ESSAY

The Worst of Anthro Job Ads for 2021

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Every fall, some lucky anthropology departments get to hire. The search for a new colleague happens behind the scenes for a while before it goes public—five-year plans have been written, external reviews have been navigated, lots of conversations have occurred, and some pleading with a dean has taken place. But the first public hint that the department has been successful in its campaign is the job ad. And what a text it is! Written by a committee, endorsed by a department, approved by HR (in some institutions), and then read earnestly and over and over again by job applicants wondering if they should apply. And these job applicants often find themselves wondering: Who wrote this ad? Why do they need so much material from their applicants? Who is actually going to read three writing samples for two hundred applicants? Job applicants might have other questions; they might want to know a salary range, if moving costs will be reimbursed, and if they will in fact be told in a timely fashion whether they made a cut or were rejected. But job seekers are supplicants, and they might feel too vulnerable to ask. There is no way for applicants to point out that the job ads are taking too much time out of the scholarly community's collective time bank. And so into the breach we go—awarding the title of "Worst Job Ad of 2021" to remind departments that job ads can be written with more consideration and care for applicants and that their carelessness has costs that applicants and letter writers are paying (and resenting every moment of).

THE SEARCH

On September 18, 2021, Dada Docot launched what she called "Search for 2021 Worst Anthro Job Ads." Taking place on Twitter, this "contest" brought public attention to conversations that often happen in private between friends and colleagues who may bemoan the state of the job market and the endlessly multiplying requirements of job ads but feel relatively powerless to do much about these things. Hundreds of people participated in various ways: contributing small amounts of money toward plaques and certificates for the awards, serving as judges, submitting nominations, commenting, liking, and retweeting. The two threads about the search (for gathering nominations and announcement of results) registered about 175,789 impressions, as of this writing.[1] The search received a total of fifteen nominations, with nominees categorized as either permanent or term-limited positions (see Table 1).

METHOD IN SELECTING WINNERS

All stages of the search were held online. Nominations were sent to Docot via direct message on Twitter, as that was the platform used for the contest. Realizing that readers and commentators were invested in the contest, Docot recruited a panel of judges from different career stages to deliberate on the nominations. The panel of judges included: Dada Docot (assistant professor, Purdue University, and postdoctoral fellow, University of Tokyo), Dannah Dennis (visiting assistant professor, Bucknell University), Ilana Gershon (professor, Indiana University), Danielle Gendron (PhD candidate, University of British Columbia), and Jena Barchas-Lichtenstein (researcher, Knology).[2]

Docot tabulated the nominations on a shared spreadsheet with the following columns: link to the job ad, content of Docot's Twitter post describing the nomination, description of the job ad as written by the nominators, and a link to a PDF copy of the job ad. These were followed by four

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All authors contributed equally to the article and the search.

TABLE 1 List of Nominees in the 2021 Search for Worst Anthro Job Ads

Department, University	Search For	Category
1. Department of Anthropology, California State University Channel Islands	Asst or Assoc Prof of Biological Anthropology	Permanent
2. Department of Anthropology, Texas A&M University	Postdoctoral Research Assoc for a National Science Foundation Grant	Term-limited
3. Department of Behavioral Sciences, Kingsborough Community College	Adjunct Faculty Open-Rank (Instructors Pool, including Anthropology)	Term-limited
4. Department of Anthropology, Hunter College	Adjunct Faculty to teach Intro to Linguistics	Term-limited
5. Department of Anthropology, Grinnell College	Asst Prof of Archaeology	Permanent
6. Department of Anthropology, Oberlin College	Asst Prof of Medical & Cultural Anthropology	Permanent
7. Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis	Asst Prof of Sociocultural Anthropology	Permanent
8. Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia*	Asst Prof of Medical Anthropology	Permanent
9. Department of Anthropology, San Jose State University**	Asst Prof of Anthropology (Applied-Cultural)	Permanent
10. Department of Anthropology, State University at New York at Cortland	Asst Prof of Anthropology	Permanent
11. Department of Anthropology, American University	Assoc or Full Prof of Anthropology	Permanent
12. College of Arts and Sciences, Stony Brook University	Postdoctoral Position (to tenure-track)	Term-limited
13. Department of Comparative Cultural Studies, University of Houston	Asst Prof of Anthropology	Permanent
14. Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Scarborough	Asst Prof of Anthropology	Permanent
15. Department of Anthropology & the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania	Asst Prof of BioAnth/BioArch & Museum Curator	Permanent

