

The PROSECUTOR

From Courtroom To Classroom

Tips for prosecutors for securing teaching positions now or in retirement

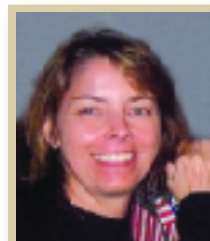
BY JANA NESTLERODE

WHEN I WAS OFFERED, a full-time tenure-track assistant professorship at the university at which I was an adjunct, to accept or not accept was a tough decision. At the time I had been an assistant district attorney in a busy county just outside Philadelphia, and I loved my job. I was a prosecutor at heart. I couldn't imagine doing anything else for a living. In the end, it was the potential for a salary that would put me in a position to go from renter to buyer that tipped the scales.

I've been teaching in higher education for twenty-seven years now. I was chair of the Department of Criminal Justice for over seventeen years. We have about 500 undergraduate majors and more than 40 students in our graduate program. I oversaw a busy program in high demand by students. Interestingly, teaching positions in my department are also in high demand. As chair, I received countless inquiries from prosecutors and defense attorneys seeking either adjunct or permanent teaching positions in the department.

Because I have found that trial attorneys often make

good teachers, I'd like to offer a few tips for those seeking an adjunct position at a college or university while continuing their prosecutorial careers, or for those who hope to transition to a full-time teaching position. Having served on countless search committees, and having hired many adjunct and tenure-track faculty, I believe I can offer some valuable insights from the inside of the process.



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WHERE ARE THE JOBS?

Prosecutors seeking teaching positions should consider law schools and two-year and four-year colleges and universities that have criminal justice programs.¹ Be aware that criminal justice programs can have a variety of titles such as: administration of justice, criminal justice, criminology, justice studies, and law and justice studies. Some are even lodged in

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sociology or political science departments.

Many academic institutions will advertise adjunct and tenure-track teaching positions in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.² The American Society of Criminology (ASC) has an employment exchange that lists position openings.³ But probably the best place to look for open teaching positions at four-year universities is the *Employment Bulletin of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS)*, published quarterly.⁴ There is also an online service called *Academic Keys* that distributes an e-letter announcing faculty and administrative positions in the social sciences. Subscriptions are free.⁵

Another way to get in the game is to send a letter of interest along with a current vitae to the department chairs of your local colleges and universities. Be sure to follow up with a phone call. Even if there are no current teaching positions available, departments often keep the information handy should an opening occur.

QUALIFICATIONS

Community (two-year) colleges will hire a qualified applicant with a Juris Doctor degree. Four-year institutions will also accept the Juris Doctor for adjunct positions and sometimes for tenure-track positions. The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) has adopted somewhat controversial standards for terminal degrees in the field of criminal justice. Under these standards at least two-thirds of tenured/tenure-track faculty must have a Ph.D. in Criminal Justice or a closely related discipline.⁶ Those institutions seeking ACJS certification are more likely to require both the Juris Doctor and a Ph.D. in Criminal Justice for a tenure-track position. For most four-year institutions, however, the Juris Doctor is sufficient for an adjunct teaching position.

Department search committees prefer seasoned, experienced criminal litigators to teach law and law-related courses. Because criminal justice is an applied science, courtroom expertise contributes substantially to credibility in the classroom. Freshly-minted law school graduates are rarely invited for interviews. In addition, committees like to see some teaching experience. That experience can include traditional teaching positions, or even the performance of training sessions to fellow litigators or investigators.

Getting hired

Be aware that applying for a position with a state university or with a collective-bargaining institution is quite different from applying for a position with a private university or college. The privates have fewer constraints and less bureaucracy to hinder the hiring process. But in a collective bargaining environment, search committees are bound by contractual considerations. At a state university, search committees are also constrained by government policies and procedures over which they have very little control.

My institution is both a state university and one subject to collective bargaining. To hire anyone we must first create a formal search committee. That committee then writes an initial advertisement that comports with specific rules promulgated by the state. Specific publications are identified for advertising, and a plan for securing a qualified and diverse pool of applicants must be created.

An application screening instrument is devised by the search committee and then used to identify the strongest applicants. That instrument is the means by which the reviewers assess the quality of the application, the academic credentials of the applicant, the extent of prior teaching experience (if any), and the quality and relevance of the applicant's professional experience. Spelling and grammatical errors in the submissions will disqualify most applicants summarily. If the advertisement for the position includes a request for references, or even letters of reference, the committee may contact those individuals at this point. After assessing the quality of the applications, the search committee identifies the smaller pool of applicants who will be invited for interview. The search committee also develops an interview instrument that delineates the many questions the committee may ask during an interview.

