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**A Guide to Campus Interviews**

**What you need to practice (repeatedly) to make a good impression**



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By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong

It’s January, which means that some of our readers have had preliminary interviews already and others have them scheduled; a few readers have already had campus interviews, and others are preparing for them now. Still others are hoping to land an interview of any kind.

Wherever you fall on that spectrum, this is a nerve-racking time for candidates on the academic job market. Things can feel very much out of your control. What is in your control: Doing your best during the interviews you do have, knowing how to talk about your own background in the context of a particular department and institution, and projecting a polished, confident version of yourself (even if you don’t always feel that way).

First, for those still preparing for [a preliminary interview](http://chronicle.com/article/What-to-Expect-in-a/128827/)—conducted either on the phone, by video conference, or in person at a scholarly conference—here are a few quick tips:

* Because first-round interviews are short—30 minutes to an hour—find out ahead of time how long the interview will be and who will be participating. Be able to succinctly talk about your teaching and research vis-à-vis the particular institution. Be able to talk about why you see yourself as a good fit for the posted position.
* If you are doing a videoconference interview, familiarize yourself with the technology. But have a back-up plan—a phone number you can call if the Skype connection is weak or if the committee fails to call you at the appointed time. That way, you won’t panic (or, well, you’ll panic less) if the unexpected occurs.
* If the interview is at a scholarly conference, scout out the location in advance, so you are not racing madly around trying to find it five minutes before the interview.
* Practice—out loud and with colleagues. Don’t fall into the trap of only rehearsing by yourself.

Conference interviews lead to a shortlist for campus interviews, which last a day or more and can be quite grueling for candidates. During the campus visit, you will have to demonstrate a wider range of skills and expertise than you did in the first round, not to mention being comfortable socializing at receptions, lunches, or dinners with potential colleagues.

Clearly a campus interview will be more challenging for you than for your interviewers, but keep in mind that they will find this a taxing process, too. The search committee is charged with choosing a colleague who might very well be around for the next 30 years if he or she receives tenure, a unique situation in today’s working world where most people frequently change jobs. They may also fear that they will hire you only to have you leave for another opening in a year or two. Given those two concerns, your goal is to stand out not only for your own qualifications, but also for your interest in the department and institution.

How might you do that?

**The first step bears repeating: Be prepared.** Many of the questions you will be asked are fairly predictable, so be ready for them. You’ll mostly be asked about your research and teaching, so be able to speak with confidence on both. As career advisers for doctoral students, we run practice sessions with candidates who have a job interview coming up and we are sometimes surprised to find they still don’t have the basics down about their own records.

**Rehearse.** Practice the way you talk about your scholarship with someone in your field. Make sure that what you say and how you say it conveys the importance of your work even to those whose research specialties are different from yours.

**Develop a five-year research plan (i.e., the years before tenure).** And be able to discuss your "research agenda" in a clear and convincing manner. That can be hard to do, especially for those in fields in which you go on the job market while finishing a dissertation (or just afterward), but it is a way of signaling intellectual maturity to the search committee. The last thing you want is for your projects to sound as though they have not grown beyond the graduate-student or postdoctoral level.

**Have examples of your teaching style.** Reflect on your time as an instructor, in the classroom or the lab, and be ready to discuss both your teaching methods and examples of what you can teach. Nothing helps paint a picture of your classroom effectiveness like an example. If the search committee is interested in encouraging undergraduate research projects, it’s not enough to say, "I can see involving undergraduates in projects connected to my research." Demonstrate with specifics how you might do that. Show that you understand the search committee’s concerns.

**This is no time to sit passively.** As an outsider, you can’t know everything that a department is looking for, but you can certainly make some inferences. A scientist interviewing at a liberal-arts college, for example, would want to have specific examples of how undergraduates could contribute to the work in his or her lab (and how student research could be funded). Any job candidate who would be involved in developing a new major or minor in the hiring department should bring ideas about that curriculum to the interview. And all job candidates should be able to offer ideas on how to teach some of the basic courses in the field—and should seem enthusiastic about sharing that responsibility with potential colleagues.

You will want to learn as much as you can from the search committee during the campus interview. That means asking good questions of the people you meet. During your preliminary interview, the search-committee members may have volunteered information about the position, the department, and the institution. Use that information to develop questions to ask during the on-campus interview. For more specific suggestions, read our column, ["Asking the Right Questions."](http://chronicle.com/article/Asking-the-Right-Questions/46896)

What exactly will happen during the [campus interview?](http://chronicle.com/article/What-to-Expect-in-a/130491) You can expect to:

* Have one-on-one interviews with faculty members in the department, one or more members of the administration, and some students.
* Give a presentation, known informally as a job talk, about your research.
* Teach a class on the campus.
* Have an exit interview with the department chair.

All of those things take practice. So practice talking about your research and teaching—in the context of the hiring institution. Give a practice job talk to peers who can ask you challenging questions. Do more research on the hiring institution and review any notes you made during your previous interactions with the search committee.

Try to find out the schedule for your visit as far in advance as possible. The search committee should provide you with that information and other details (like where you’re staying). If it doesn’t, then ask. Knowing who you will be speaking with (and finding out more about them), knowing how your time will be organized, and knowing what to expect in terms of your job talk and any teaching you’ll have to do can help you be better prepared and set the stage for a successful visit. (Make sure you also know whom to call in the hiring department in case of an emergency; campus interviews often take place in the winter months and with that comes flight delays and cancellations.)

Many job candidates find the campus interview exhausting. It’s hard to maintain your enthusiasm for the job over the course of a tiring daylong or two-day visit. As you have back-to-back interviews and describe your research for the umpteenth time, you can start to feel like you’re stuck in the academic version of *Groundhog Day.*

No matter how tired you are, however, your pitch has to sound fresh to whomever you are speaking with. One way to keep it fresh is to know something about the interviewer and frame your response in a way that will resonate with that person. Or try to incorporate what you’ve learned in interviews earlier in the day into your response. For example: "Grace mentioned to me that you’ve played a large role in the founding of the Center for the Study of X. Can you tell me more about the center?"

A final note on the job talk: It’s the focal point of a successful campus interview, and we cannot stress enough how important it is to your success as a candidate. You can find a lot of good advice online about giving a good job talk, [like this piece](http://icc.ucdavis.edu/graduates/PerfectJobTalk.htm) from the career center at the University of California at Davis. But the best preparation is to practice giving your talk before an audience of faculty members and fellow students from your home department. Find out exactly how long your talk should be, how much time will be allotted for questions, and who will be in the audience. Then practice with those parameters in mind. Make sure your presentation conveys the context and impact of your scholarship in a way that is accessible to a broad audience. Answer that all-important "So what?" question about your scholarship.

For those of you interviewing at teaching-focused institutions, your teaching demonstration may be of equal importance to your job talk, or may even replace it. Take the teaching demo as seriously as you would a research talk.

We all know how competitive the academic job market is, and how arbitrary the hiring process can seem. Interviewing is inherently subjective; institutions are looking for a candidate who is "a good fit," and "fit" is a hard concept to define. It’s not easy to demonstrate that your intellectual interests and teaching experience connect with a department’s needs, but thoughtful preparation, advice from your faculty advisers, and practice are the only ways to improve your odds.

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