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Reaching the Profession: The Locations of the Rhetoric and Composition Job Market

Based on interviews with fifty-seven scholars in rhetoric and composition, this article addresses multiple topics in relation to the job search process. I emphasize the need for a more critical examination of job market procedures field-wide, taking into consideration the ways in which hiring committees might be unknowingly enacting exclusionary practices.

> *We have to talk about [the job market]. We have to theorize it. We have to give grad students some control over the parts of it they can control so that the parts that they can't control don't feel so overwhelmingly difficult. And I think we should do that as a discipline, not just program to program.*
> —Survey participant

> *We shouldn't get complacent with this notion that the market is just hard.*
> —Survey participant

The process of officially *entering* the profession through the job market remains fresh in my mind as a second-year professor. The most recent study about the rhetoric and composition job market, conducted by Scott Miller,

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Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Bennis Blue, and Deneen Shepherd, was published in this journal fifteen years ago. Since that time, we have seen significant changes in the hiring timeline, the economics of the search process, and the shape of the field. In addition, the increasing use of technologies in the search process has affected what it means to hire and to be hired in rhetoric and composi-

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tion. Between video-based interviews, the "job wiki," candidate websites, and phone interviews, the job market now finds itself located in many spaces, some of them virtual. As a field, we must evaluate the effects of this changing landscape, tracing its repercussions for one of the most important tasks that we undertake as faculty:

hiring new colleagues. Examining these locations of the job market—by listening to the narratives of those who have recently participated in it—allows us to identify instances of unfair practices. This study, based on interviews with fifty-seven people who have either gone on the job market or who have sat on a search committee within the past ten years, argues that we as a field must address how the job market's locations intersect with discriminatory practices and inequitable hiring procedures.

My use of the term *location* in describing the job search draws on rhetoric and composition's rich body of work exploring the politics of location (Reynolds; Mauk; Ede; Keller and Weisser). In the literal sense, location remains a driving feature of the job market: candidates worry about *where* they will be hired. Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon have explored location's theoretical import:

> Theories of location are grounded in the belief that a sense of place or scene is crucial to understanding rhetorical contexts. Such thinking also helps foreground awareness of the possibilities and limitations created by location, how social control or power is "structured" by the design and maintenance of public and institutional space, and how sometimes unequal differences among social actors are naturalized or held "in place." (11–12)

The "place[s] or scene[s]" of the job market now encompass more than simply on-campus interviews and the MLA convention. Some of these scenes now take place online, on wikis, or via video chat. Locations, even those mediated through technology, bring to bear social dynamics that significantly affect the actors involved. The data from this study reveal how viewing technologies-

as-locations can help us unearth deeply embedded discriminatory practices or limits on access that are always already present in any job search. As the participant quoted in the first epigraph maintains, we have yet to theorize the current job market, perhaps because the locations of the job market are difficult to pin down: the market remains dispersed across dozens of institutions throughout the country. But by focusing on the locations that most participants have in common, both technologically-mediated and otherwise—the MLA convention, the phone/video interview, the job wiki—we can discern trends, changes, and patterns across programs and geographic spaces. Not doing so allows problematic practices to go unquestioned and hierarchies to go unchallenged. By maintaining that the job market is "just hard," as the candidate in the second epigraph was told, we are providing a refuge for inequitable behavior: that poor candidate treatment should be shrugged off as a typical hardship of the job search. To counter this mindset, I believe that we must use these pages—the institutionally valued location of *College Composition and Communication*—to explore how the material, social, and ethical repercussions of the hiring process unfolds.

Methodology

The 57 survey participants either sat on a search committee or went on the job market during the years 2001/02 through 2011/12 and were recruited via email messages posted to two major listservs. On several occasions, I also directly contacted scholars whom other participants had recommended. In total, I interviewed 24 members of search committees and 33 job seekers, with 14 of those people speaking from both perspectives. I asked all participants approximately twenty questions about their search timelines, technology use, and any concerns they might have about our hiring practices as a field (see Appendix on the *CCC* website, www.ncte.org/cccc/ccc). The participants represent a variety of institutions, both in terms of region (see Table 1) and school size. The institutions where the participants currently work can be categorized as 26 large public institutions; 16 mid-sized public; 8 small public; 2 mid-sized private; 3 small private; and 2 community colleges, with small representing under 10,000 undergraduates; medium representing 10,000–20,000; and large representing over 20,000. Interviewees included 9 full professors, 20 associate professors, 26 assistant professors, and 2 graduate students (one who served on a search committee and one who did not accept a position after going on the job market). Participants had the choice of either a phone or video interview, with about two-thirds choosing to speak over the phone. To open up a space

for critique when needed, I have given participants pseudonyms in print. I tape-recorded all conversations and drew on grounded theory to code the data, discerning themes that emerged as I reviewed the interviews multiple times. While this study tells only the stories of the privileged elite of the composition world—people with PhDs who sought and, in the majority of cases, secured tenure-track jobs[1]—I want to acknowledge the importance of voicing the experiences of adjunct, part-time, contingent labor; I encourage others to extend this study in that direction.

