

Report on the 2020 Job Market Survey Conducted by the Consortium on Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition

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In June 2022, the Consortium on Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition (CDPRC) distributed a job market survey to the Writing Studies Listserv and the CDPRC listserv, inviting recent graduate students in rhetoric & composition and related fields to complete it. Those who graduated during or after 2020 and applied for academic and/or non-academic jobs during that period were eligible to complete the survey. The Consortium was especially interested in learning about how COVID-19 had affected the job search process.

In this report, we highlight major findings from the survey and discuss implications of these findings for both future job seekers and their mentors.

Summary of Responses

Demographics

49 respondents completed the survey

35% of respondents were in their 5th year of a PhD program, 25% in their 4th year, 20% in their 7th or more years, 18% in their 6th year, and 2% in their 3rd year.

The vast majority of respondents identified as white (82%) with the remaining respondents distributed as follows: Asian/Asian American (5%), Hispanic/Latinx (5%), multiracial (5%), and preferred not to say (5%).

Respondents identified overwhelmingly as female (77%), followed by male (14%), preferred not to say (5%), and two write-in options, genderqueer and queer cis man.

Job Market Preparation

40% of participants began preparing to apply for jobs in their 5th year or later, while 26% began in year three, 21% in year four, 6% in year two, and 4% in year one. Participants used a variety of resources to understand the market, the top being *Inside Higher Ed* (17%), RhetMap (16%), RhetComp Wiki (13%), MLA Joblist (13%), and *The Chronicle* (12%).

To prepare for the job search, most respondents worked closely with their **dissertation chairs** (41 of 49) and **committee members** (27 of 49), as well as **peers** (29 of 49).

When asked **how their programs and mentors could have better supported them** while on the market, participants selected the following answers: creating a **formal program** or course (26%), sharing **sample materials** (23%), assigning a **formal mentor** (13%), encouraging participants to **start sooner** (12%) and to **work with a group of faculty** (12%). A number of participants provided write-in answers to this question, several of which focused on **the need for more varied preparation**:

“Greater support for applying for alt ac jobs and decreased pressure to snag the "plum" TT R1 job.”

“Have advice for non R1s, or just admit not all jobs are the same. The advice I got was all very R1 centered, even my interview prep for a teaching focused job.”

“Program/curriculum better suited to job market demands, more focus on preparation for/availability of AltAc jobs.”

Job Applications

Although job seekers applied for a variety of academic positions, of the 49 who responded to the survey, **the greatest number applied at Research Intensive (R1, R2) institutions (private, 32; public, 40)**. A significant number also applied at 4-year private (35) or public (38) **teaching-intensive schools**. 33 applied at **small liberal arts colleges**, 19 at HSIs, 16 at 2-year colleges, and 6 at HBCUs.

In addition to faculty positions, **43 participants applied for academic staff positions**: 19 in writing centers, 9 at Centers for Teaching and Learning or similar contexts, 9 in first-year experience programs, 3 in faculty enrichment centers, and 1 in grants and awards offices. Fewer but a still substantial number of participants applied for non-academic positions, which broke down as follows: 8 in editing and publishing, 6 in technical writing, 4 in nonprofits, 1 each in grant writing and governmental positions, 2 each in communication/media, museums, and libraries, and 1 each in digital humanities centers and healthcare.

Market Experience

When presented with a range of adjectives to **describe their experience on the market**, **participants ranked them as follows, leading with negative-leaning descriptors**: anxiety-inducing (36%), exhausting (21%), frustrating (14%), demoralizing (13%), tedious (12%), lonely (10%), exciting (5%), and affirming (4%).

We asked participants what they purchased for their job searches and how much they spent out of pocket. Their purchases included clothing (30%), subscriptions or services like Interfolio

(23%), travel costs for which they were reimbursed (20%), technology (13%), and travel costs without reimbursement (10%). Write-in entries for this question noted transcripts and luggage and travel accessories. **In terms of expenses, there was no discernible consensus.** While four participants noted that they spent at least \$1,000, two spent \$5,000, six spent \$200, and two spent \$50.

Since this group of participants searched for jobs during the global pandemic, we wanted to know how this reality shaped their experience. **Responses revealed many challenges posed by altered practices as a result of COVID-19.** Participants noted that searches were canceled, fewer jobs were posted, the process was isolating, and committee members were unprepared for supporting students in this environment. Representative responses include the following:

“I was on the market during the 2020-2021 AY. It was terrible to watch the jobs come out and know that hundreds and hundreds of people were all applying for that same minuscule number of tenure track positions. I felt helpless even though I trained for the market for years.”

“I was a candidate for three jobs that disappeared (I was on the market in 2019-2020), and the position that I accepted was frozen until two weeks before the start of the semester. I was not able to negotiate without risking losing the job.”

