

PROCEEDINGS

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THE TOOLS FOR ENTRY TO LEGAL ACADEMIA

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THE TOOLS FOR ENTRY TO LEGAL ACADEMIA

LATISHA NIXON-JONES¹

After two years' experience teaching at my alma mater, Southern University Law Center, I attended the American Association of Law Schools (AALS) annual conference. The conference was both daunting and eye opening. I was surrounded by experienced professors who asked questions about my career aspirations and when I would go on "the market." I had no idea what they were referring to. I immediately employed the imposter syndrome victim's best friend—Google. Okay, first I cried and ordered cheesecake, and then I searched Google. I learned about the "meat market" and Prawfsblawg,² and I read articles on the process of becoming a law professor.³ I thought I was ready, but after directly applying to specific schools, I received only two offers to interview.

Then, after speaking at the Southeast Association of Law School's (SEAL's) conference and learning about visitorships, I decided to apply for a visitor position. To my good fortune, I was hired for a one-semester visitor position at Stetson University. Mentorship, paid housing, and the beach—what more could one ask for? The downside was that I was still commuting back and forth from Florida to Louisiana to care for my young children. The commute affected the amount of time I could spend on scholarship and publication. So, after consulting with my spouse, I applied for a two-year visitor position with University of Oregon School of Law and was offered the position.

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² Prawfsblawg, <https://prawfsblawg.blogs.com/prawfsblawg/>.

³ E.g., Association of American Law Schools, *Becoming a Law Teacher*, <https://teach.aals.org/clinical/hiring/>.

The team at Oregon prepared me for every phase of the market. With the team’s assistance and a better understanding of myself and the keys to success in academia, I went on “the market.” This time around, I received a number of initial interviews, callbacks, and even multiple job offers. In sum, the investments I made in preparing strategically for the process yielded a return.

This essay shares advice on successfully navigating the path to becoming a law professor in the “new normal” job market. As a first-generation, non-traditional, minority candidate, I am happy to share my journey to assist others seeking to open the door to legal academia.

“The Market” and FAR Form Process

Aspiring law professors eager to join the ranks of law school faculty will undoubtedly experience five seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter, and “the market.”⁴ The legal teaching job market is unlike any other law-related job market. The process requires the best and brightest to compete each year for coveted and scarce positions in the academy.

Historically, the legal teaching market begins with the submission of the Faculty Appointments Registry (FAR) form. The FAR form is the gatekeeper to most tenure-track academic jobs. Following submission of the FAR form, applicants traditionally attend the AALS recruitment conference, also known as the “meat market,” where hundreds of potential academic candidates gather in a Washington D.C. hotel to connect with hiring schools. The meat market acts as the impetus for the hiring season. After the meat

⁴ American Association of Law Schools, *Becoming a Law Professor*, Hiring Process, <https://teach.aals.org/clinical/hiring/>. Most law faculty hiring follows the average cycle of the academic hiring market: it is conducted on a national scale beginning in August and ending in late spring. Many schools seeking to fill clinical positions with unitary or programmatic tenure will follow the same timeline. Schools seeking teachers for other types of clinical positions may follow a different timeline altogether. This website also provides an estimated timeline.

market, schools generally start their initial callbacks. From there, candidates fly out to the schools to present their job talks and teaching demonstrations.

With the meat market cancelled due to the pandemic, my interviews and callbacks were nearly all virtual, so my experience differed substantially from the traditional process described above. Schools may decide to keep some elements of the remote hiring processes in future years, so applicants should be prepared for remote interviews, PowerPoint job talks over Zoom, Door Dash delivered dinner meetings, and perhaps even for making life-changing decisions about new jobs without ever physically experiencing the school or city.

The Tools

As a candidate on the job market, I developed a set of tools that proved successful in my search. While these tools are referenced in various sources, this essay organizes them into a condensed summary and highlights the importance of each tool. The three tools include (1) the keys to entry to the market, (2) a mirror for self-reflection, and (3) a support team to call on throughout the process.

