

HIRING A STATISTICIAN AT A LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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A play in one act, set in New Haven, Connecticut and Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. The action takes place in 1995 and 1996.

Old Statistician: Gudmund R. Iversen

New Statistician: Philip J. Everson

Old: It is the fall of 1995 and we had another over-enrolled semester in statistics! There are about 330 students in each of the four years at Swarthmore College. About 90 students taking our regular, introductory statistics course Stat 2. Our liberal arts type course Stat 1 with limited enrollment of 30 has a long waiting list, and almost all the students had to wait until they are seniors to get into the course they should have taken by the time they were sophomores. With another 60 students taking intro stat next semester, 180 of the 330 students are taking statistics. Statistics is beginning to nudge out calculus as the most enrolled topic in the department!

It is a good thing we changed the name to the Department of Mathematics and Statistics! Even though the "and statistics" consists only of me.

I have to write another letter to the provost, arguing that we need a second statistician. She must be getting tired of these letters, even though both she and the president agree, in principle, that we need a second statistician. It seems to help when students lotteried out of the courses send e-mail directly to provost and president and complain that they cannot get into the course.

New: I finally finished my degree at Harvard and now here I am teaching at Yale - my first real job! But it's only a 1-year position, so I guess I'd better start thinking about next year. There's a chance I could stay on here, but I can't count on that. And is this the kind of place I want to end up? It sure is exciting being at Yale - It's definitely keeping me sharp teaching these extraordinary students! Teaching graduate courses is a great way to move ahead with my research and I've always loved teaching undergrads. But I sure feel a lot of pressure to produce papers, and it's hard to justify spending as much time as I'd like to on my classes. Wouldn't it be fun to just focus on either teaching or research

without being torn between the two? There are industry jobs, like Bellcore, where I could work on interesting research problems and not have publishing pressure, or I could try a liberal arts college like Pomona, where I did my undergrad, and just focus on teaching. But I'm certainly not committing to stay forever at whatever job I might get, and probably a university position would be the most flexible place to work from - I might end up loving the variety you get there once I have a job with a little more security. Well, I have to get an offer from some place first before I can decide, so I'd better start applying!

Old: Exciting news! The provost tells us she has found enough money to get us started with a new statistician. It seems that buildings and grounds has come in under the budget for the year, and we can use that money. No wonder the roof leaks and a few other things should also be repaired, but never mind.

We can advertise for a second statistician! What kind of person do we want? Just think if we could clone me. Let's get another Iversen, specially coming from the same graduate school I did. That would solve all our enrollment problems. Seriously, what are we looking for? We want a statistician, not a mathematician. That principle has been well established by David Moore in his College Mathematics Journal article several years ago. We only have money for a starting-level position, even though it would be nice if we could get someone with experience in teaching. We want someone who think they have figured out that they want the small teaching-liberal arts institution instead of a statistics department with its more research-oriented approach.

Where do we advertise? The American Statistician, Newsletter for the Women's Caucus, the Web listing of mathematics positions.

New: I think I'll concentrate on applying for university jobs. If I go for an industry position I know I'll miss teaching, and if I head for a liberal arts college I'll probably be so busy with teaching it will be hard to keep up with the research and I might have a hard time moving back to a university later. But look at this - Carleton college is looking to hire a tenure track statistician! Wouldn't it be exciting to move back home to Minnesota and be close to my

family and all my old friends? I know Carleton so well and I'm sure I'd love teaching there. The winter's are pretty harsh, but at least I'd already know a lot of people and it's not too far from the Twin Cities, so I'd have lots of fun things to do! And who knows if I'll ever have this chance again?

Old: It is after Christmas, and the folders are pouring in. Among the 125 folders are several mathematicians masquerading as statisticians! But that doesn't do it. Without a Ph.D. in statistics, someone will have to really work on convincing us.

After an initial reading of folders by a math colleague and myself we will present the department with a list of the ones we think belong in the top 20. What are we looking for? Teaching experience as a TA with good teaching recommendations is important. Also important is a statement by the candidate about why teaching is exciting. One page is a good length for such a statement. We like people who have gone to a good graduate school, because that means someone has already passed judgment and found the person good enough to enter the good graduate school. A similar research statement rounds out the application.

New: I was able to visit Carleton while I was home for Christmas, and I was sure impressed. And they seemed to like me too - they invited me to interview! I know they got hundreds of applications, so I'd better put together an impressive talk. It's going to be completely different from interviewing at a university - I can't really talk about my dissertation research because even the faculty wouldn't be able to follow it, and I know they're primarily interested in how I'll teach undergraduates who might not know the first thing about statistics. I'll have to keep it basic, but I think I can present a simple version of my thesis problem without the messy details that made the work worthy of a PhD. That way they'll get an idea of my research interests and also see how I present difficult material to an audience with little or no background.