In representing the data, I have remained aware of how my own positionality informed my interpretation of my participants' responses. I write as someone who has gone on the job market one time; as a white, middle-class, queer, able-bodied, thirty-something female; as a graduate of a respected rhetoric and composition PhD program; as someone who had a positive experience on the job market; and as someone who is pleased with the tenure-track position that I obtained. All of these factors inform how I have cast the data, though I have tried to remain true to what I perceived as my participants' intentions, allowing their voices to direct this project. Finally, this study was completed with IRB approval; a rough draft was sent to all participants for their feedback prior to submission, and I made several revisions based on their recommendations.

Table 1. Institutional Affiliations of Survey Participants.

	Candidates, PhD programs	Candidates, current institutions*	Hiring committee members, PhD programs	Hiring committee members, current institutions
Midwest	21	10	14	7
Mid-Atlantic/ New England	2	3	6	11
South	8	13	3	3
West/ Northwest	1	2	1	3
Non-contiguous	1	1	0	0

*Some job candidates from the 2011/12 year did not accept a job for the upcoming year and have remained at their PhD-granting institution.

Previous Scholarship about the Job Market

Over the past two decades, several articles have explored various aspects of the rhetoric and composition job market. All of them focused on the "health" of the market: specifically, whether jobs in rhetoric and composition existed for the PhDs who sought them. In 1994, *Rhetoric Review* ran a special issue in which Stuart C. Brown, Paul R. Meyer, and Theresa Enos offered the cautionary note that soon the field would be producing more rhetoric and composition PhDs than the market could handle.[2] In a 1997 study, Miller, Brueggemann, Blue, and Shepherd further mined this contention by using survey data regarding graduate students' academic preparation. They contrasted the students' "present perfect" (satisfaction with their graduate programs) with their "future imperfect" (disillusionment about securing a job). The authors alternately referred to the academic job market as "appalling" and "disastrous," prompting an *Interchanges* section in a subsequent issue of *CCC* where others disputed their assessment. Brueggemann and Miller responded to these critiques by reinforcing the importance of sharing both positive *and* negative experiences of those graduate students who hope to enter the professorate, a rhetorical move that I attempt to repeat in this article.

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In 2000, Gail Stygall identified the uncertainty about the number of jobs available in rhetoric and composition as symptomatic of a deeper institutional lack: that even then, the field still maintained a large degree of invisibility because few structures were in place to track degrees, dissertations, and available positions. Stygall urged that we should not rely on MLA or any other outside organization to acknowledge the increasing visibility of rhetoric and composition. Ten years later, John Ackerman and Louise Phelps reported in *CCC* that due to the tireless work of those affiliated with the Visibility Project, rhetoric and composition had finally been recognized as an "emergent field" by the National Research Council. The Visibility Project made additional strides in implementing Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes for rhetoric and composition/writing studies, further establishing the field within the complex institutional workings of national registers and agencies. Twelve years after Stygall urged the field to make greater efforts at becoming more visible, rhetoric and composition appears to have made some strides toward this end.

While those articles concern themselves primarily with the end result of the job market process, this article focuses on the *process* of seeking a job.

Though I don't speak to market conditions specifically, an undercurrent of this study is the inevitable supply and demand of the job-seeking enterprise. While I divide this article according to various locations of the job market, these locations inform one another: we can't talk about the role of the MLA convention, for example, without mentioning the increasing popularity of phone interviews. Additionally, each of these locations yielded evidence of discriminatory behaviors embedded in search practices that we often take for granted. With that caveat, I first examine the phone interview as a location, then the Internet (including both video interviews and the job wiki), and finally, the MLA convention, weaving participants' concerns about discriminatory practices and different aspects of the hiring process throughout.

On the Phone

Spurred at least partly by the economic crisis that this country experienced in the fall of 2008, subsequent job searches have relied heavily on phone interviews. While some participants who went on the job market prior to 2008 reported having had several phone interviews during their respective searches, their MLA interviews typically outnumbered their phone interviews. This trend seemed to reverse itself after 2008, with 21 out of 24 participants reporting a range of 1–12 *more* phone or video interviews than MLA interviews.[3] As one participant put it, "The phone interview has now become universal."

The majority of candidate participants (27/33) expressed some degree of frustration with the format, ranging from being "a little annoyed" by inconveniences such as echoes and dropped calls to one candidate claiming that she "heard horror stories" from her colleagues about their experiences with phone interviews. Participants most frequently cited a lack of visual cues and extended silences as the sources of their dissatisfaction. Some candidate participants reported feeling constrained by not being able to gauge how well their answers were being received by the committee. In contrast, 8 candidates mentioned that they appreciated the ability to have notes in front of them as they answered questions. Additionally, 6 candidates expressed relief at not having to travel. Several candidates also mentioned that being given interview questions in advance alleviated anxiety and allowed them to construct more thoughtful answers.

