

DO I REALLY WANT TO WORK HERE? A CASE STUDY OF DOUBLE BINDS IN ACADEMIC JOB SELECTION

by Céleste Grimard, Université du Québec à Montréal | James M. Tolliver, Retired

grimard.celeste@uqam.ca
gryphon@unb.ca
Case Study
Experiential Track

ABSTRACT

In this case study, a new Ph.D. graduate, Ian Finagle, faces a critical decision regarding a job offer from Skirmish State University. As he looks back on his interviews with two selection committees, he senses a clear rift between the committees and recognizes that, if he accepts Skirmish State's job offer, he'll find himself navigating conflicting job demands that may prove insurmountable. Our case study discusses how to recognize when a potential job is besieged by double binds – forming the very essence of a “bad” job in which the job candidate is caught in a net of contradictory expectations. Students studying career transitions, job selection, organizational culture, and academic careers may find this case study particularly relevant.

CASE STUDY

Medium-sized university? Check. Charming, family-friendly city? Check. A good starting salary? You bet! In fact, Finagle was offered a compensation and benefit package that is much better than the average for a similarly sized university. Further, given the scarcity of tenure-track openings in his field, the university's somewhat unexpected offer of a tenure-track position made the job offer all the more alluring. “What more could I ask for?” Finagle asked himself while looking at the job offer letter that had arrived about two weeks after his interview at Skirmish. In fact, he thought, everything in this letter points toward accepting Skirmish State's offer.

Yet, well, something was nagging at Finagle that he couldn't quite put his finger on. First were the rumors of high faculty turnover at Skirmish, ongoing and vicious faculty fights, folks working from home whenever possible, and a general disgruntlement that Finagle had heard about around the break table at a conference before his interview. Those rumors might have been enough for him to decline the invitation to be interviewed, but, as these things go, the conference happened just after he'd already accepted their invitation to be interviewed, and to be fair he wasn't sure whether the rumors were just the grumblings of embittered faculty carrying grievances. So, he decided to go ahead, got on the plane, and found himself in the arrivals area of a busy airport about six miles from Skirmish State.

The second thing that concerned Finagle was the interview process itself. His first impressions were quite positive. Although Finagle had an early morning flight, he was met at the airport by the Faculty dean, where he was not only greeted warmly but was pleasantly surprised to discover that the dean not only knew of some of his research but had read it. In fact, the dean wholeheartedly praised his research even saying, “Getting the Best Paper Award at the Down-South Conference on a first try is quite a feat, lad, you should be proud of yourself!” And, somehow, the dean was also aware of some of Finagle's teaching evaluations and seemed equally impressed with these.

The morning was spent on a campus tour, a blur of places and faces, and the obligatory “presentation” attended by quite a few of the faculty. It went well too: not only were the questions the faculty asked easy to answer but his presentation was met by a smattering of applause at its conclusion. During lunch, he had the chance to interact with prospective colleagues who were friendly and seemed excited about showing him the city later on, “when we get the formalities out of the way.”

But the afternoon interviews with the selection committee – or rather two selection committees – was a different story. You see, there wasn't one interview with the whole committee but, oddly enough, two different sessions about an hour apart, each with a subcommittee of the whole and each having its own distinct agenda. And to make things more interesting, each subcommittee tried to subtly undermine the other.

The VP of Research led the first interview, accompanied by a group of researchers. The discussion revolved around the importance of research productivity and how teaching, if it met some minimum standard, was not a concern. Some of what they said was:

- “Here at Skirmish, we value research productivity above all else. How do you plan to contribute to and support our research culture?”
- “Our research, not our teaching, brings global recognition to us and the University's academic ranking. So, while teaching is a mundane and necessary part of the job – and you should at least do a serviceable job of teaching – don't, whatever you do, become entangled or side-tracked by it.”