“Made the process more isolating, more difficult to seek feedback (especially because of the lack of informal opportunities that f2f environments offer); higher levels of anxiety in general because of the pandemic and the local political environment (an anti-mask state!).”

Even an initially positive response noting the **reduced time and expense due to less travel for interviews** led one participant to express concerns about equity during the interview assessment phase:

“As a poor graduate student, I was thankful not to have to travel for interviews. That really saved my wallet. However, one interview I had I was given the option of appearing in person. I know personally that the other candidates appeared in person and I was told that my teaching demo wasn't engaging enough. I can only imagine this was because mine was virtual since I received no other similar feedback on that presentation.”

Another participant voiced **appreciation for the move to remote interviews**: “I wouldn't have been able to go on the market otherwise. I had a newborn and was able to do all steps of the job search virtually.” Given that **39% of participants noted that they had significant childcare responsibilities**, it's surprising that this issue wasn't raised by others in their open-ended comments. And **childcare was not the only care responsibility or other obligation impacting participants' experiences on the market**: 24% held secondary employment, 15% managed elder care, and 3% managed medical care for a family member. In addition, **32% of**

participants reported having dealt with economic insecurity during their time in a doctoral program, 28% with major health or medical issues, 15% with disability, 12% with housing insecurity, and 6% with food insecurity.

43 of 49 respondents had accepted a position by June 2022. Of those 43, **21 (48%) had accepted tenure-track positions**: 13 (30%) at teaching-intensive schools, 6 (14%) at research-intensive schools, and 2 (4%) with administrative duties. 14 of 43 respondents had accepted non-tenure-track faculty positions, ranging from short-term visiting faculty or postdoc positions to continuing lecturer appointments to administrative support. One respondent accepted a non-academic job. Seven respondents chose “other” when asked to describe their position.

Open-ended Comments about Job Market Experience

At the end of our survey, participants were invited to add optional comments about their job market experience or advice to future job seekers. Twenty-one participants, nearly half of those who completed the survey, took us up on this offer. Their comments, raw and unguarded, revealed deep dysfunction within the academic job market process. They also offered shrewd advice for future job seekers.

On the job market process:

“The experience on the job market has been one of the ugliest things I’ve ever encountered. It has made me regret getting a PhD and question whether “academia” ought to exist given its rampant cruelty and disregard for the humanity of the people involved.”

“I was totally stunned at the lack of communication by search committees. I’d assumed that I’d hear from every place I applied to, even if it was just to say, ‘Thanks but no.’ I was totally ghosted by about 4 universities who never even confirmed that they received my materials. My lowest moment came when I interviewed with a school in early February and was told ‘you’ll hear from us in a few weeks’ and didn’t hear from them again until I got a form email from HR the second week of May, letting me know they weren’t going to hire me. I worked in industry before coming back to school and was totally floored by the totally unprofessional (not to mention ethically questionable) behavior of most search committees with whom I worked. Is this normal? If so, this is a total indictment of faculty hiring. People can and should do better. I finished my experience resolved to do my damndest to ensure that no hiring committee of which I am a part treats people this way.”

“It should not work this way. It is a joke that in our field it is so disempowering, disheartening, and exhausting. As a candidate I was often treated like crap—even for jobs that weren’t paying a living wage. No feedback, no follow-up, no discussion. Just ask a question and answer it. I regretted getting my PhD the most when I entered the job market—I can’t believe how bad it is.”

“The logistical challenges can be tough (every step of the application process takes longer than you think it will; and some online portals absolutely suck in terms of how they're set up and how long it takes to complete them). I also found it very challenging to split my time & energy between finishing the dissertation, doing my work as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, and applying for jobs. That combination created a lot of stress. I'm not sure what's the best advice for navigating that trifecta, however. Also, because my first post-doc faculty job is a one-year term, I'm right back on the market this coming season. So I'm a bit anxious, yet glad I completed the dissertation before the new job season.”

On varied levels of preparation:

“My cohort formed a group for job preparation, which helped to keep us each balanced in completing our dissertations and preparing materials for the job market. This was led by our dissertation chair and involved talking about the materials, viewing models, and sharing drafts for feedback. These meetings were invaluable and I believe were more effective than some of the formal courses I have heard are offered by other programs.”

“I have a Phd from a research focused institution. I was not encouraged nor provided guidance on how to apply for community college jobs, SLACS, religious universities, or teaching focused universities. My first TT job was at a community college and my second TT job is at a SLAC. I wish my research university had better prepared me for applying for those jobs. I had to teach myself what was needed and wanted in those application. I also wish there had been more guidance about what to apply for. Both of my TT jobs were not necessarily in my direct area of expertise. Both were ones I applied to because I kinda of fit, but not really. Yet, I got both because I fit what they were looking for. The guidelines from my research university was just to apply to 10 jobs. Well, I applied to almost 300 my first time and around 200 the second. These were over 9 different areas. I found this strategy to be very helpful, but it is one that I figured out on my own.”