From the committee member perspective, most participants spoke positively about using the phone as a medium for interviewing candidates. In several interviews, however, the issue of nonverbal communication among

committee members emerged in a more unfavorable light, as three of my participants expressed concerns about this tendency. According to committee member Ann Silva,

> This is one thing nobody admits . . . when we do phone interviews, it's a very different environment because the four or so of us can sit around and make faces and pass notes back and forth and start critiquing right there in the moment, which is something you can't do when it's face-to-face. I actually didn't like that because there was sort of this almost this us-versus-them thing that would happen.

The fact that a candidate would have no way of knowing if a committee member was expressing dissatisfaction further magnifies an already unequal power dynamic. The ability to have a "conversation" can become stifled when the committee can utilize modalities of communication that the candidate cannot, possibly contributing to the us-versus-them dynamic that Silva mentions. This phenomenon typifies how using location as a lens helps make transparent how "unequal differences among social actors are naturalized or held 'in place'" (Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon 11–12). When committee members use the affordances of the phone interview to "make faces," as Silva claims, they are magnifying the power differentials at play (particularly when the interviewee is a graduate student). Several of my candidate participants referred to this kind of dynamic, alluding to the long, awkward pauses that they did not know how to read. Silva's comments, I believe, stand as evidence of the need for search committee members to consider how the format might complicate their interactions with candidates—and to find ways, ideally, to resolve those complications.

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The phone interview's implicit reliance on the auditory modality also surfaces issues of access. The assumption that everyone can comfortably navigate this format leads to the exclusion of some candidates,[4] as candidate participant Amy Morrison explains:

> The big problem with the phone interview stuff is that people are not thinking about the issue of access . . . [committees] are not giving people alternatives, or they're assuming that the onus is on the candidate to create those alternatives if [candidates] can't do the phone. . . . I was particularly stressed out because my disability involves auditory processing issues, but it's not a hearing impairment. And so by requesting an accommodation, immediately that means the institution might

think, "If she can't process on the phone, then how is she going to process when she teaches?" . . . [The committee has] to think of [accommodations] beforehand; you can't just put it all on the candidate. Because then you're forcing disclosure, right? You're forcing that process on the part of the candidate and by law, it gets really tricky there. . . . If you're relying only on one modal channel, how is it that you're going to actually be more inclusive to the people you're interviewing?[5]

As Morrison attests, the phone can prove especially problematic when it forces candidates to disclose their disability. According to the search committee participants I surveyed, discourses of "fairness" often pervade discussions about letting candidates choose their interview format. In 2011, Margaret Price argued that academe, during the job market process and beyond, constrains the ability for teacher-scholars to perform at their best—and usually couches these constraints in the language of equity. Price maintains, "If this system were revised to become more accessible for academics with mental disabilities, all members of the academic world would benefit." One of the concrete suggestions that Price makes is that "at the interview stage, a committee could ask candidates if there are any accommodations that might make the interview more accessible." As participants attested, the concern—often initiated at the administrative level—is that choice will give some candidates an unfair advantage over others. As Morrison points out, however, forcing all people to conform to one modal channel excludes some people, forcing them to disclose a disability that they should not have to disclose.

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To complicate matters, some participants invoked the notion of equity to advocate *for* phone interviews. Three search committee participants referred to the phone as being a potentially less discriminatory way of communicating with candidates because it lessens the ability for the committee to assign identity markers. Committee member Christine Mills argued that the phone is the most ethical way of interviewing candidates: "The good thing about a phone interview is I think it's less prejudicial. I feel like they're morally better and ethically better than Skype or in person. . . . I do think that judgments are made on physical appearances." Markers such as race, weight, and age are potentially evidenced visually, which might work against candidates. While the phone can prove exclusionary on the basis of ability, several participants argued that the lack of visuals can help committees maintain a clearer focus on a candidate's answers. In short, the *ability* to not be seen can work to the candidate's advantage, while the *inability* to see a committee can prove detrimental to the candidate.

These varied perspectives locate the phone interview as a space that harbors significant ethical implications. In deciding whether to use this medium for interviews, committees should weigh the ethics of asking all candidates to use the phone, knowing that some candidates may have a disability that they should not have to disclose by asking for another interview format. In addition, requiring a phone interview might place those candidates who identify as ESL, for example, at a potential disadvantage by removing all visual cues. With these issues in mind, committees should offer an alternative way of interviewing. In addition, knowing that candidates cannot gather a sense of what people in the room are doing during the interview, committees should avoid making evaluative nonverbal statements about candidates during the interview. Likewise, schools might share the names of participating committee members and, as Amy Morrison said one university did for her, send a diagram and seating chart to provide visual markers. Finally, committees might provide questions ahead of time to allow candidates the opportunity to offer more thoughtful answers.[6] Through these approaches, the phone interview would see improvement as a cost-effective method of getting to know candidates.