*Disqualified due to conflict of interest

**Disqualified as the terms of nomination do not apply to the criteria of the current search

columns for the panel of judges to add their comments for each nomination. The judges were given time to review the contents and add notes to the spreadsheet asynchronously. The judges then held a virtual meeting to deliberate the awards.

The judges generally agreed with the nominators' descriptions of the job ads, although there were two nominations that we decided to exclude from the list. We disqualified SJSU (number 9 in the table) as the nomination was beyond the scope of our search: we focused on the ad itself rather than trying to imagine the interpersonal dynamics of the department that the nominator pointed out. UBC anthropology (number 8) was also removed from the list due to a conflict of interest, since one of the judges (Gendron) is currently enrolled in its PhD program.

THE TWO TOP WINNERS

From these nominees, the panel of judges chose two main winners from each category. The two winners will receive a commemorative plaque for their especially bad job ad, purchased using donations from the supporters of the search.

In clarifying our concept of a bad job ad, we decided to judge based on what we hoped to achieve from the search. One of our main priorities is to encourage search committees to reduce the number of documents demanded from applicants at the initial stage of application. In this light, the judges awarded the title "Worst Job Ad in the Permanent Category" to Grinnell College, which required a needlessly long list of application materials, including a CV, cover letter, transcripts, a diversity statement, six course descriptions, and three recommendation letters—all upfront. Grinnell also received the dubious distinction of being nominated by three separate people (more than any of the other nominees). Several months after applications closed, the Grinnell search was canceled. We realize that the cancellation of the search was probably due to circumstances beyond

the control of the search committee or the department, and we do not wish to rub salt in the wound. However, the cancellation of the search further highlights the absurdity of requiring each applicant to submit thirteen documents in order to be considered in the initial round. For those who completed this arduous application process, the search's cancellation adds incredulity and indignation to preexisting insult and injury.

In the category of "Worst Job Ad in the Term-Limited Category," Texas A&M University was the winner for their search for a postdoctoral research associate who "will be exploring models of cooperation" while "conduct[ing] economic games" in a remote community in Nicaragua. The purpose of the experiment is to "build a much-needed school." The person who will be hired, according to the ad, can reach the community, which has no cellular and internet access, only by boat. Some hiring parties occasionally seem to forget about the harm that experimental research might inflict on communities. The panel of judges saw Texas A&M University as a fitting recipient of this top prize for all the ethical red flags raised by their job ad.

By highlighting these two top winners, the judges would like to communicate to readers that we found it especially bad for anthropology jobs to draw so much time and energy from the academic community by requiring too many documents at the first stage and to echo colonial-era missions at the expense of communities.

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS

When we undertook to award the superlative of "worst," we had to confront the fact that there are so many ways in which job ads can be bad. To address this, we awarded "dishonorable mentions," a term coined by Dennis, to nominees as a tongue-in-cheek comment on some of the common problems that we see in job ads. Departments will receive a printed certificate for the following dishonorable mentions:

Unicorn Hunting

Departments occasionally search for a scholar who can teach a combination of courses that no one has the background to teach. Such ads call for a combination of skills and expertise that are unlikely to co-occur in a single candidate, often ranging widely across subfields and specialties. There may be internal institutional reasons this happens—sometimes this signals that the department already has a candidate in mind but is obligated by university policy or federal law to run a seemingly open search. Other times, the job ads seem so broad that it appears as if the writers want someone to fill all their incompatible and urgent teaching needs. The winner of this dishonorable mention was California State University Channel Islands. The nominator summarized the ad as follows: "They want a human biologist/biocultural anthropologist who can teach advanced courses in all the other subspecialties of bioanth (and at least one course that's often taught by a cultural anthro) PLUS they want them to do archaeology in collab with local tribes? What kind of unicorn are they looking for and why do they think they'll be an assistant prof if they can do all those things?"

