

Applying for a University Position What it Takes and What to Expect – Part 1

By John W. Parks IV

The following is Part 1 of the Future Faculty Initiative presentation I gave at the University of Rochester/Eastman School of Music in October 2015, called “The University Position: from a Percussionist’s Point of View.” The ideas and advice I shared at my alma mater that day were shaped and developed from my own experience, which spans three university positions and over twenty years of teaching.

More and more students are graduating with hopes of becoming university professors. The idea of running your own program, being able to pass your knowledge to the next generation—it’s very exciting! Plus, I think it’s the best job in the world: working with incredible undergraduate and graduate students, playing whatever you want, whenever you want, wherever you want, having tons of equipment that you don’t have to buy personally, going on tours, presenting clinics, performing as a soloist, playing with other faculty members, giving guest-artist residencies, being a member of the local professional symphony orchestra, coming back to the University of Rochester to speak—the list goes on and on!

Before we jump in, let me share a pivotal personal moment. I had graduated from Northwestern with my second master’s degree, and was fortunate enough to get my first job at 24 years old. I worked for three years, loved it, and then came to Eastman. It was here I decided that although I loved my first job, which was more like having ten jobs (small program; I was teaching percussion, directing the marching band and everything that came with that, directing the jazz ensemble, teaching jazz fundamentals, music appreciation, and aural skills), I felt that I could perhaps narrow down the list of responsibilities when looking at potential positions—although it’s important to note that I still applied for everything, no matter what.

So I was very focused on taking orchestral auditions and applying for university positions geared towards my areas of interest and

expertise. In speaking with colleagues one day over coffee, someone asked me which job I would rather have: full-time playing or university professor. I sat there for a second and then listed all of the things I thought were good and bad about both, and decided that the university job probably fit me best—although while on the audition circuit and also applying for everything else, you really can’t choose: the opportunity most often chooses you! Which-ever happened first was fine with me, truly, and that was my moment. And now I am the luckiest person in the world; I have an amazing job working with some of the best percussion students in the country, teaching at one of the oldest, largest, and most respected music institutions in the United States, along with performing and teaching all over the world. I just finished my twelfth year at FSU, and I still pinch myself about how fortunate I am to be here.

So let’s start at the top. For every university position, there are basically three kinds of applicants: (A) those who aren’t experienced enough, but apply anyway for the heck/practice of it, (B) those who might have enough experience but have a high number of exclusionary points in their paperwork, playing, or references, and who are usually passed over as a result, and (C) a few people, say ten, who could probably all do the job equally well.

So here’s how the process works: I’ll list as much about what’s happening with the search committee, you as a candidate, and everything else I can think of in some kind of discernable order.

STAGE ONE

First, someone in a position has to retire, move to another position, or have a new position created (usually when a school finds the money to make an adjunct position go tenure-track) in order to have an opening. Typically, these situations are known a good while before the job is advertised; sometimes there will be a one-year position available if the current

teacher leaves late in the spring before the next school year or if the job is in the process of going from adjunct to full-time. So you would either hear about the opening from friends, teachers, or colleagues in advance of the advertisement, or you would see the advertisement on the MVL listing (or any number of higher education job websites), or in the Chronicle of Higher Education.

There are basically three levels of jobs: (A) Entry jobs: typically percussion and something else (marching band, theory, music history, jazz band, whatever)—usually in smaller music departments who tend to hire younger professors either right out of school or soon thereafter for a variety of reasons, (B) Second-level jobs: much more specialized—most likely teaching percussion, drumset, running the ensemble, etc., and (C) Super-specialized jobs: schools where you might have more than one percussion faculty member, and you are hired to teach in your specialty area.

Here are some hard facts: One of the biggest prerequisites for second-level and super-specialized jobs is proven success in the entry job. It is exceedingly rare for a student fresh out of school to get a super-specialized job; it takes time, experience, and a track record of professional and student success to be competitive for the bigger, more specialized and prestigious positions. So you will want to have some kind of idea about your viability as a logical choice for the position before you kill yourself getting everything together. If you have any doubts, ask your teachers or contact some colleagues about it.

