**Older and on the (Academic Job) Market**



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[*Image:*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104348/) *Glengarry Glen Ross (1992)*

Searching for employment tends to make people anxious about the ways in which they are different from the "typical" candidate. One such factor is age, especially if you are older than average on the market. I heard from two readers who had such concerns:

* *"A growing number of us earn Ph.D.s post-40, post-50. I'm 58. I've been told pointblank not to even think of applying for conventional teaching positions."*
* *"I will be 60 when I complete my doctoral program. I really would appreciate insights on managing my job search."*

I'm of two minds about these concerns. On the one hand, I want to tell you not to overreact to an adviser who rules out entire sectors of employment because of your age, race, gender, or any other personal characteristic. The faculty member giving such advice may be well-intentioned, trying to save you time and heartache. The problem is that such blanket statements can be flat-out incorrect. For example, in a previous column on [interdisciplinary Ph.D.s](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/914-job-market-mentor-the-interdisciplinary-ph-d) -- another characteristic that makes a candidate different from the norm on the tenure-track market -- I spoke with one such Ph.D. who was told specifically not to bother applying to traditional disciplinary departments, but then did so anyway and was hired into one.

On the other hand, you need to be realistic. If you're just getting your Ph.D. in your late 50s or early 60s, it's unlikely that you're going to be attractive for tenure-track jobs that require six years as an assistant professor and then another six as an associate before promotion to full professor. Keep in mind: There's no mandatory retirement age in academia anymore. Departments may be concerned that if they hired someone who was 60, that candidate would enjoy relatively few productive years and stay on as deadwood for another 15 years. That sentiment may be unfair, and it may be age discrimination, and departments almost certainly will never come out and say it, but it may be how you are judged and you need to be aware of that possibility.

Still, candidates in their 50s and 60s can be very competitive for other types of teaching positions on fixed-term contracts, such as lecturerships. So be open to a variety of types of positions if you're an older candidate on the market.

But what if you're a new Ph.D. in your 40s, older than the norm but not exactly in your senior-citizen years? How should you approach the academic market?

I sought the firsthand perspective of Kristin Seefeldt, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Michigan who finished her Ph.D. in her early 40s and offers the following advice for older candidates:

* *"I put the start and end dates of my doctoral training on my CV. I was concerned that people would think I had been lingering in a Ph.D. program forever. And I made sure to be clear in interviews about when I started and why. Even then, I still had to convince one interviewer that I hadn't been hanging around the doctoral program for 10 years."*
* *"In my cover letters I talked very little about the work I did previously [before entering the Ph.D. program] and really focused on what I had been doing during the time I was a doctoral student. Other than an introductory paragraph discussing my nontraditional path to academia, I wanted my cover letters to resemble and be structured like those of other people on the job market.”*
* *"In interviews, I also focused on what I was currently doing and where I saw myself going, not what I had done in the past. I wanted to be viewed as someone who was very actively focused on her research agenda, not as someone who was switching careers. I saw myself as an academic who was starting at the beginning. Junior is junior, no matter what your age."*

Just as interdisciplinary scholars have the additional task of explaining their training and how they would fit into a traditional department, candidates who are older than average should be prepared to discuss their previous work and educational history, their decision to change careers, and how their earlier work enriches their current studies. As Seefeldt noted, you don't want to dwell on your past but you don't want to ignore it either.

As a new Ph.D. in your 40s you may be able to turn your age into an advantage and make a convincing argument that you bring more to the table than younger candidates. For example, earlier military service might offer interesting perspectives on history, and working in government would inform teaching and research in political science. In your cover letters and interviews, be sure to briefly explain any such synergies and advantages between your earlier career and your current academic work.

*You can email your questions to* [*JobMarketMentor@gmail.com*](mailto:JobMarketMentor@gmail.com)*. Contributors will be kept anonymous. You can also follow this column on Twitter: @JobMarketMentor.*



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