Kitchen Sink

This is the second dishonorable mention that recognizes the all-too-common practice of listing a wide range of skills and expertise that a department desires in a candidate. This practice of asking for "everything and the kitchen sink," like "unicorn hunting," may actually reduce diversity in the applicant pool, as more marginalized candidates may be discouraged from applying if they cannot demonstrate mastery of all the desired qualifications. The winner of this dishonorable mention was SUNY Cortland, looking for a tenure-track faculty who can teach courses as diverse as North American Archaeology, Survey of Ancient Archaeology, Native American Culture, Human Evolution and Survival, and archaeology of a particular "world area," among others. Aside from these, the applicant must demonstrate commitment to social justice, human rights, climate change, and other themes. Finally, applicants must "emphasize collaborative partnership with descendant and/or indigenous communities." We realize that there is relatively little difference between the "unicorn hunting" and "kitchen sink" categories. However, granting two such dishonorable mentions highlights the flagrant problems with this practice, which were repeatedly identified and discussed by judges and nominators.

Publications Arms Race

This award refers to the practice of requiring multiple writing samples for an application. Jobs ads do not use a specific language to refer to writing samples. They may say they require a recent publication, sample of scholarly work, article, chapter-length piece, etc. Whether the search committee requires a work in progress or a published peer-reviewed article, the requirement for multiple writing samples places a particularly heavy burden on potential applicants who are just finishing their PhDs. Even when not openly stated, many applicants assume that a writing sample must be published, and recent PhDs may not yet have that much published work. Washington University in St. Louis won this award for requiring three writing samples.

Paper-Pushing

Nobody really knows why a hiring committee needs a mountain of documents to review when the faculty conducting the search are most likely already overburdened by their own research, teaching, and administrative duties. Though not as burdensome as Grinnell College's "winning" ad that required a whopping thirteen items, Oberlin College's request for nine items was given the award for paper-pushing to highlight the absurdity of requiring a stack of documents in the initial stage of the application process.

Tell Them How Much You'll Pay Them and They Will Come

A large proportion of academic job ads do not list a salary or a salary range. This lack of transparency reached a near-comical extreme in the case of an ad from Hunter College, in which the department sought to fill a last-minute staffing need for an Intro to Linguistics course scheduled to start within a week. The nominator wrote that they deleted the email with the ad "out of rage," as there was no mention of a salary for a job that was set to begin the next day.

Eternal Return of Data Entry

Some applications are unnecessarily tedious, asking applicants to enter the same information over and over again in different forms and on different documents. This award goes to Stony Brook University, which had the most tedious application process among all nominees.