A search committee is assembled of faculty members from the university, and they write a job description, filling in the potential salary, qualifications, contact information, and some general information about the school. This is approved at various levels of bureaucracy, and then the ad goes out.

Meanwhile, the search committee members, as well as other members of the faculty, are already talking to their friends about possible

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candidates. This all comes from the “Degrees of Separation” theory, which paraphrased posits that everyone is connected to everyone else by six people. In music, it’s one or two degrees maximum. For example, if I were to meet you for the first time, or hear you play something, you would know every single person that I know by one degree of separation. In other words, I would be the conduit between all of my acquaintances and you. Conversely, everyone you know would be separated by one degree from me. And also important, anyone who doesn’t know you (but wants to) may know someone who knows me. In short, everyone knows everyone.

Then the advertisement comes out, and many people on the faculty have already been calling people to let them know about the job opening. You will find out about the job through one of the ways mentioned above, and since we’re pretending that you’re going through this for the first time, here’s what you need to do, regardless of whether or not you are going to apply for a particular job; the following needs to be ready to go almost at a moment’s notice.

The first thing the committee sees is your cover letter. Before I had a job, I created my own letterhead in order to look ultra-professional, and I had done enough research on the job to find out who the Chair of the search committee was—and therefore I could address the cover letter directly to him or her, rather than going with “To Whom It May Concern” or something similar. The trick in a cover letter is to give a taste of your experience and personality—but without being arrogant. It’s tough because you have to be your own cheerleader, but the line between experience highlights and perceived conceit is very thin. I’ve made available a version that I use (and my graduate students use) just for fun; you are welcomed to use the basic format if you and your advisor deem it appropriate for your specialty; basically, it’s a paragraph to announce your intentions as an applicant and introduce yourself, then a few paragraphs to address the advertisement language (what they are looking for and how you could fit the position), and then a short paragraph to thank the committee for their time and consideration—which I

think is just good manners. To receive a PDF of a sample cover letter, email me at Jparks@fsu.edu.

The cover letter is, in some ways, the catalyst that gets them to look at your CV or resume. If the cover letter is off-putting or has grammar problems, it’s easy for the committee to put you in the “no” pile right off the bat. *So make sure that you have your materials proofed by at least three other people before it’s uploaded or goes in the mail.*

Next, you should put together a CV/resume, list of references, and have supplemental materials if they request them. The basic difference between a CV and a resume is the amount of material; I find it easiest to cull the resume from a good CV; that way you have both handy and can send whichever one the search committee requests. You might be asked to send a CD or video of your playing at this point, or a committee may wait until they have eliminated a large portion of the pool before committing to watching the videos and listening to CDs.

THE CV

Basically, when building a CV or a resume, you want to be “leading” from the upper left in every category. The way in which you list your name, address, phone numbers, and email address can be left up to you, but generally that’s the first thing on the document. Believe it or not, I once saw a resume that had the candidate’s weight, age, sex, etc. listed in the first blurb of information. Don’t do this, as it’s an Equal Opportunity Employment (EOE) violation (the committee is not supposed to know what you look like, whether or not you are married, your sexual orientation, etc. They can figure it out, but don’t you tell them). The first thing after that will be your list of Educational Institutions, which I usually list as simply “Education.” Again, how you set it off is up to you; some things look better than others. Experiment and be sure that at least ten people look at it for aesthetics, grammar, spelling, and truthfulness. To receive a PDF of a sample resume and CV, email me at Jparks@fsu.edu.

EDUCATION

You want to make sure that the most impres-

sive thing is first under each category. And consider the different impacts these choices make.

