READING AND EVALUATING NON-ACADEMIC JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Humanities M.A.s and/or Ph.D.s. are eligible for a large number of jobs in educational support at universities and colleges. Just visit <www.higheredjobs.com> and click on “Administrative” positions (this is the “professional” category), and you will see that it lists thousands of jobs. On 5 February 2012, this site listed 84 different positions from all over the country under “International Programs and Services” alone -- a natural category for language and area professionals. The 62 “Executive Assistant” positions listed on the site offered many entry level opportunities. Not all categories will be of interest -- “Athletics and Coaching” is not fruitful for most humanities graduate students, and “Laboratory and Research” or “Medicine” is not suitable -- but something in many of the other 45+ categories, from “Academic Advising” to “Volunteer Programs and Service Learning,” might be.

Getting started on the search is not hard, but you have to be persistent. New jobs are posted constantly, and the window of opportunity for application may very small (1-2 weeks). You have to check regularly to see what’s new on the sites you determine to be the most useful to you. If you have questions about the position, you may want to contact the appropriate HR office or the contact person and ask if the position is internal, local-only, regional, or national. This is also your chance to gather other information about the position and get a sense of the institution. Always try to learn more about the position than the ad tells you.

Job advertisements constitute the employer’s “wish list.” Rarely does a candidate come forth who meets all qualifications, required and preferred, and who has the je ne sais quoi that the employer is looking for but cannot stuff into the job description. In most cases, there are few, and sometimes no ideal candidates; in other cases, the competition will be stiff. But employers know that some things can only (and must) be taught on the job, and that initiative, entrepreneurial spirit, commitment to the mission, willingness to learn, collegiality, enthusiasm, and the intangibles (key competencies, which some job ads actually list) really matter more, once required characteristics are more or less met. So in searching, your reach should exceed your grasp.

Do not think that, because you have been a graduate student for X number of years, you have not worked and have no experience. Big mistake. On the contrary, “graduate student” and “graduate teaching assistant” are also job categories. You have worked very hard and you can do lots of things: you can search out information, evaluate its quality, organize it, apply it, communicate it well in writing and orally; you are able to assimilate new information constantly and learn new things; you know how learn and can teach others how to learn; you are flexible; you are savvy with computers and programs and databases and the internet; you understand and can use social media; you can work alone or on a team; you know how to organize -- be it a work load or materials or students; you can manage your time effectively; you work well under pressure and with considerable stress; you can apply theoretical models to your data; you can create theoretical models from data; you can work with anyone: after all, you know how to deal both with egomaniacal professors and sweet snowflake undergrads; you have kept confidential records of grades and performance, and every time you wrote a letter or recommendation for a student, you evaluated the performance of someone who was working for you. The list goes on. What you need to do is think about your grad student experiences, then sit down and translate them into specific skills and abilities.

You must also learn to learn to read job descriptions carefully and to evaluate them strategically. Things to consider:
✓ How does the position description correspond to your own professional goals, short- and long-term, and your personal goals (living wage, good health insurance)? Would you enjoy doing this job?

✓ Learn something about the institution. What is the institutional culture there? Priorities? Mission? Would you like working at this institution? If not, then . . . .

✓ What is the job description actually asking for? Move past the employer’s wish list: what does the institution really want/need? What will it take to do this job? Translate those “responsibilities” into your own language and experience, then compare it to your own assets and skills. Do you fit 65% or better? If yes, it is worth a shot.

✓ What do the key words in the advertisement mean? For example, what constitutes “administrative experience”? What other kinds of activities and responsibilities are synonymous with “administrative” in this particular case? Have you done things that are “administrative” without realizing it? And “training.” How much “training” do you need to be “trained,” and what kind of training do you need (a separate degree, a course, a two-week workshop, a one-day workshop, some self-study on the weekends)? How can you translate your specific experiences as a graduate student to fill the “experience” requirement?