Search committees receive scores of applicants for law classes in criminal justice departments. To narrow the field, the committee will look beyond academic credentials. Because criminal justice is an applied discipline, departments commonly seek attorneys who have experience as criminal litigators. Professors of law courses in criminal justice programs will have little classroom credibility unless they have significant courtroom experience. Generally speaking, criminal trial attorneys are good orators, and that talent translates beautifully into the classroom.

The committee will also express a preference for applicants who have at least some teaching experience, and who are student-friendly. If the applicant has teaching experience, the committee will want to see the results of any student evaluations that were administered. The committee will also be calling the chair of the department in which the applicant taught to discuss such things as the applicant's teaching effectiveness, course preparedness, course rigor, communication skills, professionalism, cooperativeness and collegiality.

Departments also seek applicants who are passionate about what they are doing. Teaching includes not just subject matter expertise, but also the ability to inspire students to learn. Teachers who love what they do can infect their students with that passion. All other factors being equal, search committee members will prioritize those applicants who demonstrate that enthusiasm.

Applicants invited for interview are normally in a select group of three to five successful candidates. Usually the interview is conducted by the members of the search committee (commonly composed of about five faculty members) and the department chair. Questions can include approaches to teaching, evaluation methods, subject matter expertise, oral and written communication skills, and attitudes towards students. Interviewees may be asked to give a teaching demonstration, either to an existing class of students or to the search committee. Applicants should select a subject in which they have particular expertise, and one that is of current interest in the field. Observers are looking for both content competence and energy. (The person we're avoiding is Ben Stein in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* – "Anyone? Anyone?").⁷ At the same time, no committee is looking for an instructor who spends too much of the class time telling war stories. Examples from professional experience can be extremely helpful in driving home and illustrating legal concepts. Just use those experiences judiciously.

GETTING REHIRED

Most academic departments have formalized guidelines for faculty that can be enormously helpful. Ask for a copy and take the time to read them. At most colleges and universities, department evaluation committees are required to per-

form "peer evaluations" of all junior, probationary and adjunct faculty. A senior faculty member in the department will arrange to attend one or more classes to observe teaching style and expertise. Normally there is a formalized evaluation instrument used for this purpose. Typical categories of evaluation are: content competence, effective teaching methods, communication skills, quality of syllabi, evaluation methods, relationship with students, responsibility, professionalism, cooperation, collegiality and "fit" with the department. With the advent of mandates to assess student learning outcomes, the following factors may also be included in the evaluation: effective teaching of students' communication, research and critical thinking skills; and promotion of the development of ethical and moral standards.

Having a senior faculty member observe your class can be a bit nerve-wracking. Reviewers look for a comfortable classroom environment that stimulates discussion and faculty/student interaction. It is important that students feel free to ask questions, challenge positions and engage the professor and fellow students. The Socratic method so familiar to law school graduates can be equally productive in undergraduate and graduate criminal justice classes.

Faculty members are also evaluated by the students. Some institutions have devised their own evaluation instruments. One commonly used by many colleges and universities is provided by the Educational Testing Service.⁸ Typical evaluation instruments ask students to rate professors in multiple categories. Students are asked to evaluate the overall quality of instruction and specific areas such as whether

- there was a clear statement of course objectives;
- course requirements and evaluation procedures were clearly presented;
- the course was well organized;
- the instructor made good use of class time;
- tests and assignments were returned in a timely manner;
- students were given useful feedback on exams and assignments;
- students were fairly evaluated;
- there was positive interaction with students;
- learning was encouraged;

- students were comfortable asking questions;
- there was a an atmosphere of civility and respect in the classroom;
- classes met on time.

Student evaluations and comments are taken very seriously. In fact, these evaluations can be a dispositive factor for departments when deciding whether to rehire untenured faculty, temporary faculty or adjuncts. Of course, the student evaluations then run the risk of becoming merely popularity contests. But the best professors are those who challenge students, offer reasonable course rigor and are accessible to students. It should be noted that evaluation committees will not consider popular online sites that rate professors.⁹ Anyone, student or not, can post comments at these sites. In fact, a faculty member known for his practical jokes has made inane comments about colleagues at these sites.

You'll be asked to create a course syllabus. Oftentimes you'll be provided with a syllabus used by a prior instructor, a template, or even a core syllabus required for the course. The syllabus is a contract between the professor and the students. At some institutions, the course syllabus must follow policies and guidelines developed by the university curriculum committee. In any event, course syllabi must be fairly detailed. (After all my years of teaching, I now have an eleven-page syllabus.) There are elements essential to every course syllabus. They include: course title, course description, course learning objectives and educational goals, course outline, required texts and readings, attendance policy, academic dishonesty policy, evaluation methods and office hours.