“I've had my job for two years now, and I'm glad (so far at least) that I ignored advice about applying to lots of jobs all around the country and decided to prioritize a location where my friends and family live in a school with a strong labor union and lots of protections for non-tenure track jobs over tenure-track employment in a random place where I didn't know anyone and where I didn't want to live. I encourage job seekers to really think about what THEY want: not what people around them think that they should want. The job market sucks no matter what, and whatever happens (good or bad) has less to do with the candidates than with the incredibly fucked up labor system that we've collectively built. We need to be talking to job seekers about unionized jobs WAY MORE than anyone ever mentioned this to me. This matters a LOT!”

Advice for job-seekers:

“Two pieces of advice: (1) a year before actively searching jobs, sign up for job alerts for a variety of positions, read them, and see what ones make you excited. And (2) I figured

out a faculty job wasn't for me because I redefined jobs based on the tasks or skills they wanted me to complete; once I put that into perspective, I realized academic/professional staff better suited my goals to do exclusively course design work.”

“Other things I wish I had known: Keep applying, all the way up until it is time to move to the new job.; Don't be afraid to ask for what you need. If you need a break during an interview, ask for one. If you need accommodations of any kind, ask for them; PLEASE don't be afraid to negotiate! Think of it as advocating for what you are worth! You are helping yourself AND those that come after you.”

“start collecting sample job listings as soon as you can. Even if your focus changes, it's much more useful to know what required and preferred qualifications are while you still have time in your doctoral program to make yourself a good candidate!”

Themes & Recommendations

Although the pool of respondents was limited, responses were consistent enough to observe the following, which we pair with recommendations for students and mentors (note that our findings reinforce the recommendations provided in the [CDPRC Statement on Academic Hiring Practices and Graduate Program Support During COVID-19](#)):

- Most students began preparation for the job search in year five.
 - Job preparation needs to begin much earlier, at least a year to eighteen months prior to the market year, during which students could become familiar with trends in ads and have conversations with faculty members about support letters, teaching observations, and other high-demand materials.
- Mentors overemphasize preparation for research-intensive jobs.
 - More varied job preparation needs to be provided to support students interested in working at small liberal arts colleges, community colleges, comprehensive institutions, HBCUs, tribal colleges, religious-affiliated colleges, and schools other than research I institutions (e.g., [Cassuto](#); [CCCC Statement of Professional Guidance for Mentoring Graduate Students](#); López; Pandit). In addition, ongoing preparation for non-academic jobs is essential for widening students' possibilities upon graduation (e.g., [#alt-academy](#); [Connected Academics](#); [Hartman](#); [Wood](#)). Students should be introduced early in their program to the range of work they might do. They should also be offered opportunities to align their research, teaching, and service with their career goals. Such an emphasis would ideally have a trickle-down effect, inflecting research projects during course work.
- Institutions vary in how much preparation and support they provide to job seekers, from none to weekly professional development workshops.

- Graduate programs should provide students with structured and reliable support for the job search. At minimum, students need help understanding the job search process; creating job application materials (including seeing samples); practicing interviews, teaching demos, and job talks; and negotiating terms of employment. In addition, mentors should have conversations with students about what to expect in terms of communication from departments and human resources after submitting an application or completing an interview. The lack of communication can be excruciating for job seekers, who often endure radio silence for months before learning that they were not considered for an appointment. For detailed recommendations on how hiring committees might improve their communication practices with candidates, see the [CDPRC Statement on Academic Hiring Practices and Graduate Program Support During COVID-19](#).
- Students consult a variety of job search resources but need help navigating the varied and sometimes conflicting information they find.
 - Mentors need to be aware of current job market trends and be prepared to . tailor their job search support to individual students' career goals rather than offer one-size-fits-all advice. Attending webinars hosted by *Inside Higher Ed*, MLA, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, or organizations within writing studies will help mentors keep pace with changes in the job market and job search process.
- While the COVID 19 pandemic significantly impacted the 2019-2020 job search, the emotional and financial challenges experienced by survey respondents will likely continue.
 - Mentors and departmental leaders should take care to counsel students on the psychic and material effects of the job search process, doing their best to build supportive communities within their programs that encourage students to share information, materials, and feelings about the process. In addition, departments or university funding agencies should work toward covering travel and lodging for candidates up front in order to minimize out of pocket expenses.

Resources

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