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Interviewing for Research & Teaching Appointments

A Resource Guide for Ph.D. Candidates and Postdocs on the Academic Job Market

Like every aspect of the academic job search, the interviewing process for research and teaching appointments in colleges and universities varies from discipline to discipline. This handout provides an overview of the interview process, as well as some general information about the structure and variety of academic interviews. The information here should serve as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, the information you should gather from advisors and peers in your field.

Contents:

- Types of interviews
- Researching institutions
- Preparing to talk about yourself
 - Dissertation/Research
 - Teaching
 - Future research plans
- Preliminary interviews
- Campus visits
 - The job talk
 - The sample class
- Sample questions
- General advice
- Suggestions for further reading

Types of Interviews

Academic interviews can occur in a number of settings: a half-hour to hour-long preliminary interview at an academic convention, meeting, or conference; a telephone interview; or a one- or two-day interview on campus. In many fields, the campus interview, sometimes referred to as a campus visit, on-site interview, or fly-back interview, follows the successful completion of the convention interview, (e.g., English or History). In other fields (e.g., Political Science), the campus visit

may be the only interview during the process. In many scientific disciplines, a candidate will be invited to campus after talking informally about his or her work with members of a hiring committee at a meeting. As you approach the interviewing season, it is extremely important for you to gather as much information as possible from your advisors, peers, recent alumni, and other mentors about the interviewing process in your particular discipline.

Researching Institutions

When applying to institutions, you should do as much research about them as you can. To determine whether or not both the school and the department are good fits for you, personally and professionally. You want your cover letter to demonstrate that you know something about where you are applying and why you would be a good fit (e.g., "having gone to a small liberal arts college myself, I..."). Before interviewing (see below), you'll want to learn as much as you can about the university and department, including information on: the student population, the department's course offerings, the research/teaching ratio, faculty, mission, etc.

The Internet provides easily accessible university and department information for the majority of colleges and universities in the United States. Other sources of background information on colleges and universities include college guides, student and university newspapers (often online), faculty advisers or committee members, and anyone you know who attended the institution. College and university course catalogs are also excellent sources of information on the goals and characteristics of institutions and of departments within them; these too, are often online. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* can also be an important source of information on issues in higher education. You can search back issues online to look for information specific to a school by making an appointment with the CAPS librarian (call 773-702-7040).

In addition to talking to people you know who attended a particular institution, you can use the Alumni Careers Network (<http://www.alumni.uchicago.edu/gateway/careers.htm>) to search for alumni employed there and contact them to get their impressions (and ideas for where to get more information). You might also see if any other institution you attended offers a similar service to further widen your network.

Preparing to Talk about Yourself

As in any interview, you must be able to talk comfortably and confidently about yourself and your experience. The interviewers want to know that you are well on your way to making the transition from graduate school (or postdoc) to professional life. Certainly, the interviewers are interested in your dissertation and/or research and teaching experience, but they are also interested in you as a colleague--as someone with whom they can talk about their own work; they may be thinking about what it would be like to have an office next door to you for many years! Thus, the more you can think about the interview as a **conversation among colleagues**, the better off you will be. Obviously, this does not mean that you should assume a familiarity that does not yet exist. It does mean that you should think about the interviewers as colleagues with whom you would like to cultivate comfortable, productive, and supportive working relationships. Address the interviewers as they are introduced; in most cases, the departmental

faculty will be introduced by their first names, but in some situations, the department or institution may be more formal in tone and refer to one another by title. In either case, follow the lead of the interviewing committee members.

Because most departments want to offer a candidate tenure at the end of his or her “probationary” period, the interviewers will be looking for signs that you are job ready—that you understand what is entailed in being a productive scholar and an excellent teacher, and to some extent, a good citizen in the department and university. They want to know that you can hit the ground running when you arrive on campus. They will not be interested in hiring someone who is temperamental, arrogant, or inflexible, or someone who will need excessive mentoring. Thus, **the excellence of your dissertation/research is only one issue; you need to be able to convince the interviewers that you are ready to succeed in every aspect of the job.**

In all interview situations, you should be prepared to talk about three aspects of your work and experience: your dissertation/research, your teaching experience and interests, and your future research plans. To what extent you will talk about each depends upon the type of institution.