Old: Aimee and I have read all the folders. Why are many of them so bad? Why doesn't graduate departments spend some time teaching their students how to apply for positions? Many candidates shoot themselves in the foot by presenting themselves in such bad light. But here is the list we are ready to take to the rest of the department.

After lengthy discussions we are down to the final five to be invited here for a visit. How do we

get the best possible person? The obviously good people are good enough to get many different offers; how can we get them to take our offer?

Here it depends on the applicants. If Swarthmore is a backup, safety application for someone who really wants a research university, then we will have wasted our time if the person also gets an offer from such an institution. This is a difficult balancing act, both for the candidate and the applicant.

New: Wow, my interview at Carleton went great and I love the idea of moving there! All of the faculty members there seem to love teaching as much as I do. I felt so at ease during the interview - no worrying about people not taking me seriously as a researcher because I get excited about teaching. I know I'd be comfortable in that environment and I'm confident I could do an excellent job. That's got to be my top priority in choosing a position: I want a job where I can be myself and excel. And my second priority is no problem either: I already know Minnesota is a place I'd enjoy living. Money and everything else have to take a back seat to those two things. What they're offering is certainly enough to live comfortably on. I think I'm set: if they offer me the job I'm going to take it!

Old: It is hard work this going out to dinner with one candidate after another. But the candidates are impressive. It strikes me how much more they know than I do, and how much they learn in graduate school these days. We have offered the position to two candidates, but in the end they both turned us down.

New: Email from Carleton - this could be it! Oh expletive. They went with one of their other candidates. And that felt so right. Well, I have some other interviews, and Yale is still deciding. But I was sure gung ho on the idea of teaching at a liberal arts college! Are there any others out there hiring? Swarthmore - I know that's a great school - where is that? Near Philadelphia? Hmm, I've never been there, but at least they're close to a big city so there should be plenty going on. Ok, let's not get too carried away. I'd decided a university job would be best - I just jumped at Carleton because I know it so well. Liberal arts colleges can wait. And it's pretty late to be applying anyway - Swarthmore has no doubt already hired someone. But I might as well send an email to the chair there and tell him my situation, just in case. Being a finalist at Carleton should at least get their attention.

Old: This is an interesting application! Look at his name. He spells it Everson and I spell mine Iversen, but he probably pronounces it the same we I do! He even went to the same graduate school I did! Beyond that, this is a good application. The CV is well laid out, and he has written very good statements about his interests in teaching and research. There is even a copy of an article in the student newspaper about his course and how much the students liked it. He must be the only statistician who has been written up in the Yale Daily News for his excellence in teaching.

I am going to take this application to the department with the recommendation that we invite him for a visit.

New: Hmm, e-mail from Swarthmore - yep, they have an offer out already, but at least they haven't hired anybody yet. And they want me to send an application "just in case." It's certainly a long shot, though.

Well, Yale made an offer to somebody else - but I just discovered he's the same person who was sitting on the Swarthmore offer ... and now they want to interview me! They want me to meet with the president and the provost and there's only one day they have open and it's next week, so I guess I'll have to wedge this in between these other two interviews. They realize it's short notice and said I should just give the same talk I gave at Carleton, so that should be ok. I've been hearing nothing but great things about Swarthmore so I'm pretty excited, but I'll try to stay objective and decide if this really feels like a place I might like to be.

Well, here I am in the Philadelphia train station. It's a long ride, but a lot easier than flying out of New Haven. I'll bet it's a lot more convenient traveling in and out of Philadelphia! It's pouring rain and pretty dreary today, but the college seems to be in a beautiful area not too far from downtown. Everybody seems pretty tired and maybe a little disillusioned with the interview process, and I'm having some trouble getting excited about being here. It helps that I've been able to see the process from the other side at Yale this year, so I can imagine what it's been like to have a candidate sit on their offer for a while and then turn them down. I feel like maybe people are a bit suspicious of my intentions - they definitely want someone who's genuinely excited about being at a liberal arts college, not someone who's treating Swarthmore as a backup and would rather be some place else. I'm pretty sure I fit with what they're looking for, but I have to get more of a

feel for this place before I could make a decision.

