

THINGS I LEARNED FROM THE JOB APPLICATION PROCESS

M. D. WILLS

This is just a grab bag of ideas that I learned when going through the job hunt for academic employment in 2004/2005. I applied these ideas for 2005/2006.

- **Start Early!** I started in late September 2004, and would have started earlier if it had not been for chicken pox. Quite apart from early deadlines, different colleges want different things as part of your application. Thus there is a lot of preliminary work to do. The main things that you will need are your CV, a research statement, and a teaching statement. Additionally, almost every college wants a cover letter. Although you should probably tailor your letter for each college, at least have a basic template prepared. It is recommended that you also have an AMS cover sheet prepared. Many colleges require (unofficial) copies of your transcripts. Other items that I have been asked for include a publication list, a research summary, a liberal arts statement (useful), a vision statement, an undergraduate research statement (trendy), sample papers, and evaluations from students. All of these things take time to prepare, so even if you do not plan to start sending applications until November, you will still want to be thinking about these things in October.

- **Ask for help.** The AMS web page (<http://www.ams.org/employment>) has a number of advice articles. I downloaded a few of them and referred to them frequently. I also talked with people I knew at colleges that I was considering applying to, as well as former UCSB grad students. All of them have their own insights into the job market, and all of those that I talked to were helpful.

- **Stay organized.** I think one of my greatest assets compared to other mathematicians is that I am relatively organized (in fact I describe myself as one of nature's bureaucrats but in fact staying organized was something that I had to learn). I know that it is hard to do this what with the sheer volume of correspondence on top of your research and teaching duties, but keeping everything sorted definitely helped me stay on top of things. Remember, a tidy desk is a sign of a small...er... I mean tidy mind.

- **Make a Web page.** This ties in with staying organized. I put all of my statements onto my web page and created retroactive course web pages, etcetera. This allowed me to have a very easy way of reprinting out my important documents whenever I ran out. It also allowed employers access to additional documents not included with the original application. Several employers told me that they used my web page to find out more about me (and were in general favorably impressed).

- **Be Selective.** I was fairly selective in my applications, and I still ended up applying to over 180 schools in 2004/2005 and over 100 in 2005/2006. This is partly because I did not stop applying for jobs until I had an offer. Still, I probably stretched myself a bit thin, especially in the first year.

- **Get on your Letter Writers.** Writing good letters of recommendation is hard and time-consuming. Ask your letter writers early, and make sure that they understand when you need their letters by. You should have at least four letter

writers. Some jobs ask for more but thankfully they are relatively few in number. One or two colleges want student letters of recommendation as well.

- **Give a talk at the Joint Meetings.** A weak point of my application is that I've not really given a lot of professional talks. Although there is a list of talks that I have given on my web site, only a couple could truly be called professional talks. In particular, in my first year of job hunting, I had not given any talks at Conferences, and I really should have at the Joint Meetings (in 2005/2006 I did). In 2004, by the time I found out that giving a talk was a good idea, it was past the deadline. This is one more reason to get started early.

- **Keep track of all correspondence.** I printed out all email correspondence in my file. I found it helpful to keep a list of schools that I applied to, and filing all correspondence accordingly. I did this even for schools that rejected me. This turned out to be a good thing, since one school that had rejected me later asked me for a phone interview. I also tried to keep track of schools that I had talked with at the Joint Meetings, had phone interviews with, and had made short lists with. I only shredded my correspondence after I had signed a contract.

- **Write a FAQ.** There are a number of questions that get asked at almost every interview- for example, why do you want to come here? Where do you see yourself in five years time? Describe your teaching style. Writing out answers to these common questions helped me a lot to prepare for phone interviews especially. (No- I did not have my FAQ in front of me!)

- **At interviews, dress professionally.** I got a suit from the Men's Wearhouse expressly for the purpose of interviews, INCLUDING the Joint Meetings. I suggest that gentlemen who are reading do this should take similar steps. Although I am not a 'natural' suit wearer, it has served me in good stead.

I can't really offer guidelines to women in this matter, apart from the generic 'dress conservatively'.

- **At interviews, bring smart casuals!** At all four of the interviews that I went to, there were occasions (usually evening meals) where they suggested that I wear casuals. As some of my readers may be aware, I have a suit look, an absurdly casual look, and have not in the past gone for much in between. Nevertheless, I felt that (for example) a Sex Pistols t-shirt was inappropriate attire even in a casual part of the interview, and was glad that I had something else. I think that a rugby top and jeans is fine.

- **Don't be either too formal or too casual at interviews.** At two of the colleges that I interviewed at, some feedback that I received indicated that I was too reticent or too reserved. At a third college, I was explicitly told that I was too casual (they were right). Unfortunately, individual colleges have different expectations and different standards. However, since I got offers from both of the colleges where I was too reserved and I did not get one from the college where I was too casual, I can safely say that it is far better to be too reserved.

- **Try to enjoy the interview process.** For me this was not too hard. After seemingly endless rejections, ambiguous phone interviews, and sheer overwork, it was nice to actually meet interviewers. I got to see a lot of the country, met a number of really cool people, and by and large make a good impression. Still, even this aspect can be frustrating. Some colleges have massive interview schedules set up for you. The post-interview process has a tendency to take the wind out of one's sails. Try not to get too depressed. Things can happen completely out of the blue.

Colleges who previously rejected you changed their mind; colleges who you hadn't even applied to expressed an interest in you; colleges who picked you second were turned down by number 1.

- **Go With the Heart.** I ended up having two offers in 2004/2005. Each offer had it's advantages. My head told me that one place was better, but my heart told me the other was. I went with the heart, and, despite the fact that this meant that I was on the job market again in 2005/2006, I think it was the right decision. Certainly, I got interviews and offers a lot faster than I did last year.

- **Don't neglect everything else!** For better or worse, life does not go on hold while you are applying for jobs. Try to allot time for research and teaching. Also, if you are an Associate, don't overburden your TA the way I did.