As I begin my job search, I'm confident about my preparation in terms of my teaching, my research agenda, and I have a fairly good sense of what to expect at different types of institutions. But three things in particular have me a bit concerned.

First, I know what teaching is (or ought to be about). I know good research when I see it. But what is service? What might it mean at different places? Is it a letter to my Dean? Is it just committee work, or is it more interesting than that? Does it mean connecting service to the community with my academic courses? Does it involve connecting my research with real needs of my community? How will how I approach service affect my success at promotion and review periods? Is there a disjuncture between what the Provost or Academic Dean wants service to involve and what the departmental culture will permit? That is, is there room for me to think creatively about what service to my institution and my community can mean? I think I know how my department views this, but am I prepared for alternative arrangements at other institutions? Moreover, do other graduate students even know the right questions to ask in this regard?

Second, one of the most interesting developments in liberal education is the recognition of the necessary connections between seemingly disparate categories of analysis. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has long documented the changing academic landscape. At Georgia, recent changes have expanded our understanding of the arbitrariness of disciplinary boundaries. The emergence of the College of the Environment, the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA), and the Non-profit Institute among others is suggestive of pedagogical and research interests that reinforce interdisciplinary approaches.

At the same time, however, we have seen a narrowing of scholarly inquiry within the newly established SPIA. For example, the political science department has recently decided to move away from a three sub-field requirement to a one major, one minor field requirement. I’m sure there are compelling reasons for this shift; but I regret that the effect of the change will limit interdisciplinary (or even intra-disciplinary) research and teaching. As interdisciplinary emphases become more common at colleges and universities around the country, I wonder if I am prepared to meet those new expectations.

Third, as those interdisciplinary connections are emphasized, will that also require a reconsideration of where student learning takes place...and by extension where and how I teach? For a number of years, we’ve seen a great
deal of emphasis placed on a commitment to reinvigorating liberal education. A number of higher education associations and many colleges and universities are rethinking their commitment to liberal learning. A liberal education of quality, according to one report, “has the strongest impact when studies reach beyond the classroom to the larger community, asking students to apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment to concrete problems in the world around them, and to connect theory with the insights gained from practice” (AAC&U: Greater Expectations 2003, p. 25-26).

This understanding of the connectedness of liberal learning and civic engagement is separable from traditional notions of altruism or acts of charity by students and faculty. Instead, it suggests that civic engagement has a fundamental pedagogical justification; that liberal learning is necessarily linked to a recognition of the civic obligations of responsible citizens and learners, as well as the institutions they inhabit. Again, many institutions have responded in interesting ways to this reinvigoration of liberal education. The University of Georgia has a wonderful tradition of public service and connecting academic study and service to the community. However, we have seen only limited involvement of graduate students in these programs and discussions. As we move from being graduate students to take faculty positions at institutions with commitments to civic engagement, we may not be as well prepared as we could be.