Via a Video Feed

As with phone interviews, video interviews have recently grown in popularity. Despite the medium's drawbacks, a majority of candidates (15/23) reported preferring video interviews to phone interviews (10 candidate participants did not experience video interviews). Those search committee member participants who utilized video (8/24) reported largely positive experiences. Despite this generally positive reception, however, several people expressed concerns that video interviews can play out in unpredictable ways. In considering the kind of candidate preparation needed for this type of interview, committee member Marlana Fernandez argued, "That's probably something that we need to work on more is how to help prep people for Skype interviews. And one of the questions, I think, we need to answer is how do different schools conduct Skype interviews. They're not conducting them the same way . . . small differences make a big difference in how you respond to the question." Likewise, describing her experience, candidate participant Grace Cooper illustrated how confusing such an interview can be:

> Sometimes [the committee was] super far away because they wanted to get everyone in the screen shot. Sometimes they were up high, so it's like they put the camera up in the corner. In a couple of interviews they passed the laptop, which was weird because you couldn't see how other people were responding to your answers.

Cases where the candidate can only see one committee member at a time can establish the us-versus-them dynamic referenced earlier with phone interviews. In addition, candidates can make assumptions about how much planning the committee put into "staging" the interview and about the range of technological infrastructure available within the department. While video interviews provide the visual information that many committee members feel is necessary for "knowing" a candidate, they also say a lot about the committee: information that may inform a candidate's decision, should she or he progress to the next stage.

This scenario cuts both ways, however, as four candidate participants remarked that video interviews made them feel significant pressure that the technology operate properly. Candidate participant Priya Parmar remarked: "I felt like that was an interview question in itself: is this person smart enough to figure out how to use Skype?" Several candidates mentioned taking great care in choosing their backdrop. They also invested time into making practice calls to assure the program operated smoothly. Candidate participant Jonathan Varcho, who now advises his own graduate students, claimed, "We did a whole different way of preparing [candidates] for a Skype interview in terms of like figuring out how to test it before they're calling you and making sure you have a back up plan." Like several others, Varcho remains concerned that any technological glitches might negatively affect a committee's perception of a candidate, even when the problem originates on the committee's end.

The newness of this format carries with it potential repercussions, as committee member Adam Tweedy indicates: "Right now people feel like they don't really know how to navigate Skype socially. They don't know how to read people. . . . At least everybody is aware that phone interviews are problematic. In Skype interviews you feel like well, you're seeing [the committee], you can see the looks on their faces, you should be fine. You don't really recognize how flat, how strained the communication is." As mentioned earlier, the responses of several candidate participants suggest that they do *not* see the video interview as being naturalized. Tweedy's comments serve as an important reminder that when advanced technologies like video feeds are involved, participants on both sides need to devote great care to the technical and spatial-material aspects of the experience. In addition, committee members must consider the ethics of (not) "being visible," especially in cases where the candidate cannot see the entire committee at one time. Committee member Scott Dengel claims that the focus on visuals encouraged by video interviews can have a pernicious effect: "There is greater possibility for a kind of discrimination; and when you talk about 'fit,' that's the classic alibi of discrimination. . . . 'We just didn't think they were a good fit.' It really means that they're working class, they're overweight,

they're Arab. There's no interview process that doesn't have that potential, but Skype might have greater potential [than face-to-face interviews]." While candidates tend to appreciate how video interviews enable the visual cues that phone interviews do not, these interviews—in which someone's face is the focus of attention for an extended period of time—also open the door to discriminatory practices. In this sense, while we often position the video interview as a "new" interview location, it rekindles long-standing concerns about a person's candidacy being unfairly influenced by his or her appearance. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued that digital environments sometimes encourage viewers to focus on the medium itself, or what they call *hypermediacy*: in this case, to privilege the act of seeing above all else. Video-based environments involve a "style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium" (272). We as interviewers, then, need to resist this tendency to place undue emphasis on a person's physical characteristics when the medium that we are employing is encouraging us to do so.

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Based on these data, several suggestions emerged as reasonable ways to counter the instability associated with video interviews. While the majority of respondents who participated in video-based interviews used Skype (24/28 of the participants who mentioned which software they used), 4 participants used other software (such as Vidyo). Some committee members said that they sought out a campus setting that was specifically equipped for collaborative communication, an approach that can benefit all parties. For example, by enlisting the help of campus instructional technology experts, committees can better assure that the wireless connection will be reliable and that lighting, backdrop, and the seating arrangement will appear professional. Graduate programs might also consider providing similar access for their graduate students who are on the job market, even if it means simply allowing them to use Skype in a secure campus setting with reliable Internet access. In addition, as the video interview grows in popularity, we must continually assess the unique ethical and social constraints and affordances of this medium and how they affect the interview dynamic.

On the Job Wiki

Started in 2006 in an effort at crowd-sourcing information about jobs, the wiki serves as a space for users to update details about any given position. The

most common entries include dates when requests for more materials were received and indications that interview requests and, later, campus visits had been arranged. As with most wikis, all posts are made anonymously, which contributes to the job wiki's reputation for unreliability. As a graduate student, I heard stories about people deliberately posting incorrect information to the wiki, and I was advised by more advanced peers in my program to avoid it altogether. While some participants relayed similar stories, the wiki nonetheless has become deeply embedded in the job search experience of most candidates.