DISSERTATION/RESEARCH

Throughout the interview process, you will need to explain your dissertation/research project to a variety of people—those in the field as well as deans, students, and faculty from other departments. Think carefully about how you want to present your work to these various audiences. Prepare at least two spiels of your dissertation: one for faculty with similar interests and one for an educated audience outside of your field. Practice these spiels aloud whenever you can, and if possible, with friends, advisors, with your department’s placement committee, and the CAPS Graduate Career Counselors. You want to make sure to present your work clearly and concisely and in an organized fashion even when under pressure. If you don't practice, you risk having to backtrack during the interview to cover an important point you missed earlier in your discussion; you also run the risk of talking too long and getting bogged down in the details of your work rather than simply sparking the interest of the interviewers. One caveat: do not make your spiel sound scripted!

TEACHING

You should be prepared to talk about teaching as much as you talk about your dissertation/research in any interview setting, although again, this depends upon institution. For positions at some teaching colleges, interviewers may focus exclusively on the character and quality of your teaching during a preliminary interview.

When discussing your teaching, be prepared to talk about your classroom methods as well as your general philosophy. If you are currently experimenting with new pedagogies or computer technology in the classroom, be sure to talk briefly about this experience. Be prepared to talk about what you *can* teach as well as what you would *like* to teach. Many people want to teach a graduate-level seminar on their dissertation topic, but you need to remember that junior faculty in many departments teach all of the introductory courses; in other departments, all of the faculty share the introductory teaching load. Most departments also offer "service" courses, such as special classes for non-majors or large lecture courses that fill general education requirements. Therefore, you will probably be required to teach courses at many different levels. Prepare for questions like "How would you teach _____ to a group of non-majors, and how would you teach the same subject to graduate students/majors?" Be sure that your responses are specific to the type of students you will find at the interviewers’ institution—you don’t want to mention teaching a graduate level seminar at an institution that does not have any graduate students.

Make lists of the texts and/or materials you would use in each situation; think about how you would present the material and the kinds of assignments you would make. Think about how you would adapt courses you have already taught to be appropriate in a different environment. The more specific you can be when answering a question about teaching, the more you will appear ready to do the job.

FUTURE RESEARCH PLANS

Even though you may be immersed in your dissertation research and writing, teaching or postdoc, you need to think about the direction of your future research. You need to demonstrate that you have some plans beyond the publication of your dissertation (whether in articles or a book). Since you should have an active agenda in place shortly after assuming an academic post, you need to briefly describe what that agenda might look like. If relevant, mention any plans you have to apply for grant funding, as well as any ongoing collaborative work in which you're engaged with colleagues at other institutions. Your plans do not have to be definite, nor does your next project have to be conceived fully. But you do need to demonstrate that you're thinking ahead and to express your plans convincingly, even if they are preliminary. The department chair may want to know what kind of support you will need to pursue your research plans, such as specialized equipment, laboratory start-up funds, special software, travel money for archival research, etc. At some liberal arts colleges, people will be interested in how you can adapt your research (particularly in the sciences) to a small college setting while providing undergraduates with opportunities.

Preliminary Interviews

When you receive a call for a convention/meeting/conference or telephone interview, be prepared to gather significant, detailed information. Your contact will be offering important information about the nature and length of the interview, the location, time, and number of interviewers. You want to sound poised and confident, not scattered and nervous. If the call comes at an inconvenient time, suggest that you will return the call in 5 minutes or at another specified time. Many departments don't call candidates until two or three days before the start of the convention or prior to the actual phone interview; thus, the phone call is often your only chance to collect the information you need in order to prepare for the interview. You want to know how long the interview will be, so you will be able to pace yourself, and who will be conducting the interview. If possible, do some research about the interviewers before you meet/talk to them.