- “Research grants, especially large ones, are crucial to our success. How do you plan to secure funding and enrich our research landscape?” When Finagle asked what type of seed money he could expect to further the development of grants and research, they replied, “Our university has limited internal research funding. So, we expect our faculty to bring in substantial external funding and seed money to further their research.”
- Finally, “Most of us here are key members of the Tenure and Promotion Committee and, from our perspective, the success of your tenure journey depends on a substantial publication record during your time here. Can we count on you to publish and to be a highly successful author?” To this Finagle, at a bit of a loss, said “Well, I don’t believe in publishing unless I’ve got something important to say,” to which the VP of Research responded, “At Skirmish we expect you to have something important to say in an A journal at least twice a year (1).”

As you’d expect, Finagle was a bit shaken by this interview, not only because of the implied threat if he didn’t “perform” but because of the “bricks without straw” (2) approach Skirmish was taking. “It’s hard enough to get two ‘hits’ in an A journal annually, year in and year out, until tenure,” thought Finagle, “But to do this without any seed money is damn near impossible.” A few other questions, after the session, with the VP of Research and a couple of the committee members let Finagle piece together the whole story. Simply put, there was a lot of money for research in the grants that came in, but the faculty was being used as a “cash cow” for other faculties. On the surface a faculty’s discretionary funding, designed to support conference attendance and as seed money for research, hinged on the number of students (graduate and undergraduate) that a faculty “serviced” and a faculty’s research ranking within the university. However, some faculties received a larger share of the general funding pie by arguing that it was more expensive to deliver programs and research in their field. In short, the “rich got richer.” Also, to further complicate matters, a higher than normal cut for “administration” was taken from research grants in a sequential slicing process; first there was a share claimed by the University, followed by the faculty, and eventually by the department within the faculty.

The second interview was led by the VP of Teaching, and it was clear that the folks around the table interviewing Finagle were passionate about teaching and couldn’t care less about research. Here are a few of their comments and questions:

- “At Skirmish we take immense pride in our quality teaching. We’re here to create meaningful learning experiences for all our students – whatever their ability – and to meet their needs. After all, if the student fails to learn, the instructor has failed to teach (3). How will you contribute to quality teaching?”
- “Here at Skirmish, we value and honor student feedback as measured through student teaching evaluations. Ultimately, ensuring student satisfaction is our priority and our students’ reports of their satisfaction are heavily considered by our Tenure Committee.”
- “Helping undergraduate students with their case competitions, facilitating their internship placements, mentoring student association leaders, and, of course, office hours that are convenient for our students are all factors of key importance. Will you make yourself broadly available for students?”
- “Securing tenure requires a strong teaching record. Our Teaching Committee reviews and approves all teaching portfolios every year to ensure that faculty are mindful of and focused on improving their teaching practices. All of us on the Tenure and Promotion Committee are committed to our faculty spotting and using the latest pedagogical trends and maintaining an up-to-date teaching portfolio.”
- Finally, “Can we rely on your dedication to prioritize teaching and learning for your students – above all else?” And when Finagle asked, “What about research?” one of the committee members said, “Well, you always do your research, you see. The only question is ‘What is your most important audience for it, the ‘field’ through publication or your students through your teaching?’”

Again, informal conversations at a second coffee break after this interview suggested that increasing the number of students and their success rates – as measured by the number of students who pass a course – were a top concern of the “Teaching Group.” It also seemed that almost all student applicants were accepted to the faculty; there were no minimal thresholds to meet. Failing grades in any course were reviewed by the Teaching Committee and needed to be justified by instructors. As you might expect, almost all students graduate from the faculty. A bit of an added inconvenience in this regard is that, if Finagle draws from the existing pool of students for these roles, he risks having weak graduate students and teaching/research assistants. Moreover, professors were assigned courses; they had no say in what they taught (plus there’s an approved textbook for every course) or when they taught it. They might also be assigned to teach some off-campus courses, sometimes several hours’ drive from the main campus, especially if they were on the dean’s bad books. In discussing these off-campus courses at coffee, one professor said he was told to teach an evening class once a week that required about two hours of travel one way and then give an 8 a.m. class the next morning.

