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First Person

What Small Colleges Really Want

[By Carol Kolmerten](#)

As job-seeking season gets under way in academe, I contemplate the audacity of offering advice to those who want a tenure-track position at a small college.

I hesitate for the obvious reasons: What I have to say may contradict the advice of many dissertation advisers, it will be potentially unwelcome, and (even worse) it will make me sound old.

Yet, I remember last November when, as head of our department's hiring committee, I read more than 150 cover letters for a one-year position in my department. Like so many years in the past when we have advertised a position, I felt as if I were reading the same letter over and over.

Most letters looked alike in their emphasis on The Dissertation and sounded alike -- as if they were being generated by some amorphous, jargon-laden computer: "My dissertation, based on the theory of [insert theorist here], informs the impact of cultural practices found in [insert adjective here] literary sites."

I thought about telling those earnest, brilliant young people to change their ways: to stop writing cover letters in the format and voice preferred by their dissertation directors (or their "placement advisors"). At a small college (or at a community college or at a "New American" college) we yearn to hear a real person writing to us -- a person who has her own voice and lets us know who she is through a clever and witty letter.

My urge to give advice has been prompted by a number of recent essays in *The Chronicle* like one by Jason Lindsey and Graham Bennett in which they asked [Just What Is a Dossier?](#) As a job-seeking couple, they said they would gladly provide a department with any information it wanted, if only they could figure out what that information was. They mentioned only one "unbreakable rule": Always send a dissertation abstract, even if it isn't requested in the job.

OK, here's my first bit of unsolicited advice: Forget the abstract if you are applying to a small college. Forget about describing your second book. Forget about focusing on how well you understand the intricacies of Judith Butler or Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida. What we want to hear about in your cover letter is your teaching. Tell us why you love teaching, why you want to spend the rest of your life doing it for little pay, what you can offer our intellectual community.

Before you write a single word of that letter, remember the maxims that we tell our students when they try to write: It is the responsibility of the author to be interesting. We tell students to remember the audience for whom they are writing. We tell them to have their own voice, one that does not sound

exactly like everyone else's.

You do not have to follow the "required" five-paragraph letter format. In a cover letter to a teaching-oriented institution, your first paragraph does not have to be about your dissertation. You really can begin by talking about teaching -- about what you do in your classes, about what you want to do in classes you might teach for us.

Talking about teaching, however, does not mean sending a separate "Statement of Teaching Philosophy" in your application packet.

Every such statement I have ever read (and I often don't bother reading them) has said the same thing: I am a student-centered teacher, who listens to students, and who structures a classroom around individual learning styles. Abstractions do not speak to me or to members of many hiring committees; specifics do.

Later in your cover letter, when you do mention your dissertation, you need to be able to explain what you are doing, and why it is important, in clear, jargon-free language. One problem with graduate school is that to succeed at it you have to learn the always-new, specialized language of your field as a kind of second language. When you have adapted to graduate school, that jargon becomes your first language and you forget that to most people outside of your field, you are incomprehensible.

You do not want to be incomprehensible -- or, even worse, perceived as "trendy" with "no substance" -- to the people who might hire you.

You should know that in every department at a small college, there is at least one person who loathes jargon-laden theory, another who doesn't understand any of this newfangled stuff, another likes to think of herself as a trendy theorist but is 20 years out of date. In other words, you will have to explain your dissertation -- and how theory might inform your teaching and specifically your teaching in introductory classes -- in such a way that all of us can understand and appreciate.

If you can do that in a cover letter, you are a gifted writer and just the sort of person we would like to have as a colleague. Always have a nonacademic friend read your dissertation paragraph. Can he understand it? Can he see its significance?

It is also your responsibility as a writer to inject your voice in the letter. Who are you? Right now, almost all of you sound the same. Rarely does your individual voice come through. Is there any evidence in your letter to show why we should interview you, instead of the 150 other people who sound like you?

We read every cover letter, hoping to find out why you want to work with us. Would you fit here? Do you know who we are? Do you know anything about our major requirements?

My department, like so many others at small colleges, is made up of a motley crew of human beings, but we like each other and are looking for someone who would appreciate our collective sense of humor. We like irony. We like self-effacement. We like sarcasm (as long as it is not directed at us, of course).

If you can find the time, check out our department's Web site and Google our individual faculty members. Writing about how you would like to teach "Shakespeare in Film" when one of our senior professors teaches just that is not conducive to getting an interview. But writing about ideas you have for developing a course in our genre or major-author offerings, now that would interest us.

When you insert your personality into your cover letter, you may find that you reveal yourself in ways that your advisers caution against, but that can work to your advantage.

Departments in small colleges often receive letters of application from candidates who seem to be "overqualified." We always wonder, What's going on? If you don't want to tell us about how you were discovered in the conservatory in a compromising position with an undergraduate at your former college, that's fine, but you might want to say something specifically about why our position or our geographic area are especially appealing to you. We do understand that people have families and sometimes need to change location because of a spouse or partner.

Giving a real reason, if you feel comfortable with that, might help many small colleges overcome the sense of "why does that excellent, advanced star want to come here? He won't stay more than a year." Help us here. Remember, we want to hire people and keep them.

Finally, don't even think about applying to a small college unless you love teaching. Students will eat you up. Their need for your time and your energy could overwhelm you, and if you don't love the idea of the enthusiastic undergraduate student just sitting in your office, sipping coffee with you, while you talk about voice in Faulkner or imagery in Toni Morrison when all your papers are just sitting on your desk waiting to be graded -- then the small college is not the place for you.

Although I don't pretend to speak for all (or even many) members of hiring committees at small colleges or any other place where teaching is particularly valued in hiring and promotion, I can say that, as the head of my department's hiring committee over the past 15 years, I am looking for that unusual letter writer who writes about teaching with wit and grace and offers such exciting specific examples that we can hardly wait to hire her and then steal her ideas.

I tell my students that it is possible to inject a bit of one's personality even into something as dry as a cover letter. It is, isn't it? And when better to do it than when applying for a job that 150 others are applying for, too.

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