

Dear Aleksandra,

I've begun a two-year full-time position off the tenure track teaching a 4/4 course load as a Visiting Assistant Professor at a university where a tenure-track line fitting my qualifications might open. Given the precarity of my employment, I must apply for tenure-track openings at other universities in addition to positioning myself for a potential opening at my present university. I have a recent Ph.D., journal publications, and am active in my profession. There are no service expectations of me in my present job, but I know that contributing to the university community would help in case I apply for a tenure-track line here in the future. Nevertheless, I am aware that women can often be expected to contribute more service than men and that this inequity can interfere with their research. Given my heavy teaching load, how do you recommend that I balance the need for visibility in my current job as well as pursue scholarship that will qualify me for tenure-track jobs elsewhere?

Cordially,
VAP

Dear VAP,

You are not alone. All too many recent PhDs have to hop from gig to gig for several years until they land on their feet with a permanent job somewhere. And those are the lucky ones. In contemporary academia, the shift away from tenured positions as the norm is a disgrace. I've heard very senior scholars who finished their PhDs in the 1970s—when, indeed, the academic job market was contracting—tell me how bad things were for them. Like, seriously? Dudes, what exactly are you smoking?

It seems to me that no generation of academics has faced a more uncertain job market than those who have entered it in the last decade, when the gradual inching toward corporatization of the university hopped a runaway train. A few years ago, an administrator, drunk on neoliberal Kool-Aid, said to me that it would be a good thing if all professors were always a little worried about getting fired. Because nothing says support for scholarly inquiry and ethical treatment of the professoriate like cultivating fear.

OK. I've vented. Do you feel better? I don't. So maybe I should, like you, just try to get on with it, despite the immoral exploitation under which all too many scholars labor.

You rightly identify the fix you're in: on the one hand, you want to be seen as a helpful, cooperative colleague, a good citizen of the department. This way, if and when, someday, maybe, possibly a tenure track job opens up, you will be well positioned to have an inside track on it. It sounds like you have clarity that neither the job's existence nor you being seen as having a leg up on the competition are givens. The job might never materialize if the budget and class enrollments are not there to justify it. You might be great and a smash hit with your colleagues, but they might nonetheless decide to rethink the department's long-term needs and reconfigure the position in a way that doesn't make you a good fit for it.

One thing you need to be cautious about is appearing over-eager, especially in light of the fact that they have, appropriately, no expectation of service for you in a visiting appointment. Being too keen can be off-putting to those who ultimately will be deciding your fate.

So, what's a member of the precariat to do? Think about what helps to build your resume, regardless of whether you land this job or another one. Is there some kind of service that actually would interest you? Undergraduate curriculum reform? Writing clinic? Workshop for grad students about how to get from seminar paper to published article? Maybe an interdisciplinary working group? Something that builds on your own interests and experience and also offers your department something. Maybe an idea that worked at your previous institution that you think could make a difference at your current one? You will take the track record that you build with you wherever you go, so it isn't just about making yourself visible and useful to your new colleagues. It's about you exploiting an opportunity to build a track record that makes you a more appealing candidate wherever you go.

If there is someone in your department that you've bonded with, ask her or him for thoughts about where you could contribute. Pitch it as understanding that there is no expectation for service, but wanting to grow. If there really isn't a way for you to contribute (for example, if—as in my previous institution—visiting assistant professors are actually not welcome getting too involved in department business), then throw yourself into some kind of professional service that is meaningful to you. Might I suggest AWSS as an appropriate and welcoming outlet for your energies?

But be careful. Service is a great talking point at a job interview, but it isn't going to be the thing that gets you a job. As a junior scholar, building a teaching portfolio under the weight of a 4/4 load, you need to guard your time. Whatever way you find to pitch in, don't overextend yourself to the point that it compromises your teaching evaluations or your ability to publish high quality research in respected outlets. That's what'll get you the job. Fingers crossed.

In comradeship,
Aleksandra