Hidden Curriculum of Faculty Job Search

By Unnat Jain

(PDF version)

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Application Packets

- **Apply on Time**
  While many schools accept late applications, some enforce firm deadlines. For instance, Stanford, CMU, CalTech, UBC, and UCLA had strict deadlines last season. UW's deadline was Nov 15—about a month earlier than most schools—but they considered late submissions into December. Deadlines vary, but most schools start processing applications by late December. To stay ahead, prepare packets early, share them with your mentor for feedback, and allow time for letter submissions before uploading to platforms like Interfolio and Academic Jobs Online.
- **Have a Voice in the Department**
  Having a "champion" or advocate in the department is crucial. These champions are often individuals you may not know personally but who are familiar with your work, credentials, or papers. Even a mutual connection can open doors. While cold emails may feel awkward, they're often more effective than having no advocate at all. Most schools match good candidates with champions naturally, but why leave it to chance? Often, this person will also host you during interviews.
- **Customize with Ease**
  Small tweaks to your DEI and teaching statements can make a big difference. For example, include specific courses and course numbers you'd be able to teach at each school. This not only tailors your application but also serves as a handy reference during later stages (like Zoom pre-interviews or on-site interviews). I highly recommend this approach.

Virtual Screens or Pre-Interviews

- **Specificity Matters**
  Once applications are in, schools often assess if you are "really interested" in them specifically. For virtual screens or pre-interviews, I recommend researching the department to demonstrate genuine interest. While it may feel like a strange game, it's essential to play along. Schools notice candidates who engage, and I've seen reviews mentioning, "candidate is strong but not interested in the department." This groundwork not only gets you noticed but also prepares you for the in-person interview stage.
- **Mini-Talks:**
  Some virtual screens include mini-talks. The length, format, and expectations for these talks

can vary significantly. Focus on a few key highlights of your work and clarify what the committee is looking for. Committee chairs or AI sub-committee chairs are usually good at outlining expectations, but don't hesitate to ask questions if needed. For example, one committee wanted to hear 1-2 research highlights, while another asked about potential collaborations I could initiate within the department.

- **FYI:**
  Not all schools require a pre-interview. Some, like UCSD, UW, and Georgia Tech, directly send on-site interview invites during the 2023-24 cycle.

On-Site Interview (1-2 Days)

- **The Big Talk**
  Your presentation is one of the most decisive parts of the on-site interview process. Preparation, practice, and polish are essential—but it's equally important to be realistic. Balancing your final PhD or postdoc year with job interviews can feel overwhelming, and things don't get done without deadlines. I realized that lining up your least-preferred school early could be a helpful strategy. It gives you a chance to make mistakes, learn, and refine your talk before presenting at higher-stakes interviews. On-site interviews are unlike anything I had experienced before, and my first visit gave me invaluable insights into how to adjust and improve for later ones.
  To make your talk impactful, plan when to finish each section to stay on track and stick to the time limit. Keep the content accessible—use large fonts, minimize text, and frame it for non-experts in your field. Adding light moments or humor can also make your talk more engaging. By the time you get to schools you care most about, you'll feel much more confident and prepared.

- **Meetings: Faculty and Student Chats**
  Beyond the talk, one-on-one faculty meetings and student interactions are just as critical. People notice when you've done your homework, so take time to learn about their work and come prepared to show genuine interest. Keep in mind that everyone you meet writes a review, including students. Even casual dinners are evaluative. Michigan set up a non-evaluative 1:1 with a faculty member, which was the only non-evaluative interview in my seven visits.
  At the same time, don't let the evaluative nature of these meetings prevent you from being yourself. These could be your future colleagues, so engage with them as you would with peers—be curious, professional, and approachable. For me, cracking a few jokes, sharing relatable frustrations about academia, and talking candidly about my research created a sense of connection and helped me leave a positive impression. Authenticity goes a long way.

Tips & Tricks

- **Schedule Your Interviews Quickly**
  Don't wait too long to reply to selection emails. These often go out in batches, and earlier responses usually give you more flexibility in choosing dates. This small act can save you from getting stuck with less-than-ideal schedules.

- **Interview Preparation**

  If you can, arrange a mock 1:1 meeting with a faculty member in your department, preferably someone outside your research area. Their perspective can help sharpen your answers for a broader audience. I also found it helpful to ask previous applicants about their experiences, particularly with department chairs, since those meetings can be quite different from faculty 1:1s. A resource like CS Faculty Guide is also great for brushing up.

- **Plan Ahead**

  I learned that scheduling interviews on Mondays or Fridays offers room to double-book if needed. For one intense week, I had an interview at school 1 on Monday and school 2 on Friday. It wasn't ideal, but it worked when I had no other choice. For all other weeks, I stuck to one interview, which felt far more manageable.

- **Showmanship Matters**

  This might feel a bit unnatural, but enthusiasm really counts. Things like a delayed response to an email or low energy during conversations can be misinterpreted as disinterest. I kept this in mind and made sure to stay positive and engaged throughout the process, even when it felt tiring.

- **Follow-Up After Visits**

  After your in-person visits, thank-you emails can go a long way in maintaining connections and keeping yourself on their radar. These don't have to be perfect—during my 7 visits (plus 1 research lab onsite), I couldn't send individual emails to everyone. Instead, I sent a mix of personalized notes to key people and general thank-yous where appropriate. It's a hectic process, so embrace the motto: "Perfection is the enemy of the good."

