

Tenure-Track Assistant Professor

What is it?

A tenure-track academic position is a job that can become a permanent position at a college or university provided that the individual passes tenure review, which typically takes place during the sixth year of employment.

Are All TT positions the same?

No. The teaching/research requirements of TT positions vary widely. When you see positions that carry a 2/2 teaching load (2 courses each semester = 4 courses per year), you can assume maximalist research and publication requirements; undergraduate teaching that is specific to your area of specialization; and graduate teaching and advising. When you see positions that carry a 4/4 load (4 courses each semester = 8 courses per year) you can assume research requirements that range from occasional conference participation to a handful of essay publications; and undergraduate teaching that ranges across lower/upper division coursework, varies between general and area-specific courses, and probably includes composition. A small caveat to the 4/4 load: it is not uncommon for departments that demand high teaching responsibilities to have more frequent opportunities for faculty to receive course releases. (This is when a dean allows a department to give a faculty member a reduction in teaching in exchange for some kind of service.) It is not advisable for a job seeker to lean into the idea of course releases; I mention this only to give you a broader scope for understanding to how high-teaching departments can operate.

Between these two extremes is the 3/3 or 2/3 teaching load, the requirements of which can vary tremendously in terms of research expectations. Some departments require as many publications as 2/2 jobs; others do not; but these positions are less likely to involve graduate teaching/mentoring.

When applying to TT positions, consider what matters to you. Many people love teaching without the pressures of constant publication. Others like to keep an active research agenda. Both types of work are rewarding and (as with any job) come with their own stressors. While it is tempting to apply for any job, regardless, give real thought to what kind of academic work matters most to you, and what feels sustainable over the course of your career.

One thing to keep in mind is mobility. If you take a 2/2 position, it is easier to transition to a program with a higher teaching load. If you start at a 4/4 institution, it can be more difficult to move to a 2/2 school simply because you will have less time outside the classroom to research and publish. That said, I have seen plenty of faculty move in both directions. (I have also seen faculty who are very happy at 4/4 institutions keep up a remarkable research and publication profile.) It all depends on the individual.

When do you apply?

Traditionally, the academic season begins in September and ends in March, when a candidate signs an employment contract. This timeline has come under pressure over the past decade. While most jobs follow the Sept-Mar trajectory, there is now a second job season that takes place much later, in Winter/Spring.

Where do you search for open positions?

Departments tend to post on the following job boards: MLA Job Information List (JIL), HigherEdJobs, and the annual, field-specific, academic JobWiki.

How do community colleges fit into this rubric?

In general, community college positions carry a 4/4 teaching load, and, depending on the institution, can require summer teaching as well. In general, CCs offer introductory courses as well as mid-level major-specific courses.

CC positions, especially tenure-line or long-term contract positions, can be very hard to come by. This is especially true in metro areas and in states like California (where it is very difficult to secure a permanent position). In rural areas or in less densely-populated states, it can be easier to find short-term work in a community college, but TT positions are still rare.

Teaching Assistant Professor (TAP)

How is this different from Assistant Professor?

Teaching Assistant Professor is a very new concept and title. It is an attempt, by a university, to address its adjunctification of labor by creating a tenure track for its teaching-only faculty. While “tenure series” or “tenure ladder” faculty (this is what a university calls its TT lines) teach lower course loads and carry an active research agenda, TAPs teach very high loads, but are not expected to engage in active research.

There is a very large wage gap between TT and TAP faculty, and, depending on the university, TAPs can be paid no more than lecturers or adjunct faculty. They are simply given job security through the tenure process. Yet tenure does provide non-material benefits that make for better working conditions: TAPs participate in faculty senate; they can play key roles in university-wide committees; and they are integral members of a department, such that they are part of faculty meetings, hiring decisions, etc.

Postdoctoral Fellowships

What are they?

As you are searching the MLA JIL and other academic job lists, you will frequently come across postdoctoral positions. It's important to understand the function of postdocs and their relationship to tenure-track jobs and to other types of temporary work discussed below like adjunct / lectureship and Visiting Assistant Professor (VAP) positions.