Throughout his job search, Finagle hadn’t ever come across an interview process quite like this, one that was divided into distinct sub-committees each with clearly delineated interests. Anyway, after “threading the needle” (4) in an effort to present his best side, he tackled both interviews by crafting responses – and by silence. Finagle hoped that the two committees didn’t

compare notes. And, truth be told, to loosely paraphrase Donny and Marie (5), Finagle was “a little bit research and a little bit teaching.”

But he was left with the nagging question, “Were the committees intentionally operating as separate entities?” After the interviews and being invited to “look around our campus,” Finagle walked through the hallways, hoping to catch an open office door to have some casual off-the-record conversations with some potential colleagues. He wanted to hear what they liked about working at Skirmish State University. Unfortunately, all he came across were locked doors. Did Skirmish have a remote work policy – or was something else happening?

Even more unfortunately, his interactions with the dean were difficult to decipher. Although the dean seemed pleased with Finagle’s candidacy, they dodged any questions that Finagle had about the faculty’s priorities.

“Which is more important: research or teaching?” Finagle asked the dean during their final meeting before catching the plane.

The dean’s response, delivered with a definitive smile, was a cryptic “Yes.” Further elaborating, the dean added, “Of course, they’re both important and don’t forget about service. We have lots of committees that keep the place running, and all professors must do their part as members and chairs of committees. I’d like to see you working as the faculty liaison with the student association. No worries. It’s just weekly meetings, every Tuesday evening for a few hours. Organizing the monthly faculty-student events and the semester-end gala is fun stuff. You get to attend them, err, you must attend them. And, well, there’s a bit of conflict – on this committee and possibly elsewhere, but you can sort it out.”

Finagle murmured, “I see,” as he quietly calculated the myriad constraints that would encumber his time. He’d be spinning very heavy plates in the context of pressure to favor certain ones. Finagle thanked the dean, saying that he could make his own way to the airport. Despite having a generous four-hour window until his flight departure, he felt a compelling need to reach the airport swiftly.

As Finagle looked at the written job offer from Skirmish, he was caught between the allure of this offer and, remembering the interviews, a strong urge to flee. As he sat, letter in hand, he grappled with a pivotal question: “How do you know when you’ve interviewed for an academic job that you should decline?”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What appears to be the underlying problems in this faculty?
2. How do these problems reflect the presence of a double bind?
3. What additional information would you need to fully understand the advantages and disadvantages of working at Skirmish State University?
4. More generally, what are the warning signs of a bad academic job?
5. What experiences have you had in searching for an academic job?
6. Other comments or observations?
7. Given the case study’s elements, would you advise Finagle to accept Skirmish State University’s offer? Why or why not?
8. More broadly, what contextual elements may be at play in this case study?

End Notes

- (1) The second author has heard different versions of this comment at various conferences throughout his academic career. The original source of this comment, as well as its veracity, is unknown, but it conveys the attitude of this committee very well.
- (2) This means that you’re required to do something without the proper resources.
- (3) Some trace this saying to an article in the November 1942 issue of *The Rotarian* by A. E. Wiggam entitled “Foreman in 10 hours.”
- (4) This means to strike a balance between opposing forces under difficult circumstances. See “Thread the Needle,” Wiktionary, the Free Dictionary.
- (5) This refers to the song A little bit country a little bit rock ‘n roll written in 1976 by James Martin Cooper, which was a major hit for Donny and Marie Osmond. See [Songs Written by Marty Cooper | SecondHandSongs](#)

Instructors may write to the authors for a copy of the detailed teaching notes.

Acknowledgement: The authors gratefully acknowledge the helpful feedback on this paper from Lorenzo Frangi, Ariane Olier-Malaterre, Mostafa Ayoobzadeh, and the ABSEL reviewers.