Tool #1: The Keys for Entry to the Market

First, every candidate needs access to the keys for navigating the market. Those keys include:

- Extensive practice experience
- A fellowship or visitorship
- A strong GPA from a quality school
- Recent publications
- A well-crafted FAR form
- A judicial clerkship
- Law review experience

The more keys a candidate possesses, the more doors they can unlock. Each key may have its own individual strength. For instance, a strong GPA from a Top-14⁵ school will open a wide array of doors to institutions on all tiers. A strong alma mater paired with a federal clerkship or Supreme Court clerkship will open an elite set of doors. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not note that access to the above keys is not equal, and reliance on this collection of keys has historically denied and delayed equal access to some members of the academy. Minorities and women, in particular, have been blocked from achieving equal access to tenure and tenure-track positions and are often relegated to “pink ghettos.”⁶

However, candidates shouldn’t be discouraged, as institutions are making strides—though sometimes small—and many are advocating for increased pathways to the academy.⁷ Often, other doors and windows that allow access to the academy can be opened.⁸ For example, my journey included two visitor positions at top-ranked legal writing programs. The visitorships helped me develop as a candidate and produce publications, and they became an essential piece of the third tool discussed in the essay.

Tool #2: A Mirror for Self-Reflection

The second tool is a mirror to reflect the candidate’s strengths and opportunities. Mentors can train their mentees in best practices for teaching or how to publish quality scholarship pieces; however, a person’s character, background, and personality are their unique attributes. The mirror metaphor helps candidates identify

⁵ U.S. News & World Report, *2023 Best Law Schools*, <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools/law-rankings>.

⁶ Renee Nicole Allen, Alicia Jackson, & Deshun Harris, *The ‘Pink Ghetto’ Pipeline: Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Legal Education*, 96 U. Det. Mercy L. Rev. 525 (2019).

⁷ Meera E. Deo, *Trajectory of a Law Professor*, 20 Mich. J. Race & L. 441, 447 (2015).

⁸ *Id.* at 448 (the article explains how the expansion of pathways can increase and retain minority faculty).

their special traits and contributions and to gauge their potential success at an institution.

My gaze into the mirror began with a deep Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of myself.⁹ Through this analysis, I understood the strengths and opportunities in my curriculum vitae, practice experience, teaching philosophy, and the assets I could offer an institution.

I engaged in the SWOT analysis because I wanted to present the best version of myself but also to have a way to evaluate prospective employers. I developed a spreadsheet with at least ten requirements for schools that aligned with my values and goals. I would rank the schools in each category after each callback. The spreadsheet is a particularly valuable tool when a candidate receives multiple offers because it provides real-time metrics that can assist in the decision-making process.

Tool #3: A Support Team

The third tool is a team of mentors and advocates to guide a candidate through the distinct phases of the legal market process. The team should consist of

- Offense team members, who help prepare the candidate for the market,
- Defense team members, who act as references, and
- Special teams, or anyone in the academy or legal field that the school may call upon.

One of the unique aspects of the legal academy is the weight and scope of references. The FAR form and most applications require, at a minimum, three references. Those references can come

⁹ Mindtools, *Personal SWOT Analysis: Making the Most of Your Talents and Opportunities*, https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_05_1.htm.

from past employers, teachers, mentors, and judges. The more notable the references, the more weight they carry. Educating or prepping the references in advance is important. Make sure to update each of your references after initial interviews and update them again if invited for a callback. If you are interviewing at one of your top-choice schools, encourage mentors and references to convey that message to the school. Ask references to provide updates on any requests or calls from the school. This helps to gauge the school's interest.

Other members of the team may only be available for a moment or a task (e.g., to hear a moot job talk, to review your FAR form, or to read a job talk paper). Every team member does not have to remain on the team for the entire journey, but their contribution may be the most important asset on the journey to a permanent position in the legal academy. I recommend sending thank-you notes to team members throughout the process. Mentors are equally invested in their mentees's success.

Conclusion

When navigating the job search, candidates should ensure they have keys that will unlock doors, a mirror that will reflect the inspired individuals they are, and a team that will uplift and help them find their place in academia. My story shows that, with the right tools and support, the door to a fulfilling career in legal academia will open.