover letter that you intend to continue the projects that you've been running.

Discussion of the nice location of the campus. Anybody can waste words about the perfect weather in coastal Southern California, the great cultural scene in Los Angeles, New York's great bagels, that charming rural towns are great places to raise families, and that Andy Warhol came from Pittsburgh. To say so is cloying, unless you're a Warhol scholar.

The mistake that being a student informs you about the life of a professor. Many people who apply to liberal arts colleges mention that they were liberal arts college students, suggesting that this experience gives them a better preparation for the job of a liberal arts college professor. This argument is both pedestrian and non-compelling. We are smart enough to read your C.V. and connect the dots. It's O.K. to mention it, but don't write about the topic as if you have some magical level of understanding, unless you attended the same school to which you are applying for a job. Being a student at a liberal arts college doesn't help you know what it is like to be a professor at one. If you imply this idea, you could sound a little naïve.

You're coming up for tenure. The longer you are in a faculty position, the harder it is to move, unless you want to become an administrator. If you want to move from one job to another, it's possible, but you have to convince the committee that you're really serious about moving and that you're not just applying for a counter offer, or to test the waters. Don't mince words and be clear about your motivation if you want to leave. You also need to remain positive and not say anything negative about your current position. This is a delicate dance. Make sure that this is backed up by a letter-writer from your campus, who can be more frank than you. You need to bring this out in your cover letter so that the committee will choose to look beyond your C.V.

Expression of negativity about anything. Don't complain, don't make excuses, and don't air any grievances about anything. If your publication record is subpar, the worst thing you can do about it is to make excuses or promises. If you're looking to leave one job for another, or choosing one career path over another, your motivations need to be positive. You might be working in a

snakepit, but you can't speak badly of your current employer if you are to land a new one.

A future piece will discuss non-required parts of the cover letter that can make yours stand out in a positive way.

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