Faculty members are also required to be on campus for specific "office hours." The number of hours is usually determined by the instructor's course load. (We require one office hour per three-credit course.) That time is reserved for students to seek advising and additional help with course material. There are always students who are hesitant to ask questions in class or to ask the instructor to repeat or clarify information. Thus, this out-of-class interaction is essential for some students, and is a measure of the instructor's dedication to student success.

Employers in all fields are complaining that college graduates have substandard writing skills. For that reason,

departments may expect faculty to include in-class writing assignments as part of students' evaluations. This is normally accomplished by requiring in-class essay exams. Not that students would ever cheat,¹⁰ but requiring students to write in class (without the benefit of laptops, spellcheckers, dictionaries, etc.) is the best way to measure student skills, and to ensure that the work is performed by the student and not a friend or relative. Faculty may be required to evaluate not only the content of students' papers and essays, but also the writing quality. It can be tedious, but it is critically important that students write well.

More and more institutions are implementing teaching technology in the classroom. If you have skills using PowerPoint,¹¹ Prezi,¹² video conferencing, even Skype, you will be ahead of the game. Institutions are also offering more online classes to students. There are several software packages that institutions use to facilitate this form of delivery, including D2L¹³ and Blackboard.¹⁴ Most institutions will require proof of expertise before permitting a faculty member to teach an online course. In the alternative, the

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university may require attendance at trainings dedicated to this technology.

Online classes offer particular challenges. While such courses can be made to be sufficiently rigorous, there are always security concerns. How do you know that the student on the remote computer is the one enrolled in the class? We have heard of disturbing incidents of students earning online degrees as a result of work performed by friends or relatives.¹⁵ One means of addressing this has been to require that all exams be taken in person and on campus. Other faculty has developed interesting hybrid courses. The class meets half of the time on campus and the other half of the course work is completed online. To be successful, students who take online or hybrid courses must be mature and highly self-motivated. That can be the difference between a successful course offering and a disaster.

After grueling days in court dealing with issues of life and death, it is tempting to take teaching responsibilities lightly. While understandable, be aware that academics take their responsibilities very seriously as well. Faculty members who cancel classes, start classes late or end them early are unlikely to be rehired. In addition there is a classroom etiquette that is often not well communicated and may even seem trivial. But some faculty evaluators will take it very seriously. This common etiquette calls for you to leave the classroom ready for the next professor. Place desks back in their normal positions; erase blackboards and clear smartboards; put moveable podiums back in position; remove all of your papers, notebooks, lecture notes, laptops, etc.; return display screens to their original positions; turn off electronic equipment (laptops, overhead displays, smartboards); close windows; have students return desks to their original positions and have students clean up their desk areas. These small considerations will go a long way in showing your professionalism and collegiality.

Keep an open line of communication with the department chair. Issues always arise for which you do not have answers. It's the nature of teaching that unusual, even bizarre things can happen that no one can predict. Chairs will be of enormous assistance in a variety of matters commonly occurring in a teaching career: aberrant student behavior, grade appeals, academic dishonesty, student absences, etc.

Many departments will appreciate suggestions for new

courses or topical seminars. Faculty with particular areas of expertise can offer cutting-edge and unique opportunities for students to learn and for programs to expand their curricula. Legal aspects of criminal justice offer interesting courses of study including, but not limited to: criminal law, criminal procedure, criminal evidence, trial advocacy, criminal jurisprudence, notable criminal cases, justice studies, constitutional law issues and contemporary legal issues. Topical seminar courses address specific and usually current issues in criminal justice and can vary in subject matter from semester to semester.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Teaching courses related to criminal law and procedure can be challenging. The course material changes as the U.S. Supreme Court renders decisions each term. In addition, students can come up with the most preposterous hypothetical questions ever devised. Don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer or that you'll have to look it up. In the alternative, assign students to research the question for the class.

The great thing about teaching law classes is that it's never dry nor is it ever static. Students are commonly interested, engaged and attentive. It's been said that success occurs when you can't tell whether you're working or playing. For me and for so many of my colleagues, that's true of teaching. I can't recommend it highly enough.

¹ <http://www.criminaljusticeprograms.com/>

² <http://chronicle.com/section/Home/5>

³ <http://www.asc41.com/>

⁴ <http://www.acjs.org/>

⁵ <http://academickeys.com/>

⁶ http://www.acjs.org/pubs/167_667_12021.cfm

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhiCFdWeQfA>

⁸ http://www.ets.org/sir_ii/about

⁹ <http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/>

¹⁰ <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-campus/201202/academic-dishonesty-prevalent-preventable>

¹¹ <http://www.actden.com/pp/>

¹² <http://www.prezi.com>

¹³ <http://www.desire2learn.com/>

¹⁴ <http://www.blackboard.com/>

¹⁵ <http://chronicle.com/article/Online-Scheme-Highlights-Fears/63517/>