206 Understanding how Doctoral Students Prepare for Faculty Positions in Higher Education: Building Connection, Gaining Insight and Understanding Complexities

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Higher education is complex. While in a doctoral program, students might get limited insight into the complexities of an academic role and the faculty search process. This qualitative study examines the ways in which doctoral students can prepare themselves for faculty positions. Analysis of eight semi-structured interviews conducted with current and former school library faculty members suggests that doctoral students should hone their soft skills and use strategies to build connections, understand complexities, and prepare themselves. Examples of recommended soft skills include networking, self-presentation, communication, planning, time management, leadership, and cultural awareness. Examples of recommended strategies include attending conferences, going to job talks, being active in associations, mapping your skills with teaching needs, practicing for interviews, learning about location, socializing, using support options and conducting research. The study provides a foundation for future research including exploring the experiences of current doctoral students as they prepare for academic positions.

Full paper

Introduction

Universities as organizations are complex and doctoral students may not understand these complexities (Ghaffarzadegan et al., 2017; Rexroth, 2015) and may have a limited understanding of "what is needed to secure a job" (Fernandes et al., 2020, p. 1). In addition, the faculty job market is constantly changing (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Mathews, 2000) and it is increasingly competitive (Larson et al., 2014). Lightfoot et al. (2021) suggest that doctoral "students need help transitioning from their role as a doctoral student to navigating the academic job market" (p. 153).

This research examines the ways in which doctoral students can prepare themselves for faculty positions by developing specific soft skills and using specific strategies to build connections and understand the complexities of higher education.

Literature Review

Weston (2020) defines soft skills as interpersonal and intrapersonal transferable skills. Research detailed soft skills for all work settings (e.g., El-Fakahany, 2022; Robles, 2012), and for academic work in particular (e.g., Brungardt, 2011; Curtin et al., 2016; Dorenkamp & Ruhle, 2019; Kinman & Jones, 2008; Orsini & Coer, 2022; Strawser et al., 2022). Gaff (2002) and Hanson (2022) detail the gap between experiences in a doctoral program and the realities of an academic position. The academic job search landscape has been studied from multiple perspectives (e.g., Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Carter & Scott, 1998; Hsu et al., 2021; Iacono, 1981; Martin, 2017; Perlman et al., 1996). Lightfoot et al. (2021) explored the job search life cycle while Lantsoght (2018) shared a number of tips for successful career in academia.

Methodology

This research uses a generic qualitative research paradigm and aims to "understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23) by looking at how "social experience is created and given

meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 14). The research team conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with eight current and former school library faculty members. All the participants were women, spoke English, and were at different stages of their academic careers in Canadian, US, and Australian universities. Common themes and trends that emerged across the three researchers' analyses were gathered together (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998).

Emerging Findings

Findings from this research suggest that doctoral students should hone their soft skills and use specific strategies (see Figure 1) to gain a deeper understanding of academic positions.

Soft Skills

- Develop Networking Skills and Build Connections
- Refine Presentation Skills
- Enhance Communication Skills
- Work on Self-Presentation
- Improve Cultural Awareness
- Strengthen Planning Skills
- Sharpen Time Management Skills
- Revitalize Leadership Skills

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Figure 1. Emerging soft skills and strategies for faculty job search

Examples of soft skills include:

- Develop networking skills and build connections ("Build some connections there with people, get to know what it's like working at your university");
- Work on self-presentation ("Start thinking about you know how you want to present yourself");
- Enhance communication skills, particularly with strangers ("Try to get yourself used to talking to strangers, whether that's at a conference…");
- Improve your cultural awareness abilities ("...Having a sense of what the culture of that institution is or that department is…they can be quite different");
- Strengthen planning skills ("Figuring out your path like your five year plan…");
- Revitalize leadership skills ("Taking on leadership roles in those [organizations and associations]").

Examples of strategies include:

- Explore opportunities to attend Conferences ("You know ALISE has a job market and the program for preparing young faculty members…");
- Learn more about the location of your future employment ("Well, I would say location location location...Go to a place, you want to be…that's important");
- Be active in associations ("Build relationships through conferences and join organizations and associations…");
- Map your skills with teaching needs ("Making sure that the area that you're going to be teaching matches with your skill set...")

The emerging findings align with previous literature from different academic disciplines, for example, "impression management and self-presentation"(Cotten et al., 2001 p. 26); "do your homework" (Gray et al., 2019 p. 23; Carter & Scott, 2001), interview preparation (Stasny, 2001; Gray et al., 2019), presentation and communication skills (Iyer and Clark, 1998); networking and "conference attendance" (Camacho, 2014 p. 17); and, "...get a sense of the culture of the place" (Prieto, 2015 p. 48).

Conclusion

This research presents findings and enriches the research literature on soft skills and strategies that doctoral students can use to build connections, understand complexities, and prepare themselves when exploring faculty positions. The study provides a foundation for future research including exploring the experiences of current doctoral students as they prepare for academic positions.

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