(Next day): Hey, it's sunny and beautiful today and the area looks even more gorgeous! Gudmund picked me up for breakfast and we had a great talk about undergraduate teaching. The teaching load certainly sounds reasonable: three courses in the fall with two sections of the introductory course (so only two preps), and two courses in the Spring. That's enough to keep me busy without being overwhelming, and it'll probably be much less work after a couple years once I get familiar with the courses. I walked around the campus with another department member and was very impressed with the setting. I had lunch with some students and it felt very natural to talk about teaching with them. I get the feeling there's much less of a formal barrier between faculty and students here, which fits well with my style of teaching. I also met with the president and the provost and had good discussions with both.

One topic that keeps coming up in my meetings is the college's desire that faculty remain active in research. I really enjoy research but expected I would be sacrificing that for the most part if I took a position like this. But I'm excited to hear how Swarthmore facilitates research while maintaining a commitment to teaching. I expected most research would have to happen during the summers, but they also schedule leaves every four years. I think this is wonderful both for research and also to stay fresh for teaching! One concern I'd had about going with a teaching position was that I might stop enjoying teaching so much if it became the total focus of my job. But a semester off (or a full year) after every three years seems like the perfect way keep yourself from burning out on the teaching!

The remainder of the visit was all very positive. People were very receptive to my talk, and we had a fun, relaxed dinner in Philadelphia. I decided the setting was as ideal as I could ask for: a nice community in a beautiful, seemingly isolated setting, but with civilization just a few blocks away. And with easy access to a major city (and airport) only twenty minutes away. I had the next day off before my next interview, so I decided to wander around Philadelphia for the first time and I decided this was definitely a place I could live.

Old: We had a good visit with Phil. My colleagues in the department are all mathematicians, but they went out of their way to be interested in what he had to say during the interviews and during his talk. I was able to spend a bit of extra time with

him, since we had an early breakfast together as well as a scheduled interview time. He presented himself very well in spite of the tensions that naturally come with a candidate visit.

The department unanimously agreed to offer him our position.

New: I got an offer from Swarthmore! It was a struggle not to say "I'll take it" before they even spelled out the offer, but I think I let them know that was the way I was leaning (even though the Yale job was open again and I had some other possibilities). I discovered it was probably better for the department as well as for myself that I hold off accepting until we worked out some details, because there was money available from the provost's office for the new position that they could take advantage of. It was exciting to hear what they were willing to do to make sure Swarthmore would be a place I'd want to come, and where I could comfortably maintain my research program. The whole college uses Macintoshes, but they bought me a Sun Ultra Sparc so I could continue computing in a familiar environment (but with a lot more memory and speed than I was used to!). They also set me up with a book allowance to make up for the fact that I wouldn't have a real statistics library to work with (although I've discovered that Gudmund has done quite a nice job stocking the science library!).

I accepted the offer a week later, even though all of the details hadn't been completely worked out. The negotiation process was so positive and I'd already been feeling so good about it all that there was no doubt I wanted the job. They all seemed pretty excited to be getting me too, and that made it feel even better.

Old: The first year for Phil has been very successful. He has lived up to the expectations we had about his teaching, and he has become an active and participating member of the department. The enrollment in statistics is up again, now that we can offer several sections for the popular courses. Having a second statistician has been very beneficial to me, it is nice to have someone to talk to.

New: After my first year at Swarthmore I can say unconditionally that this is my dream job - I can't imagine trading it for another position. The setting is idyllic (the climate is sure a lot milder than Minnesota - or Boston or New Haven for that matter), and I love being so close to Philadelphia. The students at Swarthmore are a teacher's dream: they're bright, motivated and excited about learning, not just about getting good grades. It's exciting to know that I'm having an impact on such impressive people at a very important time in their lives. And as a statistician, I also have a lot of interaction with the other faculty members here who need consulting. Gudmund negotiated a course release because of this consulting, and he's sharing that with me so I teach one fewer course every other year. The teaching load had me a little frantic in the fall, but it eased up in the Spring, and I was able to set aside Fridays for research. The summer has been wonderful too. Curbing the research during the year got me more fired up than I've ever been to write and to program. And it's such a relaxed place to work. There's a wonderful community here and the faculty feels more like a family. I got in a bad car accident last November and was off my feet for a month, and not only did people cover my classes, they took turns coming over every night to bring me dinner and to help me out around my apartment! The silver lining in that accident was that it removed any doubt that this was the place for me.

Old: When the students ask each other from whom they are taking statistics at Swarthmore, it is very easy for them because all they need to say is:

Old & New: (in unison) Everson/Iversen, of course.