Example 1

August 1997–May 2001, DMA, Wherever State University

Example 2

Wherever State University, Wherever City, Wherever State

Doctor of Musical Arts in Percussion Performance, May 2001

Example 3

Doctor of Musical Arts in Percussion Performance (May 2001)

Whatever School, Whatever City, Whatever State

Example 1 is fine, but it doesn’t lead with the most important information—the fact that you have a Doctoral Degree. That’s what people are looking for immediately: do you have the degree, and where is it from? Either of the other examples is fine; the trick is figuring out whether or not your doctoral-granting institution is worth listing first (how impressive is it), or whether you should start with the degree. For me, it was an easy choice; not many people have a DMA degree in percussion from the Eastman School of Music, so I led with that on my resume.

The Education heading is the first eliminating content element. Some schools are “yes”-pile schools, some are “maybe,” and some are “no.” You can figure out which ones belong to each pile, and I know it seems harsh, but it’s that real-world thing we were talking about. Anyone who thinks that all degrees are equal, no matter which school they are from—for example, the difference between a degree from the Eastman School of Music and a degree from some small, super-isolated school—is in for a big surprise. This is one of the things you need to figure out when researching the people in the positions you want to be in; you’ll find that almost all of them have one or two schools/teachers in common.

Then you list your master’s degree(s) and bachelor’s degrees(s) in the same format. You could list them chronologically, but it takes time for “committee eyes” to find the first thing that they are looking for, and you don’t want those people looking for something longer than necessary. When a committee member is looking at 150 resumes, the slightest thing may cause yours to go into one of the three basic piles.

The next thing people will want to see is your teaching experience. Go from the most recent to the least recent; in other words, if your most recent experience is a teaching assistantship, list that, then go backwards through your other experiences, listing significant responsibilities, albeit briefly. I cannot stand looking at huge

paragraphs of responsibilities under assistantships, and really even jobs. Everyone on that committee can read through it and recognize padding. Be brief, but strong.

Next, you might list your Performance Experience. I typically start with the professional ensembles, then go through the various things I did in school.

PERFORMING EXPERIENCE

Example

Professional

Some Professional Symphony Orchestra, Your Position, Dates

Here's the important thing. Say you were fortunate enough to perform as an extra with a major orchestra, like Chicago. Listing "Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Percussion, 1996" is a little misleading, even if you did play a few concerts as an extra that year. You might want to list the orchestra, put "extra percussion" or "utility percussion," then the dates. That way you get the point across, but without any room for misinterpretation. Imagine if someone on the search committee knew Cynthia Yeh, David Herbert, Jim Ross, Patsy Dash, or Vadim Karpinos and decided to give them a call and say, "Hey, I see you know Bob." And they say, "Bob who?" Not good. I also like to see the organizations or solo venues listed in order of importance. If you played with a major group, you would want to list that left-high, rather than leading off with the local community orchestra.

For school stuff, list the groups in order of importance. Listing solo degree recitals is not necessary, as it's not necessary to list every single time you were on stage. Just hit the heavy points and it will not look padded.

FSU requires all faculty members to have a CV in their online database—which means that the format was already determined by the time I had to input all of my information. So don't freak out when you see how long it is; that's just what FSU wanted—not necessarily what a search committee would want.

It's important that you document everything that you do as a faculty member for two reasons: (A) you will likely have some kind of annual review with your Chair or Dean, which will require some paperwork to demonstrate your level of effectiveness in the job, and (B) it's an easy way to see everything you've done, rather than trying to remember it all when you have to apply for something.

