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ADVICE

Me and My Shadow CV

What would my vita look like if it recorded not just the successes of my professional life but also the many, many rejections?

By Devoney Looser | OCTOBER 18, 2015

This fall I'm serving as the designated coach for doctoral students in my department who are on the academic job market. They're a talented group, with impressive skills, hopes, and dreams. I'm grateful to be guiding them, as they put their best selves before search committees. However, one part of the work is not all that pleasant: I also need to ready them to face mass rejection.



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Regardless of any happy outcomes that may await, they're about to endure what may be their first experience of large-scale professional rebuff. Before, during, and after college, they sought part-time and full-time jobs and applied to graduate schools. They didn't get hired, or they didn't get in to some of those schools, naturally. But now they're putting themselves in line for 40, 50, or more rejections within the space of weeks and months — on the heels of a grueling, humbling few years of dissertation writing.

I feel their pain, to some extent. Those of us on the job market a decade or more ago got our mass rejections in thin envelopes or via email in May or June, after we'd had a few closer looks and maybe even a job offer. Today's candidates learn they're out of the running for coveted jobs much sooner, and secondhand, by confronting another candidate's report of an interview or an offer on the Academic Job Wiki.

That then-and-now difference got me thinking about how we teach graduate students to face academic rejection. Of course, we largely don't. Rejection is something you're supposed to learn by experience, and then keep entirely quiet about. Among academics, the scientists seem to handle rejection best: They list on their CVs the grants they applied for but didn't get — as if to say, "Hey, give me credit for sticking my neck out on this unfunded proposal. You better bet I'll try again." Humanists — my people — hide our rejections from our CVs as skillfully as we can. Entirely, if possible.

That's a shame. It's important for senior scholars to communicate to those just starting out that even successful professors face considerable rejection. The sheer scope of it over the course of a career may be stunning to a newcomer. I began to think of my history of rejection as my shadow CV — the one I'd have if I'd recorded the highs and lows of my professional life, rather than its highs alone.

More of us should make public our shadow CVs. In the spirit of sharing, I include mine here in its rough outline, using my best guesses, not mathematical formulas. (I didn't actually keep a shadow CV, despite predictable jokes I may have made in the past about wallpapering my bathroom with rejection letters.)

- **What my CV says:** I have published many articles in refereed journals. **What my shadow CV would say:** Multiply that 3x to get the approximate number of rejections I've received. Earlier in my career, it was more like 4x; now it's closer to 2x. That does not count "revise and resubmit" letters.
Fortunately, the rejections do seem to get nicer, as I learn better how to present work for publication and to select journals that are a good fit for my work. I also receive more invitations to contribute, providing better odds for acceptance.
- **What my CV says:** I have published books at a great university press. **What my shadow CV would say:** My first book was rejected six times at the proposal stage before it found a home. One of them was a report so nasty it made me question my will to write another sentence.
- **What my CV says:** I've edited several collections of essays. **What my shadow CV would say:** One collection was rejected 12 times at the proposal stage. Another

collection almost imploded due to conflict among contributors. A savvy press editor smoothed the ruffled feathers.

That's not all. I co-wrote a book that was under contract but was canceled by the university press's marketing department. That book never saw the light of day. And another co-edited book, commissioned by a professional organization and some distance along, was canceled by the press and then by the organization.

- **What my CV says:** I've received some grants and fellowships. **What my shadow CV would say:** Multiply that total 5x to get the number of grant rejections I've received — with, again, the most depressing rates of rejection coming earliest in my career. Early on, I would apply for four to eight grants or fellowships, and receive none or one.

I applied for one grant eight times before receiving it. I like to think the organization finally awarded it because they were tired of hearing from me, but maybe my application actually improved.

- **What my CV says:** I've taught at five fabulous institutions. **What my shadow CV would say:** This one is the worst. In the process of trying to solve a two-body problem, I was on the job market a lot. I think I've been rejected for nearly 400 college teaching jobs and postdoctoral fellowships. In other words, I got offered less than 2 percent of the jobs I applied for, and I'm by no means among the hard-luck cases.
- **What my CV says:** I have won elections to office in my professional organization. **What my shadow CV would say:** I have lost about half as many elections as I've won. I'll take those odds!
- **What my CV says:** I have some great recommenders. **What my shadow CV would say:** They are great. I've cried in front of a few them. Academic life has been stressful. (Also, thank you for those hundreds of recommendation letters. They made everything possible.)
- **What my CV says:** I have had some great students. **What my shadow CV would say:** They are great. A few have cried in front of me. Academic life is still stressful. (And you're welcome for those hundreds of recommendation letters. I may still owe

more to the universe than I have given.)

- **What my CV says:** I have published in and been quoted in popular media. **What my shadow CV would say:** You can't really count the number of times that *The New York Times* didn't call you for a quote, so no formula there.

I made many failed attempts at getting my work in print, while learning how to write for new audiences and building relationships with editors. Let's call this rejection factor 4x, on average, although many of those rejections were not of pieces that eventually saw print but those that never did.

In total, these estimates suggest I've received in the ballpark of 1,000 rejections over two decades. That's 50 a year, or about one a week. People in sales or creative writing may scoff at those numbers, but most of my rejections came in the first 10 years of my academic career, when I was searching intensely for a tenure-track job. Very few came during the summer, when academic-response rates slow to a crawl. I remember months when every envelope and every other email seemed to hold a blow to the ego. My experience was not unusual. Unfortunately, a multiyear job search is, if anything, more common now for would-be academics than when I was on the market.

Most of us get better at handling rejection, although personally, it can still knock the wind out of me. Usually in those moments, I recall something a graduate-school professor once said after I railed at, and — much to my embarrassment — shed a few tears over a difficult rejection: "Go ahead," he said. "Let it make you angry. Then use your anger to make yourself work harder."

It sounds so simple. Whether any single rejection is fair or unfair doesn't ultimately matter. What matters is what you do next. You could let rejection crush you. Or you could let it motivate you to respond in creative, harder-working, smarter-working ways. (I'm convinced, though, that rejection is particularly tough to take in academe because so much of our work is mind work, closely tied to our own identities and sense of self-worth.)

A CV is a life story in which just the good things are recorded, yet sometimes I look at it and see there what others cannot: the places I haven't been, the journals where my work

wasn't accepted, the times a project wasn't funded, the ways my ideas were judged inadequate. I've started to imagine my CV as a record of both highlight-reel wins and between-the-lines losses. If you're lucky, you will, like me, also one day come to recognize the places where the losses — as painful as they were at the time — led to unexpectedly positive things. Slammed doors, it turns out, may later become opened ones.

When I was meeting with my department's academic-job seekers recently, one of them asked me about the last time I was rejected.

"My last rejection was one week ago," I admitted to them, feeling uncomfortably like someone introducing myself at an AA meeting. "I got two rejections, in fact. One was really, really hard to accept, and, I think, wrong. But I'll take it for what it's worth and try again."

Increasingly, I see rejection as a necessary part of every stage of an academic career. I remind myself that the fact that I'm still facing rejection is evidence that I'm still in the game at a level where I should be playing. I'm continuing to hone my skills and strive for better opportunities — continuing to build both my CV and my shadow CV. Each version is necessary as we seek to advance our research, teaching, and service, the activities to which some of us — and I wish there were many more of us — have the good fortune to devote our professional lives.

Devoney Looser is a professor of English at Arizona State University.

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