AT THE CONFERENCE

Bring extra copies of your C.V. to the conference interview, as well as any supporting documents appropriate to your application, such as sample syllabi, statements of research plans or teaching philosophy, teaching evaluations, etc.; you can offer these documents during the interview if asked for them or graciously offer them on our own. Use a briefcase or small portfolio, but avoid extra baggage, purses, coats, hats, etc.; hotel rooms can be crowded with luggage and people, and you may get nervous if you can't find a place to set down your belongings as you enter the room.

Interviews often start with a minute or two of small talk about the convention or the weather to help you relax. Most convention and telephone interviews are structured in three parts: discussion of your dissertation and future research plans, discussion of your teaching interests and experience, and your questions about the department and university. Almost every preliminary interview ends with the query: "What questions do you have for us?" You need to have some questions ready, and they should be

informed by the research you've done on the institution. For instance, you might ask a question about the relationship between the introductory courses in the department and the upper-level seminars offered to juniors and seniors. Remember that your questions are still a part of the interview; use them to demonstrate your awareness of the institution or to reinforce your particular strengths. Avoid questions at this point about salary, benefits, the tenure process, sabbaticals, housing and childcare. Do not ask questions that could easily be answered from the department or institution's website.

Obviously, your job in the preliminary interview is to spark enough interest in your candidacy to be invited for a campus visit. Therefore, you must stay focused so you can say everything you want to say during the allotted time, but also listen carefully to what the interviewers tell you about their institution. You want to be enthusiastic and congenial, even if the interviewers seem tired or distracted. Be prepared for small interruptions--a ringing telephone, a knock at the door; stay calm and continue talking, even if one of the interviewers has to leave briefly.

ON THE TELEPHONE

Telephone interviews will generally have content similar to convention interviews, but there are key differences. You can relax a bit more on the telephone since the interviewers will not see you. You can also sit comfortably and have your supporting materials from your application in front of you in case an interviewer refers to them. Finally, some departments/schools lack good telephone technology, and you should be aware that you might encounter an echo effect or some other distraction from the connection; try to stay focused and do not let the minor disruptions hinder your presentation. Keep in mind that you will not be able observe body language to gauge interest. For this reason, make sure that your responses are not too long.

Campus Visits

Campus interviews or visits are different than preliminary interviews primarily in that they are longer, more intense, and tend to be more social.

Again, when the call comes, be prepared with a pen and paper near the phone to write down specific details about your visit. Be cooperative and listen carefully when discussing travel arrangements; some schools want you to make your own travel arrangements, others prefer to do it for you or have you work through their approved travel agent. Most importantly, collect as much information as possible about your professional presentation and/or teaching demonstration. Some departments will want a formal talk, ranging in length from 20 minutes to an hour; others ask you to give a brief overview of your work and then lead a discussion; some may ask you to prepare a sample class on a topic of your choice, or to lecture on a topic in someone's class to a group of students. Collect as much information as you can so you can prepare to deliver what the department expects. Be sure to request any audio-visual equipment you will need for your presentation or sample class.

Prior to or upon your arrival, you should receive an agenda for your visit; if you don't, be sure to ask for one. Interview situations during campus visits vary from school to school and department to department. You may have a large group interview with the entire faculty in a small department or with the entire search committee, or you may go from one half-hour interview to the next throughout the day. This can be exhausting, so the challenge, especially during your short meetings with members of the department or committee, is to keep your energy level high; even though you are repeating yourself all day, you have to

be as positive and enthusiastic at 4:00 in the afternoon as you were at 9:00 in the morning. Again, remember to think about these meetings as conversations so you'll be more relaxed and natural in your demeanor.