REFERENCES

Only list people who really know you and know your current work—and people you trust. Most job descriptions will ask for three references and three letters of recommendation. The truth is, they will contact people other than your references, whether or not they have to observe any strict kind of guideline. Here's

Committee members are looking for anything to disqualify you, especially when dealing with a large number of applicants.

where the degrees of separation can help or haunt. It's really important to keep this in mind during your daily routines, because you never know who knows someone. Maybe you are the world's greatest timpanist, and your conductors and teacher love you and think you are the living end. However, you tend to skip theory class, always turn things in late, and maybe once you became a little impolite with a faculty member. Maybe that professor is best friends with someone on the committee. So you have all these letters and calls from people saying that you're great, but one teacher says that you're a jerk and an academic slacker. You're probably out, especially if there's any kind of concern along those lines in other areas (transcripts aren't terrific, others acknowledge your prodigious abilities but wouldn't trust you to spell Shostakovich if their lives depended upon it). Search committees want to hire the best possible combination of performer, teacher, and, especially when you get to the final round, *a great colleague*—someone they will enjoy working with and having on committees, and someone they feel isn't an idiot, jerk, or know-it-all, regardless of the playing level.

RECORDINGS

Depending on the job description, you will probably have to send in a CD or video at some point. It's important to lead with something really strong, and the CD needs to be *really* good. Make a good recording, or use something from a recent recital if you have some tracks you can use. And make sure that you include a variety of things on the recording—some solo marimba (maybe two pieces of contrasting styles), timpani, multiple percussion, maybe some drumset if it's on par with everything else. Maybe a hand drumming solo or a movement of a concerto that you've played recently. It's all up to you and what the people on the committee are looking for. You wouldn't send an entire CD of marimba rep if the program is looking for a drumset specialist. Make sure the CD sounds great, and also that you design a nice jewel case; many of the CD duplication programs now come with jewel case designing features. Make sure that it looks sharp, and it's not just a regu-

lar case from Office Depot with a "Cool Colors CD-R" covered in Sharpie ink.

This next step is incredibly important, and becomes much more so if you make it to a second or third round. You must find out as much as you can about the school by doing some Internet research. Just about every program in the country has a thorough website, and you can look at curriculum, facilities, know how many students/faculty there are, know who the other faculty members are (very important), as well as check out where they went to school—which can illuminate connections with you or your advisor/major professor. And don't miss the deadlines for submission of your materials. Most programs are operating under an EOE situation, which demands equal treatment of all candidates. You wouldn't believe how messed up this can get! So just be on time with everything.

STAGE TWO

All of the applications are in (on time!), and the search committee will be instructed to look at all of the materials before their next meeting. That meeting will involve the first round of cuts, in which the majority of applicants will be taken out of the running. Many programs publish a list of qualifications for the job, which is listed on the description; however, they also may have a secondary qualifications list that is not made public, and those things can be used to disqualify a candidate.

At the end of the process, the chair of the search committee will have to send a list of every candidate who applied to the EOE office, with a reason for each candidate's disqualification. Sometimes this comes from the secondary list. But you shouldn't worry too much about it; you'll never be able to second-guess a committee. Just be yourself, and hopefully that's exactly what the committee will be looking for!

The committee members will go through each file and make notes on whether or not a candidate is a yes, no, or maybe. These decisions are made on simple things sometimes—for example, if the job description requires a doctorate, and you don't have one, that's a pretty quick no. Perhaps you misspelled the name

of the institution to which you are applying, or sent the wrong cover letter, or something along those lines; committee members are looking for anything to disqualify you, especially when dealing with a large number of applicants. So this meeting usually starts off with listing the ten or so candidates that everyone likes, and then there's a ton of discussion on the maybes. Eventually a "short list" of six to ten candidates is compiled, and the second stage of the search begins.

Typically, if you make it past the first round, someone from the search committee will let you know that your references are being contacted. This is a courtesy, although sometimes is not done. For example, let's say you would rather not have your Chair or Dean (or your colleagues) know that you are looking at other jobs; this is the time where you might ask the committee not to contact certain people unless you reach the final round. It is at this point that you will want to do more Internet research and solidify your potential interview recital program with as much practice time as possible between rounds. The time between your finding out about a finals situation and actually visiting the school could be as short as a week or as long as a month or so. But if you have to go first, and haven't prepared for the recital, you could be in trouble. Believe me, everyone else on that short list is preparing at this stage, and so should you.