- **Remember, You're Interviewing Them Too**

  Use this time to evaluate if the environment is right for you. Look for potential collaborators, mentors, or even future friends during your interactions. This isn't just about them liking you— it's about finding the right fit for both sides.

Second Visits

- **Bring Your Partner or Family**

  Many schools will encourage you to bring your partner or family along for second visits. Two-body compatibility can play a big role in decision-making, and these visits help them gather valuable information. For example, my wife's preferences changed after visiting, and her feedback influenced my decisions too.

- **Ask Hard Questions (But Don't Overdo It)**

  This is the stage where you can ease up on the showmanship and have candid conversations about concerns. I suggest approaching this in "debugging mode"—ask, "What factors are preventing me from accepting X? Can you help me debug this?" This helps the school address your concerns in a constructive way.

  That said, balance is key. Don't let your questions skew overly critical; sprinkle in positives to show you're genuinely excited about the school. I learned this the hard way—during one of my later visits, I focused entirely on my concerns, and it gave the impression that I wasn't planning to accept, even though I was truly interested. A balanced approach goes a long way.

Offer Stage

- **Negotiate**
  Negotiation is essential—don't skip it. I know of offers that ended up being 2.5x their initial numbers. Start by preparing your ask ahead of time. Get feedback from recent faculty hires at top schools or from people you know have negotiated well. Once you receive an indication of an offer, start your homework. Look into details like student costs, overhead, salary ranges, research equipment needs, compute resources, and two-body constraints. The more prepared you are, the better positioned you'll be to negotiate effectively.
  Chairs play a big role here. A strong, helpful chair can advocate for you and often serves as your representative to the dean. Typically, they'll go to the dean around twice during the process, so your prepared list can help them make a solid case. There are no standard rules or packages—this process is highly subjective. However, one thing is non-negotiable: you must negotiate. Like every interview, express what you want clearly.

- **Verbal vs. Written Offers**
  Many online resources advise pushing for a written offer, and for good reason. In my experience, schools often expect candidates to communicate their startup needs and criteria to the department chair, which can involve several iterations before a formal offer is prepared. Document everything—keep an email thread of your discussions and ensure the final letter reflects all agreements.

- **Be Aware of Unique Opportunities (and Constraints)**
  Some schools are uniquely positioned to make extraordinary offers in certain years. During my process, I came across incredible options: one school offered funding for 5 students throughout the tenure process, another provided flexibility with H100 cluster credits and multibillion-dollar AI initiatives, and others allowed for a customized startup timeline. Public schools are less flexible on base salary due to public databases, but they can often adjust startup packages if you present competing offers strategically.

- **Understand What "Startup" Really Means**
  Negotiating startup funding is standard, but it's important to understand what it represents. This isn't just a gift—it's an expectation. Schools use this funding to jumpstart your research, but they also expect you to sustain it through larger grants. Essentially, your startup funding is an investment, and the ROI often needs to materialize by your tenure review or sooner. Some faculty described it as a business model (albeit in a nonprofit setting).

- **Funding is More Than Startup**
  While negotiating, don't focus only on the startup amount. Look at the broader picture of sustainable financing. Are there supportive grant offices? Senior faculty willing to mentor or collaborate? Demonstrated success in securing grants? These aspects can be just as critical as the number on the offer letter. Negotiate comprehensively to ensure you're supported on all fronts.

- **Two-Body Problems**
  If you have a partner, chairs, hosts, and dedicated offices can often assist with solving two-body issues. Even if your partner works in industry (like mine), schools usually have resources to help. Don't overlook this during the offer stage—it can make a significant difference. This process is deeply personal, so I encourage reaching out to previous candidates who've navigated similar situations. They'll likely be happy to share their experiences.

How to Decide?

- **Talk to People—People Help**
  Reach out to your close contacts and academics you admire. I spoke to over 10 people, many of whom I'd never met before, and they shared their decision-making factors, offer details, and experiences. Our community is incredibly supportive, but you have to make the first move. No guidebook exists for this—seek help actively, and you'll be surprised by how much people are willing to share.

- **You Will Not Have a Consensus**
  After weighing everything, I made my choice, but not everyone agreed with it. Some people supported my decision, while others suggested against it. Most ended on a kind note, reminding me that it's my decision and that I should go where I'd be happiest. You can't please everyone, and that's okay.

- **Intangibles Matter**
  Despite the earlier disclaimer about subjectivity, one realization stood out during my decision-making: some factors don't have a number, rank, or dollar amount, yet they're irreplaceably important. For example:
  - **Two-body stability:** Is the school accommodating to your partner's career needs?
  - **City vibe:** Consider the city's energy, weather, connectivity, and its proximity to friends or family.
  - **Department ethos:** Would you thrive in a department filled with like-minded researchers for collaboration, or do you prefer being a unique standout exploring interdisciplinary ideas? Do you need an external push from competitive peers, or do you prefer a relaxed environment with self-motivation? Would you enjoy learning from stalwarts in the field or carving your own path in a newer department?

  The old cliché, "Go to a place where you'll be happy," exists for a reason. Intangibles like these play a massive role in your happiness and long-term success, so don't let tangible factors like rankings, salaries, or startup packages overshadow them.