Postdocs are (in theory) a safety net between the PhD and a TT position. They enable newly-minted PhDs a kind of “breathing space” wherein they can benefit from a university's research tools and a reduced teaching load—all the while working towards building their research portfolio—until a tenure-track position comes their way. Postdocs function as the Academy's built-in solution to the multi-year gap that frequently exists between a PhD's graduation and a permanent job. They are more prestigious than adjunct, lectureship, and VAP positions because they are not considered temporary or contingent teaching labor...because they are *prima facie* research-oriented.

All that said, not all postdocs are created equal. For example, a 1-year postdoc with a 3/3 load is effectively an adjunct job, and the university is simply painting a “postdoc” sign on adjunct work in order to make it appear to be something that it is not. Does this mean that you should not apply? I think that depends on taking stock of several factors: 1) Is the university advertising the postdoc prestigious? Will having a letterhead from this university move you “up the food chain,” so to speak, in the minds of a search committee? None of us wants to openly talk about prestige politics, but we have to recognize that they are real; and/or 2) Does this university / department have desirable non-material resources (e.g. an archive, a famous faculty member who could mentor you, a city or region that appeals to you)?

Where are they?

While some postdocs are advertised on the MLA JIL, many are not, especially the ones that are the most prestigious. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, there is no website that acts as a clearinghouse for postdocs. A good place to start your search, though, is [H-Net](#). The most important thing for you to be aware of are these foundations: American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, American Association of University of Women (AAUW), National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). While not all of these foundations offer postdocs, a number of them do, and all of them offer dissertation / early-career stage fellowships.

You should also not shy away from certain writing program oriented postdocs, particularly at Ivy League universities. In addition for obvious prestige reasons (again, it's important to acknowledge these realities as a job seeker and to know how to exploit them), these positions tend to offer above-par academic resources, salary, and benefits. Duke's [TWP Lecturing Fellowship](#) is a good example of this.

When are they?

Traditionally, the deadline for postdocs is earlier than the October deadlines around which the traditional job market revolves. This is still true for the juiciest plums of the postdoc world that are out there. Consequently, you should begin searching for postdocs in the summer and getting your job materials ready in advance of these deadlines.

That said, the traditional job season for academic jobs is fast becoming a thing of the past, so a postdoc position could pop up anytime during the Fall or Spring of the academic year.

Visiting Assistant Professors (VAPs), Lecturers, and Adjuncts

What are VAPs?

A Visiting Assistant Professor typically references a position that is limited to a one year appointment. Typically, VAPs are given tenure-line pay and teaching duties, although the teaching tends to be lower level courses.

At more prestigious universities VAPs tend fill in for faculty who are on sabbaticals, awarded a year-long fellowship, or are visiting faculty at another university. In these cases, VAPs tend to have research interests similar to the faculty member who is away for the year. However, at less prestigious colleges and universities, VAP openings can be due to unexpected and/or last-minute faculty shortages. In these situations, the department may feel that it is too late to conduct an extensive TT search (e.g. someone left, died, or retired unexpectedly in April or May), so they conduct a short VAP search for someone to come for one year, while the department begins a tenure-track replacement search in the Fall.

Despite the relation to tenure-line positions, VAPs often have a higher teaching load than tenured professors, which can leave them with little time for their own research. These positions help entry-level academics gain more teaching experience and demonstrate their potential, but they are unlikely to turn into tenure track positions, even when working in a department that is conducting an active job search.

How does a VAP compare to a lecturer and an adjunct?

In general, a lecturer is a long-term, non-tenured position that operates according to fixed (renewable) contracts. Lecturers teach a pretty standard load of courses that can range from introductory to advanced studies. Lecturers generally have no research obligations; however, they may hold university service positions.

Adjuncts are often paid per course, and as a result many adjuncts teach at multiple universities each term.

A statement about non-TT positions

****Unlike the vocabulary of “tenure” and tenure-oriented jobs, postdoctoral fellows, VAPs, lecturers, and adjunct faculty are not formally classified positions. Some institutions may advertise a postdoc or VAP, particularly, if they are seeking to camouflage the nature of an poorly paid post.****