This is definitely a critical time—and I speak from personal experience on both sides of this process. You'll want some of your more powerful references to make some phone calls to the committee. Yes, the committee members will be contacting your references, but you might want some extra help. A phone call from your teacher can go a long way. I remember when I was in the second round for my first job; John Paynter made a personal call to the Dean of the school on my behalf while on a conducting tour, and within two days I was invited for an interview. It was not coincidence. The trick is to make sure that people are helping you, but without flooding the committee with too many calls and/or extra letters. When I applied for my second and third jobs, only three letters were required; I think the committee received at least six, along with a lot of phone calls from various people. That, along with the word-of-mouth that comes through the degrees of separation, can be a huge help in getting to the finals.

This is also the time people will be listening to your CD and/or watching your video. Remember that many search committees these days include students—in this case, percussion students, who more than likely will know the repertoire and will be able to spot the things that percussionists tend to focus upon when evaluating other percussionists. Keep this in mind when putting that recording together. A inaccurate recording of "Velocities" on your disc is not a good idea.

The committee will meet again after all the reference calls and supporting materials are reviewed and make the cuts to two to four finalists, depending on how much money the program has to spend on the search. After the list of finalists is approved by the administration, finalists will be contacted and interviews will be scheduled.

There is some speculation about where you would want to be concerning the order of interviewees. Going first, second, third, or last each has advantages and disadvantages. For example, you could come in and blow people away with your teaching and playing, but a month later when someone comes in and plays just as well, and the committee meets soon afterwards, that last interview will be fresh in their minds. I would always want to be last if I had a choice.

Part 2 of this article will be published in the July issue of *Percussive Notes*, taking you inside the on-campus interview including the solo recital, public teaching demonstration, conducting/rehearsing the percussion ensemble, teaching the methods class, meetings with current students, the search committee, an open faculty question/answer session, a meeting with the Dean or Deans, and meetings with other areas affected by your position.

To receive a PDF of the appendices including a sample cover letter, resume, and CV, email the author at Jparks@fsu.edu.

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PAS THANKS ITS ALL ACCESS PASS FRIENDS

Anders Astrand . John Baldwin
Andres Bautista . John R. Beck
Robert Bell . Michael A. Bennett
Paul Berns . Joel Bluestone
Jerry J. Bolen . Karl Boudreaux
Michael Bump . Paul L. Buyer
Ruth Cahn . James B. Campbell
Ben Cantrell . Steven Day Carter
Stephanie Sambol Carter
Manuel G. Chapa Jr. . David R. Ciarvella
Gary Cook . Diane Downs
Karl Dustman . Peter Erskine
David P. Eyler, DMA . Genaro Gonzales
Brooks Gornto . Michael Gould
Jim Guglielmo . Jonathan Lee Haas
Chris L. Hanning . Stefon D. Harris
Jeffrey Hartsough . Douglas Hazelrigg
Richard L. Herndon
George A. Hill, III, D.Min.
Julie A. Hill, DMA . Jim Holland
Richard Holly . Steve Houghton
Christopher Karabin . Michael Kenyon
Glenn R. Kotche . Adam Laarman
Johnny Lee Lane . Deborah Loach
Trina Tait Martin . Brian S. Mason
William Moersch . Jeffrey M. Moore
Ken Murphy . Valerie Naranjo
Christopher S. Norton
Eugene D. Novotney . Gary J. Olmstead
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Mickey R. Price . Lisa L. Rogers
Jim Royle . Sherry D. Rubins
Jim Rupp . Alison Shaw
Mark Stempel . Brian Stephens
Saturnino H. Tiamson, Jr.
Joseph Tompkins . Chris W. Treloar
Richelle Treves . Lauren Vogel Weiss
Kelly Wallis . Brian A. West
Gregory W. White . Brian Zator
Glenn Zeinemann