While the majority of candidate participants expressed dissatisfaction with the wiki (21/33), several people made compelling arguments for its usefulness. Candidate Brenda Sawyer explained her wiki use in this way: "I'm a list maker in my life. I found it freeing to be able to cross schools off the list." Similarly, Grace Cooper argued, "I found the wiki useful because it gave me a sense of control." People who advocated using the wiki employed similar language, arguing that it gave them insight into the behind-the-scenes machinations of an otherwise murky process. One committee member participant said that she and the rest of her committee contributed information to the wiki as a way of communicating informally with candidates. Several other members of search committees admitted to correcting inaccurate information and using the information posted to gauge how they were "keeping pace" with other schools in terms of making offers. Regardless of its ultimate value or accuracy, it appears that the wiki has achieved a level of pervasiveness that now encompasses even search committee members.

Even so, the stories participants told me about the job wiki overall serve as cautionary tales in how to compromise one's confidence during an already stress-filled time. Roughly half of the candidates who used the job wiki (15/29) claimed that its negative effects on their psyche outweighed any value they gained from it. According to candidate Elizabeth Sheedy:

> I felt toward the end of the experience that it was designed to make you hate yourself. Candidates, especially graduate students, are so desperate for any information and the wiki fulfills that, but there's a very detrimental side you don't anticipate because all grad students when they start the process are cocky and they underestimate what November will do to their soul.

In referencing its informational potential, Sheedy articulates a major draw of the wiki: believing that it will assuage anxiety by providing concrete updates. Several candidates went on to describe how they only later recognized the wiki's competitive undercurrent. Committee member Cindy Reif, who has mentored numerous candidates in recent years, voiced a similar perspective:

> I call it the evil job wiki. I think actually it's been bad for candidates. Some of my grad students, the moment they get back from MLA they get on the wiki and they're like, "Oh God, University of X already called and I didn't get called. Nobody's going to call me." It seems to heighten their stress to know what's going on. As soon as they see that one set of calls went out and they're not a part of it, they think their whole job experience has been wiped out. It seems like too much information, actually. It seems to really hurt the candidates' confidence.

It is especially important to understand the adviser perspective, considering that advisers are intimately connected to graduate students' emotional volatility during the job market search. Adam Tweedy, who advises graduate students on the job market, put it more succinctly: "[The job wiki] is scaring the bejesus out of people. It's getting pretty regular for me to have to talk people down. . . . It's not even in the category of too much information; it's anxieties amplifying anxieties." The range of responses to the wiki—some finding it helpful in being able to rule out certain jobs, others viewing it as an unnecessary additional stressor—emphasizes the need for thorough advising when students begin the job market process. The notion that wikis and other forms of crowdsourcing serve the collective by pooling people's knowledge (Surowiecki; Nicotra) slams against the reality that in this particular context, most contributors are vying with each other for a valuable commodity. Because the wiki has become deeply integrated into the job search process, we should talk to candidates about its role in both their approach to the job market and their emotional well-being.

In terms of best practices for utilizing the job wiki, survey participants offered advice for how to make the wiki a more productive space for all users. With candidates' concerns in mind, committees should realize that using the wiki as a space for directly communicating with candidates might privilege some individuals over others (considering that some candidates have chosen not to use the wiki for the reasons described above). According to recent candidate Vanessa Harris, "Committees assume that people check the wiki and are updating people that way, but I find that kind of troubling." Committees can avoid this privileging of certain candidates by making sure that any information posted on the wiki is circulated within multiple other contexts as well. When it comes to candidate use of the wiki, several candidates claimed they knew that other users were posting misinformation (i.e., someone crosses out a job at the same time another candidate receives an invitation for a campus visit). Candidate Kaiya

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Gonzales even claims, "I saw people change accurate info to inaccurate info," suggesting that some candidates deliberately attempt to skew the document's accuracy. Viewing the wiki as a crowdsourcing opportunity rather than as a way to "size up the competition" would not only make it a more generous and collegial environment, but also increase the wiki's reliability.

At the MLA Convention (or Not)

Having traced some of the changes to the rhetoric and composition job market that have transpired during the past ten years, we should also reflect on another institution whose role is also shifting: the Modern Language Association's annual convention. The study participants frequently broached both the economic and political implications of attending the conference. The MLA convention also figured heavily in several conversations about discriminatory practices that candidates experienced on the job market. Because MLA has historically functioned as the organizing force of the job market, it is useful to explore its present role and evaluate whether its benefits still outweigh its drawbacks.

