The Academic Job Search

Ana Klimovic
aklimovic@ethz.ch

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About Me

- Graduated from my PhD at Stanford University in June 2019
  - Worked on storage system design & resource management for cloud computing
- Currently a Research Scientist at Google Brain in Mountain View
  - Working at the intersection of computer systems and machine learning
- Assistant Professor in Computer Science at ETH Zurich, starting Aug. 2020
This Talk: Advice for the Academic Job Search

1. Before you apply
2. Applying
3. Interviewing
4. Getting the offer(s)
Preparing for Academia during your PhD

- Focus on doing good, impactful work rather than maximizing publication count
  - You will be asked to present the work you are most proud of: a cohesive story highlighting your major contributions, not a core dump of everything you’ve worked on.
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● Get some teaching and mentorship experience
  ○ See how much you enjoy teaching/mentorship and build experience to discuss in your application
Deciding Where to Apply

- Only apply to schools you think you would accept an offer from
  - Ask yourself: “if this was my only academic offer, would I accept?”
  - Do not waste your time or other people’s time.

- Know which criteria are important to you. Some to consider:
  - Research vs. teaching focus of the institution or position
  - Caliber of students the school attracts (often related to the school’s ranking)
  - Faculty in the department you can collaborate with
  - Funding support and expectations
  - Opportunities for collaboration with industry
  - Geographic location
  - Personal factors
Applying for an Academic Job

- Materials to submit for an Assistant Prof. application at a research institution:
  - **Research statement**: 3-5 pages describing past and future work
  - **Reference letters**: 3-5 letters from faculty members and/or industry researchers
  - **Teaching statement**: 1-2 pages describing your teaching/mentoring experience & what you want to and are qualified to teach
  - **Curriculum Vitae**: include your degrees, awards, papers, talks, press, teaching, etc.
  - **Cover letter**: 1-1.5 page summary of your application and why you are a good fit
Advice for Putting Together Your Application

- Explain your work in simple terms. Emphasize the impact of your work.
  - Your application will be read by faculty from the whole department, not just experts in your field. Ask friends from other fields for feedback on your research statement.

- Spend time thinking about your future work directions.

- Read lots of example statements.
  - Sources can be your department, friends, mentors, online search, etc.

- Reach out to reference letter writers ~2 months before your earliest application deadline. Meet with them in person to discuss your application material.
Interviewing

- Interview format:
  - Usually 2 full days
  - 1hr public talk (“job talk”) + Q&A about your work and future research plans
  - 1:1 meetings with faculty in the department (~30-45min each)
  - Meeting with Dean and/or Department Head
  - Meeting with graduate students
  - Breakfast, lunch, dinner
Advice for Academic Interviews

● The job talk is critical:
  ○ Emphasize the big-picture significance and impact of your work
  ○ T-shape structure: lots of breadth, but still demonstrate strong technical depth
  ○ Include ~7-10 min of future work discussion to get people excited about what you will do next
  ○ Watch multiple job talks as examples. My talk is online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ulSJvG5Zo&t=50s

● Ask for your interview schedule ahead of time
  ○ Look up the people you will meet with, make some notes about what to tell and ask them

● Prepare LOTS of questions to ask them!

● In 1:1s, highlight what makes you a good candidate, even if not asked this directly

● Go to the bathroom often between meetings, it is the only break you get!

● Be enthusiastic, genuine, curious. Enjoy the opportunity to chat with professors.
Common Interview Questions

- Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?
- What does success look like to you?
- Tell me about your future research directions.
- How large of a group do you want to have?
- What is your advising style?
- Why this school?
- What do you want to teach?
- Why do you want to be a professor? Why not go into industry?
- What do you consider your greatest (research) accomplishment?
Getting the Offer

● Go for a second visit
  ○ Great opportunity to ask more questions, meet with more faculty, explore the surrounding area, get a sense of housing options, etc.
  ○ Your partner/family is often invited to join too

● Negotiate
  ○ Everything is negotiable (salary, startup package, start date, partner’s job opportunities, etc.)
  ○ Think about what will help you be most successful. It is also in the university’s interest to help you be as successful as possible. Win-win.

● Timing
  ○ Do not get pressured into making a decision on short notice before you are ready.
  ○ It’s ok to ask for an extension if you need it.
Making a Decision

● Hopefully, if all goes well, this will be the most difficult part :)

● Reflect about the criteria that are important to you and analyze how closely each option aligns with these criteria.
Final Thoughts

- There is a lot of randomness in the hiring process. Focus your attention on the things that you can control, rather than those outside of your control.

- Enjoy the process of telling the story of your research work and meeting with many brilliant professors with whom you may collaborate one day!