Clean Up Our Mess

We awarded this distinction to the University of Pennsylvania in their search for a faculty-curator with expertise in biological anthropology or bioarchaeology, with a "preference for scholars having a record of advocacy for Black and Indigenous communities and/or experience dealing with reparation issues." In 1985, the Philadelphia police bombed the home in which members of the MOVE organization lived, leading to a fire that killed eleven and injured two residents. The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology found itself in the spotlight in 2021 when it was revealed that the remains of the children killed in the bombing had been kept within its premises and used for teaching forensics. The person who submitted the nomination commented on the ad: "Should this be two jobs? This almost feels like this should be two jobs. It's also clearly continuing to try to make up for UPenn's involvement in the MOVE bombing fiasco, but I'm pessimistic about how genuine the motives are." It does seem a lot to push what seems like two jobs to a scholar who works in collaboration with Black *and* Indigenous communities and who additionally advocates "reparation issues," as if both are mutually exclusive. Given the high visibility of UPenn's post-MOVE predicament, the dual responsibility, in addition to teaching and mentoring duties, seems like too much to ask of one hire who is tasked to do the university's repair work. Institutions often expect scholars from diverse communities to "fix" the institution, overburdening them with duties in the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The academic job market in anthropology is a hellscape, as the number of positions available is disproportionate to the number of PhDs looking for a placement. Research by Nick Kawa et al. (2019) has shed light on the very small elite network from which American anthropology departments recruit their colleagues and has signaled to hopefuls that their chances of landing an anthropology position are slimmer if they graduated from departments outside this network. Commentators on the search's threads have also shared their own experiences navigating the horrific job market. Moving forward from the 2021 "Search for Worst Anthro Job Ads," we recommend the following to anthropology departments in writing their future job ads.

1. Require Only a Cover Letter and CV at the First Stage of Screening

What counts as a "good job ad" based on the nominations we received is an ad that requires the *least* number of documents from applicants at the initial stage. Commentators on the search also directed the panel of judges (via direct message to Docot) to what they perceived as a good job ad: Ohio State University's, which required only a cover letter, CV, and names of three recommenders in the first round. Ohio State's model is a great step in reducing the amount of paperwork needed for a job application.

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

2. Ask for Supporting Documents Only at the Second Stage of Screening

While we recognize that some hiring departments may be tied to their HR policies, which require them to solicit a long list of documentation, requiring more documents than a committee can reasonably be expected to read or evaluate when there are often hundreds of applicants for each position places an undue burden on both applicants and search committees. Search committees should request additional documentation, such as teaching and research statements and course descriptions, after the initial stage. As for the writing sample, search committees should ask for only one sample. Normalizing the requirement of multiple writing samples, especially if the hiring department is looking to hire a recent PhD, hurts the discipline as a whole.

3. Be Transparent about Salary Range, Benefits, and the Department's Teaching and Service Needs

Transparency demystifies the initial stages of the salary-negotiation process, reduces the pay gap, as applicants know what to expect, and builds trust between the department and potential colleagues, among other things. Public institutions and schools with unions may be significantly more transparent in providing information. Departments need to start providing applicants with the information they need in deciding to apply for a position. Time is wasted if, at the stage of making an offer, the finalist discovers that the pay is too little. Job ads also currently fail to provide information about the search process as basic as a timeline, which would help assure applicants that they are receiving an equitable review.

Hiring departments also hold searches that are open-rank, and yet, in practice, these ads all too often lead to a hire of a senior person. We recognize that there may be organizational reasons why hiring departments cannot be more specific in their search. For example, getting an associate or full professor hire approved might be challenging even if departments might need senior colleagues to fulfill service roles. A position advertised as open-rank is frustrating to applicants, as it is challenging to assess what the search committee might be looking for. If an open-rank position is inevitable due to complicated internal dynamics, departments need to be clear in their job ad about their hiring priorities.

4. Deliberate Internally If Recommendation Letters Must Be Required

As a group of coauthors, we spent a great deal of time thinking and deliberating about the role of letters of recommendation in the hiring process. On the one hand, letters of recommendation can potentially be helpful to candidates and hiring committees by providing additional evidence of candidates' strengths and qualifications. These letters may be particularly useful as a means of fleshing out the application for candidates who are just finishing their PhDs and may not yet have a strong record of publication and/or teaching. Using letters of recommendation as part of the hiring process also reflects the fact that securing employment in higher education is a highly social process; perhaps it is better for that aspect of the process to be explicit and acknowledged, rather than tacit or whispered.

On the other hand, there are numerous problems and potential for abuse associated with the use of recommendation letters in the hiring process. To name a few: reliance on letters, particularly letters from star scholars at highly ranked institutions, can contribute to the reproduction of networks of privilege within academia; the need to secure a recommendation letter can exacerbate already-imbalanced power dynamics between senior scholars and junior scholars; and letters that are less than stellar, or which come from scholars who are perceived as less than stellar, can unfairly sink a candidate's chances.

