

## A Guide to a More Effective Application

We recognize that candidates for faculty positions face difficult challenges, and we offer some guidelines to developing an effective application here.

The process is largely driven by qualitative factors. Search committees struggle to answer a series of questions – is she a good fit? – that can rarely be answered in the affirmative by a *pro forma* application packet and generic recommendations forwarded by some grad school office.

Applications which follow our recommendations will take more time to prepare than will a nearly generic application which only changes the name of the school and the position title from one application to the next. At Augustana, at least, an application which follows these guidelines is apt to receive far more attention than one which does not.

As with any best practices list, these suggestions represent an ideal, not a set of minimum expectations. Few of us ever attain the ideal, but it's probably worth the effort.

### 1. Learn about your audience

Successful professors thrive because they are a good fit with their departments, institutions and community.

You can improve your prospects of finding a great match by spending time answering for yourself this question: would I want to work there, even if I could? Try to find out what the faculty are like, what the institution expects of its teachers, how the students learn. Certainly start by checking the college's website and departmental homepages (at Augustana, the most current information is contained in the departmental profiles which are linked to our position announcements), but don't stop there. Check your professional association's on-line convention programs to learn the ways in which members of a department relate to their professional community. Google the faculty (or, better yet, use the scholar.google.com search) to see what interests they manifest, both on-campus and off.

In the end, you're seeking to answer the question “are these people whose passions I share and with whom I'd like to spend a lot of time?”

### 2. Take the position announcement seriously.

Our position announcements, supplemented by the information on this site, are carefully written to reflect abilities or experiences that we think are central to your success as a colleague. As a result, it's important to recognize and address each component (though you might speak more briefly to some than to others), Consider underlining each key provision (“experience in teaching intro level chemistry to non-majors” or “track record for integrating service-learning opportunities”), write them up as an outline and note next to each how you might respond. Show the outline to someone who knows you well and who might have suggestions for other responses or for how best to organize the ones you've got.

### **3. Craft your cover letter as an argument.**

Try to explain why you're one of the three or four best-fit candidates that the committee will review. This means enumerating – briefly but clearly – why your abilities match our needs. Candidates should not assume that a search committee will automatically grasp the significance of a factor that you believe is self-evident. You might, for example, believe that your grad department has a national reputation for excellence in quantitative studies but it is unwise to assume that the committee – comprised of faculty from a variety of sub-fields and at least one person from outside your department altogether – will share that assumption.

In short, if you have a particular strength, demonstrate it.

### **4. Admit to your limits as well as extolling your strengths**

None of us are universally competent and none are absolutely perfect matches for the positions to which we apply. Search committees recognize that fact. You'll get more credit for having the self-awareness to recognize your limitations (e.g., not having taught an interdisciplinary Gen Ed course before) than for ignoring them.

If there's a particular area in which you don't have ideal experience, explain why the committee might believe that you'd be easily able to acquire the necessary skills in a reasonable time. You might, for example, say “I've never taught a Gen Ed course of the type you've described, but I'm confident that I would be able to do so. That judgment is based on my experience teaching an extension course for adults, in which I had to doing the following three remarkable things. <Insert list of remarkable feats here.> Based on that experience, I believe <X>. I have also asked one of my references who has experience in this area to comment on her perception of my potential in it.”

### **5. Don't deny your passions**

All great professionals are passionate about some portion of their fields while they are merely perfectly competent at others. In the long term, you'll be happiest if you can feed your passions even as you allow for the likelihood that your passions will change as you grow. Consider whether we seem to encourage and reward what you most cherish. If so, we're probably a good fit for you.

If not, take a moment to reflect on your passions. Ask yourself what lies behind your passion; that is, what makes community-based learning (or conducting large musical ensembles or doing bench research) so powerful for you? It's possible that your underlying motivations match those of the institution you're examining, even if the surface manifestations do. In general, avoid applying to places which don't offer the prospect of rewarding those things which you value most. You won't like it there.

## **6. Don't overwhelm the committee**

All of the members of Augustana's search committees are faculty members who are carrying a full workload. While they are committed to doing a good job with the search, they are unlikely to have the time or motivation to read reams of material.

In general, don't submit anything that is not called for in the ad. Keep the material you do submit as concise and focused as the circumstance permits.

## **7. Focus your statement of teaching philosophy.**

Most of us probably can't quite say what our "teaching philosophy" is; we rarely think in such holistic terms and almost never need to articulate it. As a result, the sudden requirement to produce "a philosophy" can quickly yield pages of impenetrable edu-babble. On the whole, you'll probably gain more by isolating two, three or four things that are particularly important to your teaching. For each of that small number of points, follow four simple steps:

- State your argument: "I believe in high-engagement feedback."
- Explain your argument: "By that I mean that, especially on assignments early in the term, I provide my responses in writing to the student and invite him or her to identify evidence that my stated concerns are unfounded. We then meet in person . . ."
- Illustrate your argument: "In my Cell Biology section, for example, the first assignment required the students to do X. On one student's assignment, I offered the following feedback ... At the face-to-face, she argued . . ."
- Assess your strategy: "I have some evidence that this strategy heightens my students' critical reading of texts. For example... At the same time, I recognize some limits to it. One such limit ..."

## **8. If possible, get at least one letter of recommendation which is specific to this position.**

Generic letters, often written for inclusion in a credentials pack mailed by your grad school, cannot address the specific concerns held by individual hiring committees. Because most grad faculty are primarily familiar with life in a research university, they may unconsciously miss the concerns most pressing at a baccalaureate institution. In addition, generic recommendation packs create the unfortunately (though unintentional) impression that the whole application is generic; that is, that we are just one of 20 or 30 schools to which you're applying.

A tailored letter of recommendation, especially by a faculty member who might have a background with the sort of school to which you're applying or in the area highlighted in the job announcement, lend credibility to the application and might help address some of a particular institution's peculiar concerns. Not all letters need to be tailored to the position, though that would certainly be a nice touch.

In approaching a faculty member for such a recommendation, consider providing a précis of your research findings from Step One, the outline you prepared in Step Two and a copy of your cover letter. That will make the recommender's job easier, will allow her to focus quickly and well on the most important issues, and will probably impress the dickens out of her as well.

**9. Whether or not this is your first academic appointment, answer the question “why Augustana?”**

Address directly, perhaps in your concluding paragraphs, the question of fit. If, hypothetically, you've never attended an institution of fewer than 20,000 students and you're never spent any time west of the Hudson, the search committee will notice and might well ask whether you yourself think this is a good match. It would be prudent for you to address, as best you can, why you think it might be.

**10. When in doubt, ask us!**

Your success is important to us. We want your application to be as clear, relevant and powerful as you make it. Your success in representing your strengths is integral to our ability to find the colleagues best matched to our faculty. As a result, we're more than willing to help you to the extent we practically can throughout the application process.

If you've got questions about the college, the position for which you're applying or the state of your application, follow two simple steps:

If we haven't provided the necessary information on this site, then click on the “contact us” link – it's on the right of the top navigation bar on every page. Send your question. It will be routed to a special account which is monitored by a senior member of the faculty who has considerable expertise in Augustana's hiring procedures. At the moment, one person is monitoring questions pertaining to all 20 searches underway. Barring unforeseen circumstances (for example, an email server failure or a serious illness), he'll respond to you within one weekday. Sometimes the response will be a direct answer to your query. At other times, he'll let you know that he's pursuing the question with a department's search committee.

If enough similar questions arise to warrant it, the [contact](#) page will also include a list of responses to frequently-asked questions.

Good luck! We're rooting for you.