

So You Want to be a Law Professor

Lucinda Jesson

I am a reader. When I was pregnant with my first child, I read all the books on childbirth and newborns I could find. Books by pediatricians, obstetricians, and psychologists. In retrospect, the most helpful was not written by an “expert” but by a recent new mother: *What Only a Mother Can Tell You about Having a Baby*.¹ That woman knew where I was coming from.

I write about the decision and process of becoming a law professor in the same vein. I am not an expert. I am, however, a law professor. At this writing, I have been one for two years, eleven months and twenty days. I practiced law for twenty-three years before entering the Academy and I now put pen to paper before time blurs my memory of the hiring process and transition.²

Here is the good news: the process is more pleasant than labor.

You think of brick buildings, wide lawns and students straining to hear your advice. Of summers off. Of time to think deeply and independently of client and firm positions. Before you awake from this tranquil dream to rewrite your resume, ask yourself these questions to help decide if, indeed, you want to be a law professor:

Have I written a law review article recently?

You believe writing is what you will do *after* you become a law professor. But you should write now for two reasons. First and foremost, find out if you enjoy researching and writing law review articles. If you do not, then look elsewhere for your next position. Writing articles, crafting footnotes, and negotiating with student editors is a large part of most of these jobs. Second, law schools

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1. K.C.Cole, *What Only a Mother Can Tell You About Having a Baby* (Doubleday, 1st ed. 1980).
2. I have twin goals for this essay. I hope it will find its way to lawyers contemplating a move to academia. (At least it should shorten my numerous conversations with aspiring law professors.) Additionally, if law schools rethink integration with the practicing bar, as prompted by the Carnegie Report (William M. Sullivan, Anne Colby, Judith Welch Wegner, Lloyd Bond & Lee S. Shulman, *Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law* (Jossey-Bass 2007)), a practitioner’s perspective on the hiring process may prove useful. We should know how they think. I write while I am still unsure whether I am “we” or “they” and before my default position on hiring becomes “but that’s the way we have always done it.”

will judge your scholarship potential as part of the process. Having written a law review article (and hopefully a thoughtful one) greatly aids your candidacy. A reasonable work-in-progress will help as well. But telling the faculty hiring committee that you had no time to write while billing 2,000 hours last year is not a winning argument. Sorry.

Do I like process?

Part—a large part—of becoming a law professor is becoming a member of the faculty. In the academic world, faculties participate in “shared governance” with the administration. And faculties never rush those governance decisions. When you combine a faculty member’s typical resistance to change with a lawyer’s procedural training and attention to detail, you have the orientation of a typical law school faculty member. Except, of course, there will be a whole set of us. We are, by and large, intellectual and engaging. But we have a committee and process for every conceivable decision. Take a look at the law school accreditation process if you doubt me. (Or, for that matter, the faculty hiring process.)

Is teaching like presenting a good CLE?

No. Good teaching is harder. Step back a minute: the lawyers in your CLE already graduated from law school, passed the bar and are practicing law. Starting at the beginning is more challenging. Remember when you did not understand personal jurisdiction? I doubt a standard lecture led you to that eventual understanding. Moreover, students, who pay \$30,000 plus a year in tuition, demand more of us than our CLE counterparts. They should. But here is the good news: while good teaching is preparation intensive, it also is rewarding. (Although the usual teaching load may strike you—as it did me—as light. This leaves plenty of time, however, for committee meetings. See above.)

Should I try adjunct teaching?

Many lawyers think that adjunct teaching will help you become a law professor. At the margin, it does. But the real advantage of adjunct teaching is discovering whether you enjoy it. (I found I did.) But, if time is at a premium and you must choose, writing that law review article probably heightens your chances more than a semester of teaching. Actually, write two.

Do I work well in a somewhat isolated, unstructured environment?

This is the question I should have asked myself. Much of academic life is solitary. Many of your future colleagues thrive on the solitude as they research, reflect, and write. And time is unstructured. While someone will notice if your classes go untaught, law schools generally recognize that good scholarship takes time. Structure is mostly self-imposed. For lawyers used to working as teams, for litigators driven by court-imposed deadlines, for those of us who thrive on solving constant client crises, the switch to an academic environment can be a culture shock. (On the other hand, if the last sentence describes you and you thrive on process, consider a deanship.)

Congratulations. Your thoughtful resume and writing won you an interview. What comes next?

If your interview is at the Association of American Law Schools annual hiring meeting (aka the meat market), there is a good advice column for interviewees posted on the group's website.³ If your screening interview is at a local law school, much of the association's advice holds true as well. I will not repeat it here. But below is advice (some learned the hard way) for the next stage of the hiring process: the campus visit.

While campus visits vary among schools, they all have one thing in common: the process is strikingly different than law firm hiring. From the resume (we call it a "C.V." here in the Ivy Tower) to the "job talk," it is a different world.

Start by rethinking your resume. As a lawyer, I wanted a resume that fit neatly on two pages. I never would have thought of listing all those CLE presentations and bar articles. Or enumerating my media interviews and newspaper columns. (I still do not go this far.) But welcome to the world of seven- and eight-page C.V.s with education, writing and presentations, front and center.

Rethink your credentials as well. What carries weight in the academy often differs from practice. For example, after five years or more of practice, few practitioners remember or care where you attended law school. Experience and expertise is the key. I was surprised that in academic hiring, people cared where I earned my J.D. (the Ivy League is still the gold standard) and whether I was on *the* (not just *a*) law review. While this emphasis still mystifies me, look at it this way: law professors believe that law school really matters. For the rest of your life. As a student, would you want law professors who believe otherwise? So try to remember your job title on the law review and be warned that many of my colleagues will not know the difference between being named a Super Lawyer and a member of the American College of Trial Lawyers. Now may not be the time to educate us.

Perhaps it is just my age, but an academic campus visit strikes me as more of an endurance contest than did a "call back" to a law firm. They usually last longer. They include more people. Rather than one-on-one interviews, you often face a series of group interviews. The process is not (and I say this as a compliment to firms) as slick and seamless as call backs. Law firms are used to marketing themselves. Not so with the law faculty.

A critical point of the campus visit is your scholarship presentation to a large section of the faculty, the job talk. It is your opportunity to persuade a skeptical audience that you—a practitioner no less—can be a scholar. It is also an up-close and personal opportunity to judge how you will come across at national symposia and in the classroom. I never was a moot court fan while in practice but I wish I had "mooted" my talk before someone besides my

3. The Interviews, in AALS, *Uncloaking Law School Hiring: A Recruit's Guide to the AALS Faculty Recruitment Conference*, <http://www.aals.org/frs/jle.php#5>.

fourteen-year-old. I suggest mootng yours before a few law professors. Your competition may come from one of the burgeoning fellowship and visiting assistant professor programs which groom recent graduates for the academy. Most will not have your experience, but they will have an inside track on what faculties are looking for in the job talk.

It's over. Good luck. As with labor and childbirth, the result can be life changing.