The MLA convention traditionally served as the fulcrum of the job market: taking place immediately after Christmas, it was the single event that most helped a candidate gauge her or his job prospects. Some candidate participants who went on the market in the first third of the time period I studied (approximately 2001–2004) reported having anywhere between nine and twenty-one MLA interviews. Candidates who went on the market later reported lower numbers of MLA interviews, typically under ten. The reasons for this drop-off are multiple, having to do with the worsening economy, the related increase in phone and video interviews, and the delayed date of the conference (early January). All of these factors have contributed to a job market in which many schools no longer view attending the MLA convention as an option. The ripple effects of this change have been significant, as the job market no longer follows what I will refer to as the "traditional timeline": candidates sending out materials in September and October, getting requests for interviews in December, going on campus visits in January and February, and securing a job by March. The timeline's increasing unpredictability has only become more pronounced in recent years, as 2007 job candidate Matthew Helm explains:

> When I was describing my timeline to you, it doesn't look at all like the timeline of the PhD students that I've been advising who have gone on the market the past couple of years. . . . I think it's problematic that you can end up getting a job offer in November. It's been difficult for me to advise grad students who have been in

that situation. . . . In November, it's just too early to settle for a job you're not sure about. That presents real problems for candidates.

In his comments, Helm directly addresses the issue of "jumping" the timeline, or the phenomenon where schools establish early deadlines so that they can put forth an offer prior to MLA. Based on the study data, the types of schools who do this range from small liberal arts colleges to large R1 universities. Five of the committee member participants, for example, explained that their programs opted for an "early" timeline so that they could remain competitive and secure the best candidates. The result of this movement is that the traditional process, one that no longer locates MLA at its center, does not materialize for an increasing number of job candidates.

Other candidate participants worry that the trend away from a standard timeline leaves candidates, already in a vulnerable position, with even less power.

The repercussions of this shift have been felt by candidates in numerous ways. While some participants explained that they were satisfied with the timing and pacing of their respective searches, fourteen candidates expressed concern over the shifting timeline. Marnie Bechloft, who went on the market in 2008, argues:

> I'm concerned about schools that are violating the tacit timeline. It's especially not fair to candidates and ultimately, I think it's not good for the schools either . . . . Having that relatively standardized timeline gives the candidates a decent chance at knowing what their options are for possibly comparing offers. . . . The more we coerce people into accepting a position because of the fear of not getting something, the more we're going to see people moving around. Maybe that's not a bad thing. But it's at the very least expensive and time-consuming.

The fact that Bechloft uses the term "violating" suggests that she, like other candidates, believes the job market process should conform to a particular structure, one that historically used MLA as its anchor. Other candidate participants worry that the trend away from a standard timeline leaves candidates, already in a vulnerable position, with even less power. According to Marcus Asbury, a 2012 candidate,

> Right now [the timeline] is structured in favor of institutions or departments instead of candidates because the search gets spread out from November to June . . . . [The process] favors institutions that search early. For instance, the place where I had a campus visit in November, if they had offered me a job, I wouldn't have any negotiating power with any other schools. . . . The schools that are [searching] earlier, they don't have to compete. Somebody's taking a big risk by turning that

offer down. So that kind of spreading out really starts to favor the schools and prevents candidates from being able to make a choice based on multiple options.

Asbury's mention of the loss of bargaining power is worth noting, as a candidate's ability to negotiate for resources stands as one of the rare moments during the process in which a candidate occupies a position of advantage. Grace Cooper, also a 2012 candidate, echoes Asbury's concerns: "Most of my colleagues took the first offer they had because they got early offers. I think that the later MLA gives schools an opportunity to cut candidates off at the pass by having early deadlines and interviewing early and actually getting their job stuff done by MLA. When people go to MLA with offers, I think it's terribly unfair." Cooper points out that a timetable that enables schools to make "early" offers (presumably, in November or December) conflicts with the more traditional MLA timetable dictating that candidates interview at the conference in January and visit campuses in subsequent months. With this conflict in mind, both Asbury and Cooper argue that the ethics of offering a job prior to MLA are questionable, implying that despite the preponderance of phone and video interviews, some candidates still expect that schools will follow the MLA timeline, even if they do not attend the conference. Additionally, we in the profession should ask what kind of timeline is best for the field at large. Would a uniform timeline (that uses MLA as its anchor, or not) better enable candidates and programs to find good matches for their needs? Is the present configuration the only way smaller programs can compete for desirable candidates? How might programs mitigate the risk of having the funding for their searches pulled if they do not act quickly enough?

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So where, then, does this situation leave rhetoric and composition's relationship with the MLA conference? Depending on whom you ask, some say that the time has come for rhetoric and composition to eschew the conference altogether. Those participants who hold this view objected to conducting interviews at the conference for either economic or philosophical reasons. The expense of attending MLA also surfaces the broader concern of whether we as a field are institutionalizing a de facto class hierarchy with practices such as expecting job candidates to attend a convention that requires significant expenditure. Committee member Lois Henderson voiced a similar concern in saying: "I was always worried about the class issue with MLA. . . . We assume

that everybody can afford to fly to wherever and stay at the hotel and buy a nice suit." Another committee member wondered if, in this time of graduate student travel funds being cut, committees would be amenable to a candidate requesting that he or she be interviewed by phone or video instead. Keeping in mind the precarious financial situation that many graduate students find themselves in by the time they reach the end of many years of study, we as a field should contend with the fact that expecting candidates to attend a conference privileges certain members of the academy over others.