In light of these considerations, we have mixed opinions on whether recommendation letters should be removed from the hiring process altogether. However, we are in agreement that: (a) requiring letters of recommendation at the first stage in the hiring process wastes many peoples' time and should be avoided; and (b) if hiring committees do continue to require letters of recommendation (either by their own choice or because their university administration requires them to do so), they should be aware of the potential negative effects that letters can have and seek to structure their review process in a way that mitigates those effects as much as possible.

At the level of the AAA, we suggest that it actively implement its Job Board Policies,[3] which include a recommendation that hiring departments forego the solicitation of recommendation letters at the initial stage to "minimize inconvenience to applicants and referees." Job ads not complying with the Job Board Policies continue to be posted on the AAA website. An AAA that is truly committed to implementing good practices and to decolonization, which includes diversifying academic hiring, would signal to advertising departments and to job seekers alike that the job ad does not accord with AAA policies. The AAA needs to find some way to announce they do not support the requirements of a job ad or not circulate such ads.

Ethical Considerations

The current state of the academic job market and its lack of transparency created some initial and lingering hesitation to participate as a judge for Gendron, a PhD student currently writing her dissertation. Gendron can imagine a situation where her participation may identify her as a

"troublemaker" to departments who may consider her as a hire when she eventually enters the job market. The intention of the awards to improve hiring practices in the field as a whole assured her it was a worthy endeavor to be involved in. Dennis, as a visiting assistant professor on a limited-term contract, had similar concerns but ultimately decided to participate publicly out of a desire to make the job application process less hellish for all involved. Though we do not know for certain, we assume that commenters on the Twitter threads were/are aware of the small networks of anthropological associations, and considered their engagement as low risk, much in the same way as Gendron and Dennis. Anthropologists from different ranks who contributed to the search but did not want to be publicly identified did so by sending their nominations or donations via direct message to Docot.

Coming from a range of positionalities, we participated in the search and wrote together,[4] inspired by Sara Ahmed's (2021) work on *Complaint!* as a way of "working *on* the university." Like Ahmed, we aspire to contribute to rebuilding the university as a space of learning that "should be open and accessible to as many as possible." Ahmed described "complaint" as "expressions of grief, pain, or dissatisfaction." Comments on the search, retweets and quote tweets, and nominations appeared like testimonies of practices in the discipline that hurt members of the community and that could be fixed by those with some degree of power. Complaints are often filed in what Ahmed calls the "killjoy genre." As testimonies of things that are broken, complaints can be exhausting. With playfulness interwoven with critique, and also stirred by feminist pedagogies, such as Bianca C. Williams's (2016) pedagogy of "radical honesty," we bring forward these reflections and recommendations on the results of the 2021 "Search for Worst Anthro Job Ads" to voice our hopes for transformation.

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Notes

[1] To read the thread that opened the 2021 Search for Worst Anthro Job Ad, visit https://twitter.com/dadadocot/status/1438321588944789506. The thread announcing search results is at https://twitter.com/dadadocot/status/1462520944585428994.

[2] The panel of judges brought their various experiences in academia to the search. Dennis has been on the academic job market every year since 2016. Docot is a Filipino diasporic scholar navigating the tenure track at an American research university. Gendron contributed insights as a PhD candidate who is cherishing every last minute as a graduate student before entering the harrowing job market. Gershon is a full professor who still has nightmares from her precarious years on the job market. Barchas-Lichtenstein is a linguistic anthropologist who works in a nonprofit research institute with no university affiliation, and they remain connected to the field through professional service, such as peer review and editorial roles.

[3] See https://employers.americananthro.org/static-page/10285/job-board-policies/.

[4] Barchas-Lichtenstein did not participate in coauthoring this article due to conflict of interest as an editorial board member at the *American Anthropologist*.

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