✓ So: where and how do your current skills and experience correspond to the skills and experience that the job description asks for? If you don’t have the actual experience, what have you done that illustrates other relevant abilities, skills, or potential to meet the description?

✓ Find a self-promotion strategy: how are you going to sell yourself to this employer? What should you emphasize in this particular cover letter? The letter is YOU -- what do you look like on paper? What do you need to communicate and in what priority order? You are a writer, so first identify your audience, then visualize yourself in the “space” of that job, working with the other staff, and finally pitch the crucial argument with data and examples that address every item on the list of requirements. Communicate your “fit” for the position, the institution, and the colleagues.

✓ Learn the language: what terms or phrases will best describe your skills, abilities, experience, potential, collegiality, and commitment in your cover letter? Here you need to shift radically away from “academese” and (ugh!) passive voice to more concrete and active descriptors to convey what you have achieved in grad school (where you actually learned and demonstrated more skills than you know). Some examples: Are you a fast and competent grader? Then you have demonstrated “quick turnaround of assigned work.” Did you complete syllabus requirements, write research papers, meet deadlines, submit grant proposals? Then you have demonstrated the “ability to work within a variety of assigned parameters.” Writing and lecturing? you have demonstrated “excellent verbal and written communication skills.” Done a large research project? You have demonstrated strong “information and data management skills.” Herded freshmen? Overseen class projects? Run the Grad Student Organization? Those are “supervisory and team leadership skills.” You have to start thinking of your graduate student activities -- academic, social, and service -- as “specific skill set development.” And you need to find the right vocabulary for conveying them to potential employers.

✓ Think aspirationally. No one walk into the dream job right out of the gate. So what experience or training do you need now? what jobs should you apply for now that will eventually take you to the kind of position you want to reach? Two-three years in the trenches? Additional professional
development in computer skills? Networking in specific professional affiliations (societies, unions, organizations, contacts)?

✔ So as you read job ads, develop a short-term and a long-term search strategy. Look both for possible, “right-now” positions and for aspirational positions. What do you really want to do? What are the stepping stone positions that will bring you to such a position, if not now, then in three years? five years? You need to do long-term, mid-term, and short-term planning.

✔ Do you need to talk to someone about your job search? (A definite “YES!” You should talk to everyone -- who knows whom they know? they could know a live lead.) From whom should you seek advice? What questions do you need to ask? What do you need to consider? Who can help you develop a strategy for the job search? Your institution has professionals to help you with this in career services. Use them.

✔ Who should be your mentor as you move forward in the search? People at your own graduate institution who are already doing the job (in study abroad, in international programs, in admissions, in the provost’s office, etc.) are prime candidates to be your professional mentors; have you solicited an informational interview from any of them? made a connection to those people? Developed them as possible references?

✔ Who should be your references? Three professors are not going to write you the letters you need or deserve. (See the point above.)

✔ If the job ad does not mention salary, or says it is commensurate with experience or negotiable, do you know how to find the appropriate numbers?

✔ What can you do now, as a graduate student, to develop necessary experience, knowledge, contacts, and mentors for a Plan A, Plan B, or even Plan C job search?

Now that you have an idea of some things to think about, read this article now:


1 Informational interviews are extremely important in any professional job search. You need to learn about what is really involved in particular positions you think you might want to pursue, in the academy and outside. The best way to do that is to contact someone who is actually doing that job somewhere and ask if they are willing to be interviewed about their skills, their tasks and assignments, the options for promotion, what their day looks like, what they like most, what they hate about their jobs. You can make the appointment by e-mail, then do the interview by phone. Skype, or in person. You are not looking for a job in doing this; you are gathering information about the job that will make an application more competitive for this job category at some other agency or institution. What the interviewee says can give you a lot of information about how to present yourself in a cover letter, what skills are most valued, what you should emphasize, how to translate your academic skills into professional skills, what the “language” of that profession is, etc. Sometimes the interviewee will e-mail back with early knowledge of a job opening; he or she may even be on a search committee for a job for which you are applying. You cannot have too many names in your contact list.