Another layer that complicates the MLA question has to do with rhetoric and composition's uneasy relationship with the conference and the organization as a whole. While others have historicized that relationship at length (Susan Miller; Crowley), the study data suggest that many people in rhetoric and composition no longer feel any intellectual affiliation with the MLA conference. Aside from the arduous experience of attending MLA, which several candidates alternately described as "barbaric," "awful" and "ridiculous," other participants questioned whether we as a field should even be associating with an organization that, they claim, does not acknowledge our disciplinarity. According to committee member Jane Roberts, "There's no reason for comp/rhet to go to MLA. They don't respect us. There's no box even to check. There's no place to check that you do anything that they recognize as scholarship. The only box you could check is 'teaching of writing.'" Roberts is referring to the process of registering online for MLA, a process that requires that candidates check a box for their area of expertise. For Roberts, the exclusionary online MLA conference form is symptomatic of a larger divide—one that seemingly becomes more pronounced as greater numbers of rhetoric and composition programs move outside of English departments. Some participants claimed that merely by attending the conference, we are complicit in our own marginalization, considering that we not only utilize MLA's job list, but also claim membership in their organization, follow their timeline for job searches, and adhere to their practices (such as conducting interviews alternately in a cramped hotel room or in a physical space so crowded and loud that it is known as the "cattle call" room). Based on the dissatisfaction of many of the survey participants and on a decades-long acknowledgment that rhetoric and composition occupies a marginalized position within English studies, I pose a question to our discipline as a whole: is it best that we make MLA the center of our hiring universe?

I position this question within the context of the issues raised here about ethical hiring practices, humane candidate treatment, and cost-effective job searches. Might some discriminatory hiring practices be lessened if we do not

rely on face-to-face meetings until the campus-visit stage? Should we implicitly require candidates to attend an expensive convention as part of the interview process, thereby reinforcing a class hierarchy within the profession? Might we, as suggested by one of my participants, explore other venues for interviewing candidates such as the NCTE convention, held every November? How is MLA exhibiting social control over both rhetoric and composition candidates and the field as a whole through its "design and maintenance of public and institutional space" (Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon 11–12)? These are some of the questions that we need to engage as a field. If we are continuing to attend the MLA convention out of tradition, as several of my participants attested, we need to think more critically about that decision, considering that tradition is often not the best source for ethical practices in any context.

Moving Forward

While the issues raised here contain no easy resolutions, my hope is that both hiring committees and candidates will adopt a more critical eye toward the choices they make. In particular, I want to highlight several crucial points that participants made during the course of the study. Additionally, I offer a final recommendation about remaining attuned to all the locations of the job market based on this study.

Critically Examine the Structure and Timing of Searches

Among the many choices that committees must make, perhaps the two that carry the most influence are the interview format chosen and the timeline established. As the data on interview formats suggest, deciding between a phone, video, or MLA interview should involve many more considerations than merely convenience or personal preference. Committees need to think about whom they are privileging when they decide on a particular format and should work to accommodate those who might be

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disadvantaged by that choice. In addition, though decisions about the timeline often depend in part on funding, committees should keep the candidate's point of view in mind—particularly the notion that a candidate might feel coerced into taking an early job offer.

The willingness to think about a candidate's perspective represents one rhetorical move that committee members mentioned repeatedly—and which is instructive for avoiding discriminatory practices. Returning to Vandenberg,

Hum, and Clary-Lemon's definition of location, such a move might involve considering "how social control or power is 'structured' by the design and maintenance of public and institutional space"—the institutional spaces being those of MLA or the phone/video interview. How might the particular way a committee is structuring these spaces exclude certain candidates: an ESL speaker, a queer candidate, or someone who is differently abled? During my conversation with Christine Mills, she drew on the notion of empathy to explain how she tried to relate to candidates: "What did I learn from being a candidate? Empathy. It wasn't easy for me to get a job. I was anxious. I was scared to death. I remember that giant map of the U.S. and all the places I might end up." According to Mills, she continually draws on her experience as a candidate to remember how intimidating a job search can be. Other committee members related empathy to the reading of candidates' materials (a practice one participant called

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"reading generously") and to conducting interviews, as mentioned by Miles Robertson: "People overread a candidate's answer to a question. Like every syllable is so parsed out that you can make anybody sound stupid and uninformed if you try hard enough. . . . There's a loss of humanity that happens when you start to evaluate people. And I would be like, 'Just remember what it was like to sit on the other side of that table.'" These collective responses demonstrate the commitment members of our field have made to conducting searches in fair and humane ways, a commitment we can expand further.

