

Welcome to Column 20 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/page.php?ss=26>

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HEY JANE!

“Although I already have a tenure-track job, I have decided to go back on the job market. I’m afraid that if I don’t include a letter of reference from a colleague in my current department, then the search committees will think that I am underperforming in my current job. What advice can you give me about informing my current departmental colleagues about my job search?”

Generally, pre-tenure, it’s not advisable to let it be widely known that you are on the job market. Despite your actual reasons for searching, people will come up with their own interpretations. They may assume that you are unhappy in the department, that you are just trying to get a raise, or that you are afraid that you might not be granted tenure. All of these interpretations may influence the way you are treated in your department by some people.

With that said, I think it is assumed in academia (and in most fields) that everyone is potentially always on the job market and if they find another job that improves their lives, they might resign. One big difference between academia and other fields is that our job searches are spread out over a much longer time frame than most. This leaves us with a much longer time period to feel like we are “keeping a secret.” I’ve known people who love their jobs and love their departments, but simply want to move to a different geographic location. Because they have supportive colleagues, they feel guilty about even looking for another job. There’s no need to feel guilty, I think most people understand that you “have to do what you have to do.”

As far as a letter of recommendation, if you have a departmental colleague whom you really trust to be confidential, you could ask her or him to be a reference. It can certainly be handy to have a letter that says “so-and-so is an amazing scholar, teacher, colleague and human being who would be a terrific addition to your faculty. We really would hate to lose so-and-so, but our loss would be your gain.” However, that letter doesn’t have to come from someone in your department, but might come from a trusted colleague in another department at your institution. If it is simply not possible to ask anyone at your institution for a recommendation, don’t fret, search committees understand the delicacy of applying for jobs while you are currently employed.

As for informing the rest of your departmental faculty, I would say wait until you have a written offer on the table. However, if you are hoping to receive a counter-offer from your home institution, you will probably need to begin talking with your chair and/or dean with only a verbal offer.

Once you are tenured, job hunting is a whole different story. At this point, it’s perfectly reasonable to ask for a letter from a departmental colleague. Ideally, you wouldn’t want to bother people for letters until you have made a short-list based on your CV, however, some

searches will request letters right away. In this case, you might contact the search committee and ask if you can postpone letters of recommendation until the short-list phase of the search. At this level, there is still no need to widely inform people of your search, however, once you've been invited to interview, it's probably okay to let people know. Often, someone desired elsewhere becomes more valued at home. Once you've been offered the interview, you might want to inform your home institution because some administrators have the freedom to make preemptive counter-offers to encourage faculty to decline the interview. The counter-offer might be attractive enough that you will choose to forgo the interview. However, if you turn down the counter-offer and then are not offered a job, you have lost out on whatever was offered by your home institution.

A few more things to consider:

- * If you are actively trying to leave your home department, you might try not to make big extracurricular commitments (long term committee work, chairing student committees, etc.) to your department while you know you may not be there to back them up.
- * Once you have accepted another offer, you may want to consider how you will notify your colleagues. Depending on your situation, it may be worth the time and effort to talk to everyone individually to explain your motives for leaving – especially if they are personal and not a reflection of the work environment or department. This will cut down on people relying on the “grapevine” and other people’s interpretations of why you are leaving. It may make the difference between severing ties and maintaining ties with the department. If you chose to use the opportunity of leaving a department or university to vocalize a complaint, try to do so carefully and diplomatically. The world of academia is a very small one and it’s never a good idea to burn bridges!
- * This whole process can be tricky and you may want to have more guidance than this column offers. In this case, you might seek a mentor through SWS’s professional needs mentor program. Applications can be found at: <http://www.socwomen.org/page.php?ss=6>. Or you can contact Erin K. Anderson at eanderson3@washcoll.edu.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps!

-- Jane

Do you have a question for Jane?
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