

# PROCEEDINGS

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FROM VISITING PROFESSOR TO TENURED PROFESSOR

AMANDA J. PETERS

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## FROM VISITING PROFESSOR TO TENURED PROFESSOR

AMANDA J. PETERS<sup>1</sup>

Even though the number of law professor job openings have increased over the last two years, the market for legal writing positions remains competitive. Many people are looking for opportunities to teach for the first time while others are looking to move from visitor positions to permanent positions. I'd like to share my journey—from practitioner to visiting professor to tenured professor—to provide insights and support to those hoping to take the same journey.

I was a trial and appellate attorney working in Houston when I learned that a former colleague had been hired as a tenure-track legal research and writing professor at South Texas College of Law Houston (STCLH). This sounded like my dream job! I had always loved writing and editing. But it wasn't until I served as an editor on a law review that I learned I also loved helping others improve their writing. I began to wonder whether I would enjoy teaching more than lawyering.

I decided to contact my former colleague and learn more about her job. Two years later, she informed me about two openings. I applied, and STCLH offered me an initial interview. The hiring committee narrowed more than 100 applicants down to seven, including me, and invited us to a second, all-day, on-campus interview and job talk. I first had to learn what a job talk was: a

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scholarly article presentation followed by questions from the faculty.

While I had written a lot as a lawyer, I had not published a scholarly article since law school. Knowing the faculty expected candidates to have recently published, I settled on a new article topic and began to research it before I applied. This paper became the basis of my job talk and my first published article as an academic. However, when I presented my job talk, the piece was still in rough draft form.

Unfortunately, I did not get an offer. Two better-qualified applicants accepted. Both had researched and written extensively as attorneys and had recently published law review articles. One had two years' experience as a visiting fellow teaching legal research, writing, and oral advocacy. Both had impressive academic pedigrees. Though I was disappointed, I understood why they were chosen over me. They presented more like academics whereas I looked more like a lawyer.

Three months later, I received a call from the associate dean, who told me a legal writing and research professor had recently left the school. She asked if I would be interested in a visiting professor position for one year. I accepted. It was May. I would begin teaching in August. I decided to wind down my solo practice, make an occasional court appearance, and work on a handful of cases.

I knew I needed to keep the academic door—with my foot in it—open. I created a checklist. First, I knew I had to publish. However, I had three young children. Thankfully, my husband, a teacher, was home that summer. He watched the kids while I wrote an article. The school provided a temporary office, a computer, and free Westlaw access. I quickly had to figure out the online scholarship submission process, which was new to me. And I had to prepare to teach my classes in the fall.

All my writing and research over the summer paid off; two weeks after the fall semester began, I accepted an offer of

publication. I crossed that off the list. The next tasks on my list involved making the most of my year-long visitorship. I focused on

- (1) being a good teacher.
- (2) being a good colleague.
- (3) finding faculty mentors who could help me adjust to academia, answer all my questions, and provide wise counsel when I faced a dilemma.
- (4) making an effort to attend events and meetings at my school. I attended all monthly faculty meetings and all job talks for other open positions (after checking with colleagues to make sure that was appropriate).

After the first year of teaching, I sat for an annual evaluation with administrators. I learned they would assess my performance based on teaching, scholarship, and service. (This is standard at all law schools.) I was asked to stay as a visitor for one more year. While I constantly sought to improve, I recognized this was a new field and I had a lot to learn. I also tried to give myself grace when I made mistakes.

Over the second summer, I wrote an article on a national topic (my first was on a Texas legal topic) to demonstrate I could write about broader issues with national significance and publication opportunities. I accepted a publication offer in the fall. When STCLH sought to fill the open position that spring, I applied and presented my job talk alongside three other applicants. I was offered the tenure-track position and accepted it. Six years later, I was tenured.

Before I offer hiring and application tips, I'd like to discuss visitorships more generally. First, understanding the difference between a visitor and visiting assistant professor (VAP) position is important. VAP programs are designed to be a springboard to teaching opportunities at other schools. STCLH has hired several

visitors from other schools' VAP programs over the years. While VAP programs tend to be structured, they can vary considerably depending on the institution and its goals. When you are hired as a visitor to merely fill a vacancy, like the position I filled, the experience is often what you make of it. Visitors of this kind may or may not have writing support, designated mentors, or an expected teaching curriculum to follow.

Whether applying to be a VAP or visitor, or for full-time employment of another kind, applicants who have a specific school in mind, like I did, should call and ask questions. I spoke to two faculty members, one of whom was also an administrator, before I applied. These conversations helped me understand what the law school desired in a new hire. I suggest reading faculty bios, CVs, and faculty bibliographies to see whether the legal writing faculty have published and if so, where. Increasingly, even programs staffed with non-tenure-track faculty are requiring their faculty to write and publish. Finding out if the institution expects its non-tenured faculty to publish is an important step.

I also advise those who, like me, have interviewed without success to objectively assess concerns academics may have about their readiness. When I compared myself to the people who were hired, I could identify areas for improvement. Some things I couldn't change; I worked on the things I could. Academics admire perseverance, so job seekers should consider applying again.

In my current role, I have served on the hiring committee twice when we sought to hire legal research and writing professors. Each time, between 100 and 150 people applied. Our wish list probably mirrors that of other schools with tenure-track legal writing programs. We desired to hire people who

- wanted to teach legal research and writing long term,
- had practical legal writing and research experience,

- could write and publish academic articles (we preferred applicants with recent publications),
- had a record of solid teaching or had potential to be good teachers,
- were collegial, hardworking, and contributed to our diversity,
- were dedicated to volunteering or serving others, and
- were interested in *us*.

Sometimes visitors face an uphill battle to get hired permanently with their employer. Some schools have a tight budget. Other schools may have policies that forbid hiring their own visitors in permanent positions. If that's the case, a person seeking permanent status must leave the school for an interim period and reapply. Schools may require a higher percentage faculty vote to hire visitors. Other schools treat visitors as they would any other applicant. If possible, find out the institution's policies before applying.

Schools may refuse their visitors an initial interview based on the person's own actions or inactions. Visitors at my school and other schools have lost interview opportunities because they

- failed to publish scholarship during their time at the school,
- weren't collegial,
- weren't engaged with or serving the institution,
- had poor teaching evaluations or were unavailable to students, or
- didn't abide by institutional norms or understand academic culture.

If you're seeking to enter academia from practice, take steps to make yourself the most competitive applicant possible. If you're

currently a visitor, don't take your opportunity for granted. If I can help you find your way to becoming a visiting professor or tenure-track professor, please contact me. I love my job. I love my employer. I love mentoring students and teaching them skills they will use for a lifetime in legal practice. This really is the best job in the world.