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Success in Higher Education: Before and After the Interview

by Dr. Giselle Wyers



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Ask anyone in academia, and they will tell you that landing a job in “the Ivory Tower” can be tough. The applicant/position ratio is competitive, and an advanced degree from a prestigious institution isn’t a certain guarantee of hirability. And even when you’re hired, a second challenge presents itself---obtaining tenure and promotion.

Academics going through the elusive process of getting hired and promoted often find that the information they most need cannot be found by reviewing class notes.

Practical wisdom—often a different beast than academic knowledge—is normally communicated in more informal ways, but should not be considered any less valuable or vital.

This fall, as part of a presentation on career development for the College Music Society’s National Conference, I sought out the opinions and advice of those many professors and administrators who have successfully navigated careers in higher education. What follows are my questions and some of the responses I received. It is my hope that by sharing this compendium of helpful anecdotes, students and professors in the first few years of teaching will feel a little closer to achieving their career aspirations.

What do you believe must be learned by music graduate students before they will be successful in landing and keeping a college/university position?

“Make contacts and cultivate them—with professors, other students and admired musicians in the field. Getting a position in the academy is mostly about having someone advocate for you, and keeping you informed of interesting opportunities.”

“Make a ‘perfect’ video and/or audio tape and packet, complete with curriculum vita, letters of recommendation and newspaper clippings.”

“Anticipate the questions that will be asked in an interview. Know what to say if you’re asked why you want the job. Have solid ideas regarding curriculum, goals for your students, and a plan for the future of your area of teaching.”

“As an administrator, I am very concerned about how many new faculty know NOTHING about the non-artistic sides of being a faculty member. It is crucial that candidates understand the workings of the college or university with respect to administrative structure, committees, and tenure process.”

“Remain broad and versatile while developing your skill base. Develop more than one area of expertise.”

“Foster a passion for your field that is infectious. Focusing on the passion is a positive way to balance the anxiety that comes with auditioning and interviewing, and can help you to keep going if the first interview doesn’t result in a job offer.”

What are hiring committees looking for as they peruse hundreds of applications?

“Reviewers are looking for a good match between the candidate’s strengths and the needs of the department. Personality will matter, as everyone wants a colleague they can relate to.”

“I’m looking for people whose ability and experience matches the job qualifications—and a degree from a prestigious institution never hurts!”

“I think the thing that gets someone the job is the questions they ask us—not the other way around. We want to know that the candidate has knowledge of and interest in our institution.”

What are “red flags” that administrators use to weed out prospective candidates?

“Weak letters of recommendation, or bad word of mouth information about the candidate.”

“Candidates who earned all their degrees from the same school, or who have short stints at many different schools.”

“Almost every administrator I’ve talked to has a horror story about hiring ABD’s (all but dissertation), only to have the person back out of the doctorate after they get hired. Many times the initial weeding out removes from consideration anyone without a completed doctorate.”

Once hired, what are your tips for success in college teaching?

“Make sure that students, faculty, and your department chair are aware of your successes. Communicate a long-range vision for your position. Demonstrate a good work ethic by going the extra mile for the department. Do the job that is advertised, but perform above and beyond what is expected.”

“Avoid gossip and politics; be savvy in building positive work relationships. Young faculty often come in with so much focus they go about their jobs with blinders on. Be sensitive to the needs of others around you—be careful, and try to read the signs of your colleagues with regard to you personally. Work well with and communicate with your director regularly.”

“Look for a mentor, both within your work environment and at other institutions. Just because you’ve completed school doesn’t mean you can’t continue to ask for help and advice!”

“Be smart in figuring out what is important and what isn’t. Find a balance between teaching, creative development, and service in your field. Continue to develop your professional skills so you remain competitive for more desirable positions in the future.”

What advice do you have for young professors seeking to obtain tenure?

“Do work of national and international significance. Put yourself on the map!”

“Ask your chair or dean EXACTLY what you must do to get tenure. Have a meeting with your chair every year to show him/her your tenure folder. Ask everyone in the department how they got tenure. If the department doesn’t have a tenure committee assigned to you, find one or two trusted faculty and use them as mentors.”

“Read your student evaluations carefully and adjust your teaching as needed. Positive student evaluations are crucial, since they are often the only documentation you’ll have of how you teach.”

“Remember that you will have to live with your colleagues for many years, if you are lucky. Faculty will tend to shun difficult colleagues, in effect isolating them. When the person comes up for tenure, the negative personality will

weigh first, followed by how they are doing in the position. So work to build and maintain positive relations in the work environment!”

In closing, it seems that colleges and universities best serve their students when they outline—early on—the non-academic elements involved in succeeding in the field. As musicians, it is tempting to view ourselves as solitary artists who will prevail through scholarship, hard work, and creative endeavor alone. Clearly we must focus on our art—but common wisdom also suggests that we must navigate our career paths with conscious direction, working cooperatively with colleagues and seeking advice from mentors along the way.

Dr. Giselle Wyers is Director of Choral Activities at Boise State University, and newly appointed Regional Chair of Youth and Student Activities for the ACDA’s Northwest Region. She holds a D.M.A. in Conducting from the University of Arizona, where she studied with Dr. Maurice Skones, and a Masters of Music from Westminster Choir College. Dr. Wyers has also served as adjunct professor of music at Lewis & Clark College, Linfield College/Portland campus, and Mount Hood Community College, and is in frequent demand as a clinician throughout the Northwest. Her article “Robert Kyr’s Third Art” was recently published by the American Choral Review (Summer/Fall 2001). Her dedication to exposing audiences to the music of contemporary American composers earned her a Medici Scholar Award in 1999. As a vocalist, Dr. Wyers has recorded CDs with the Oregon Repertory Singers (Fern Hill and Mass for the Earth, Koch International) and Linda Ronstadt (A Merry Little Christmas, Elektra Records).

W-ACDA welcomes Giselle as our new R & S Chair for Student Activities.

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