

# THE CHRONICLE

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## Manage Your Career

### Coming Home: Re-Entering the American Job Market

*By Kathleen M. Pike and Jean Dowdall Ph.D.*

Many more faculty members and administrators at all stages in their careers are pursuing overseas postings. Some have short-term adventures, while others make long-term career commitments. Some stay in one institution, country, or region, while others develop careers that take them to several countries.

At some point, however, most Americans who work overseas want to come home. But re-entering the U.S. job market can be almost as daunting as going overseas.

Unless you have made a permanent move overseas, it is never too early to contemplate when you would like to return, where you would like to return to, and what you want to do once you're back. As we mentioned in our first column on successful global careers, one of us is a search consultant who has worked with foreign institutions and with American candidates for administrative positions. The other is an American academic who taught overseas for more than a decade and recently returned to the United States. In this column, by providing a navigable path home, we hope to make it easier for faculty members and administrators to think about heading overseas in the first place.

**Home sweet home.** For many academics, the best opportunities for re-entry will be at your "home" institution, especially if you have been overseas for a relatively short period or have remained connected to your campus (formally or by way of extended collaborations with colleagues). Many institutions have policies governing leaves of absence and obligations to accommodate returning faculty members. If you know your plans well in advance, you may have the opportunity to pursue grant support or reinstatement of your academic appointment while you're still overseas.

Administrators returning to their home institutions have the advantage of being known commodities to colleagues and may have the social capital to be the favored candidates for administrative positions within the institution.

The obvious benefit of returning to your home institution: Many professional and personal adjustment issues are immediately eliminated for you and your family.

**Maybe you can't go home again.** Going back to your home institution may not be an option, or it may not be an option you want. While you were gone changes may have occurred, and there may not be a position or a role for you now. Perhaps you are no longer well aligned with the institution's vision. And if there is a position available, it may be the same job you left—and not what you want to do anymore.

Once you decide to pursue a position at a new campus, you need to plan and network. Allow yourself a substantial amount of time to do so.

If you are under time pressures to return to the United States, you will need to be creative and flexible in crafting a transition plan. Some people are able to extend their overseas appointments by serving for a transitional period as nonresident fellows, for example. Other options include pursuing positions that you might not want to hold for the long term but that can re-establish you in the United States while you do a full search—for example, adjunct faculty appointments, interim administrative appointments, or project-based work like designing curricula, evaluating programs, building strategies for internationalizing the honors program, or teaching a new course that integrates your overseas experience in a meaningful way.

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Work with your network of colleagues to create and construct a new position that would fill your needs and your institution's.

**Translating your experience.** In some cases, the work that you have done overseas is immediately self-explanatory and no translation to American employers is necessary. If you serve as provost at an American university campus overseas, your title and role are likely to be relatively clear.

But if you worked at a foreign institution, the university structure may be sufficiently distinct from the American system, and job titles sufficiently unclear, that you will need to provide a comprehensible description of the work you have been doing.

It is extremely important that you convey the leadership authority and decision-making responsibilities that you've had as you speak to search firms or committees and represent your experience on your vita. That is especially the case if you have spent considerable time overseas, have progressed in your career, and would like to re-enter at a more senior level than you held before you left.

No matter what move you are making, you want to avoid jargon, acronyms, and any insider language that may be opaque to committees reviewing your application materials.

Think, too, about how to link emerging issues in U.S. higher education with the issues you have observed or worked on abroad. Be knowledgeable about current hot topics here, such as distance learning, access and accountability, severe budget cuts at public institutions, endowment losses at private institutions, and the growth of for-profit institutions. You want to show that your experience overseas was unique and transformational while also demonstrating that you haven't missed a beat with regard to current issues in American higher education.

You also want to highlight the impact of particular experiences on your professional development. For example, someone based in Cairo during the Arab Spring will want to talk about the impact of those tumultuous events and the ways in which that person's teaching or administrative leadership might have changed as a result.

**Network, network, network.** If you are seeking a new position at a new institution, you need to aggressively network with professional friends and colleagues. Ideally, you have been doing that throughout your time overseas. Expanding your professional network is all the more important in an era when the competition for job openings is especially intense.

Your overseas experience gives you special strengths—many American institutions are searching for faculty members and administrators who can help expand their global reach and provide strategic leadership with international programs. Candidates for administrative positions should be pleased to know that, as many presidents and provosts approach retirement, and deans and others move up into these positions, vacancies will develop at many levels.

Meet with as many colleagues as possible to share your overseas experience and your career ambitions. Some of those people may be willing to speak on your behalf to a search consultant or a hiring committee. Consider making use of social media to keep informed.

As you network, think about how best to tell your story. Higher education does not always easily welcome those who stray, and you should anticipate questions about why you went abroad and why you are returning now. If there were difficult circumstances surrounding any moves you made or jobs you held, you should speak to those concerns directly. It is always better for a search committee to hear about that directly from you.

**Navigating the search process at a distance.** If you decide to apply for a position in the United States, how can you best navigate the search process? You need to remove as many barriers as possible for the search committee or the consultant.

For example, don't assume that a search committee will understand the size, type, and status of your overseas employer, or the meaning and organizational placement of your academic or administrative position within that institution. If your overseas campus is included in some foreign ranking of institutions, mention its rank and help the committee understand how that

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compares with institutional rankings the readers may be more familiar with, like the one published by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Besides providing your own clear and complete contact information, make sure that information for your references is clear as well. Mention which time zone they are in, and whether they plan to be in the United States during the hiring period.

Think ahead about the possibility of an interview. Search committees working with tight budgets may be inclined to avoid candidates whose travel to an interview would be costly, or whose visit would involve a very long trip for a meeting of just an hour or two. If you are going to be in the United States, mention that, and consider whether you would be willing to share your travel costs with the search committee. If you are willing to have a video or phone interview, even knowing that other candidates will interview in person, state that.

At some point, particularly if you are advancing in the search process, the question of compensation will come up. If you give your salary in a foreign currency, provide a dollar equivalent. If you have a benefits package that would be unusual in the United States, offer some explanation—for example, “my overseas salary is low but a home is provided for me, and thus my compensation package should be thought of as higher than it appears to be.”

Searches almost always take longer than anyone anticipates—especially candidates, and especially those who are several thousand miles and several time zones away from the search process.

Be prepared for a protracted process in which communication seems inadequate. But do what you can to enhance that communication: Make sure you provide e-mail addresses through which you can be contacted quickly, as well as phone numbers with all the necessary dialing codes. Make it as easy as possible to call you.

Returning home and finding the right position requires time and energy. And while the process may be exhausting at times, it will also afford you a unique opportunity to re-examine your personal and professional aspirations and expand your knowledge of the American academic landscape.

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