Be Aware of the Ways in Which Certain Job Search Practices Can Be Discriminatory

In reflecting on the practices that committees choose to implement, members should be mindful of the ways in which they can further institutionalize discrimination. While considering the aforementioned scenarios—thinking about MLA in terms of class; allowing people of all abilities the opportunity to choose their interview format; finding ways to focus more intently on qualifications and interview performance instead of appearance—committees should also work with their institution's equal opportunity office to assure fair-minded practices. Based on comments made by several participants that their administration urged them to have a uniform method of interviewing, we need to educate these offices that "fair" does not mean "the same for all." Only in challenging these institutional constraints can we work toward a more flexible process that allows all candidates to perform at their best.

Moreover, the presence of discriminatory practices in general proves that we need to constantly reflect on ethical hiring practices. Search committee participant Julia Telep described the pervasiveness of marginalizing practices on the job market: "People get attacked through their work. There's a real backlash against people who do work in cultural difference: people who do work in queer rhetoric, disability studies, Native rhetoric, African American composition studies. People get racist questions and racist interactions." Telep's commentary emphasizes how embedded some of these practices are, in that a candidate's research agenda might factor into how ethically he or she is treated. While my research agenda (and, in fact, job talk) included queer rhetorics, the instances of bias that I encountered occurred more subtly during campus visits when committee members would emphasize the quality of local schools or tell me that the area was "a nice place to raise kids": comments that assumed I would be pursuing a particular lifestyle (though some queer-identified people *would* be interested in these aspects of a town). According to committee member Katherine Horan, "The heteronormative family is lurking out there in a lot of job interviews.

In addition to learning how to navigate the technologies involved in interviews, candidates should also consider how they present themselves online.

. . . I don't know how much our field has responded to that. I know that queer scholars and feminist scholars have talked about [this issue] when they've been on campus visits—that there's an emphasis on the heteronormative family and how to deal with that." For committee members, enabling candidates to get the most out of their job search experiences means not making normative assumptions in terms of sexuality, gender, race, weight, age, class, ability, or ethnicity. As Horan encourages, we need to educate graduate students on how to deal with instances of bias on the job market; additionally, I argue that we as (future) committee members need to avoid perpetuating normativity in all its iterations.

Take into Consideration All the Places That the Present-Day Job Market Is Located When Preparing Candidates

As the job market process encompasses more locations, we need to prepare graduate students for this new reality. In addition to learning how to navigate the technologies involved in interviews, candidates should also consider how they present themselves online. As committee member Marlana Fernandez insists, "You need to have a professional online presence at this point." This presence might include more formal online spaces such as a personal website

but could also encompass informal contexts, as Fernandez goes on to describe: "How you negotiate Facebook [while on the job market] can show that you are social media savvy." While deleting all social media accounts prior to going on the job market remains one approach that candidates choose, Fernandez instead advocates using these websites thoughtfully to demonstrate one's rhetorical sensitivity. In fact, removing all traces of oneself online prior to entering the job market can backfire. Even for candidates who do not pursue digitally oriented scholarship, there seems to be a growing sense that full engagement with the discipline includes online participation. Search committee participant Miles Robertson articulated such a perspective:

> When I first started looking [candidates] up, I didn't think much about Web presence, but what I found is that people who hadn't thought through how they were presenting themselves online, I somehow felt like they were less involved in the profession. It made me think that they weren't fully engaging with the profession.

Candidate preparation, then, needs to include considerable attention to the ways in which technologies will be used as a medium for getting to know candidates. Committees will search for information about candidates online; will interact informally with graduate students on Facebook in the years leading up to their candidacy; will interview them using software programs such as Skype; will expect them to manage the social challenges of phone interviews.

Committees will search for information about candidates online; will interact informally with graduate students on Facebook in the years leading up to their candidacy; will interview them using software programs such as Skype; will expect them to manage the social challenges of phone interviews.

Candidates need to be ready to navigate these locations in addition to the more familiar ones of campus visits and MLA interviews.

Ultimately, only through a greater awareness of the dispersed locations of today's job market can we make the process more equitable for all participants—with equity entailing a keen awareness of difference. We also need to capitalize on opportunities to pull these dispersed locations into view at once, maintaining ongoing discussions in our journals and at our conferences about the changing job market and ways to manage it. One committee member participant playfully exaggerated about the hiring process: "You spend about six hours with someone to make a possibly forty-year commitment. And that's crazy." While in most cases the numbers are probably not that extreme, the fact remains that search committees and candidates have to make major decisions within a compressed time period, based on occasionally ambiguous

data. Because the process contains many factors outside of our control as both candidates and committee members, we need to consistently interrogate and revise the factors that are within our control.

Notes

1. All but three survey participants hold a PhD in rhetoric and composition.

2. These authors were responding to a similar study conducted in 1987 by Chapman and Tate.

3. Of the 33 candidate participants, 24 went on the job market for the first time in 2008 or later.

4. Not having access to visual cues can also place at a disadvantage people for whom English is not their first language.

5. Morrison made a point of mentioning that several schools were proactive when it came to accommodation issues.

6. While one participant recommended receiving interview questions in advance for phone interviews, I think it is worth considering whether that option should be available in all interview formats.

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