Social events scheduled during campus visits may include small dinners in a restaurant or larger dinners at someone's home, social hours with students and faculty in the afternoon, wine and cheese parties in the evening, breakfast with members of the faculty or the dean. Be prepared for anything. In social situations, behave naturally but cautiously. If alcohol is served, drink in moderation, if you are comfortable doing so; you should never hesitate to refuse alcohol if you don't drink. Conversation at these gatherings alternates between small talk, personal conversation about families, general discussions of cultural life on campus, and scholarly chatter, but may also include departmental or university gossip. Always be diplomatic and polite, even if the situation becomes uncomfortable; excuse yourself politely and exit to the rest room if you need to extract yourself from a difficult encounter. If there is personal information you would rather not divulge, such as the fact that your spouse is also an academic in the same field, be careful not to let it slip casually during a social event; just because you're talking to someone about her kids doesn't mean you have to tell her about yours (but you can if you want), etc. You will also get questions, either directly or indirectly, about where else you are interviewing and/or getting offers. You may choose to dodge these questions or be extremely vague in your answers, since you cannot gauge how the questioner will use the information later on.

Finally, avoid the question of salary unless the chair brings it up in a private meeting with you. Most universities have some but not much room to move on salary; at this point, the chair might be testing you to see if you have other offers, and if so, how much he or she will need to offer to be competitive. People will offer advice about housing and childcare during the campus visit, so listen carefully, but watch yourself; don't divulge any private information you'd just as soon keep private. During the campus visit, it is also appropriate to ask the chair about course loads and teaching responsibilities, about expectations for departmental service, and about sources of research/curriculum funding in the university for junior faculty. You can also ask about sabbaticals if you do it carefully--you never want to give the impression that you're ready to go on leave as soon as you get there!

THE JOB TALK

The job talk is a significant part of your visit; it is your opportunity to present your work, your teaching style, and/or your public presence in a formal setting. The job talk can take many forms. At most research institutions, this talk is a formal presentation, ranging in length from 20 minutes to an hour, with the average being about 40 minutes; your presentation is usually followed by a question and discussion period. You should start thinking about your talk as soon as you can in the application process, and especially as the interview season approaches, since you may not have much lead time to prepare before the campus interview. Practice your job talk- either to colleagues, or to your department's placement committee. But don't simply deliver the one talk you've prepared at each campus visit. Listen carefully to the information given to you when the interview is offered; if the chair tells you to talk for 30 minutes, present for 30 minutes and no longer. Err on the side of brevity; if you run over your allotted time, some may draw the conclusion that you can't manage your time in the classroom or that you are arrogant. If you are currently finishing your degree or have finished in the last year, you should make a presentation about your dissertation; if you have been done more than a year or two, you should make a presentation about your current research. Think carefully about your audience. You will be talking to a range of people within your field and related ones, as well as faculty from other departments and possibly students and administrators. Thus, you need to pitch your talk to a group of people who are highly intelligent but who may not be familiar with all of the terminology, theory, or background in your sub-field. Take

additional cues about the formality of the event by the arrangement of the room. If there's a podium and classroom-style seating, then you know that you will be delivering a formal talk; if you are seated around a conference table or in a lounge with a dozen of the faculty, then your presentation could be more informal or conversational.

Don't be thrown by seemingly bizarre or trivial questions about your presentation or your work. Most faculty genuinely want to engage you in conversation about your work, but a non-specialist in the field may not be able to ask a perfect question; don't automatically assume that he or she is trying to haze you or that your presentation was ineffective. If you don't understand a question or if your mind wanders for a moment, calmly ask for clarification.

THE SAMPLE CLASS

Some schools require you to teach a class rather than or in addition to giving a job talk. Again, listen carefully to the instructions given by your contact when you are offered the interview. In some disciplines, you might be asked to give a lecture in someone's undergraduate course or to conduct an upper-level seminar. Be sure to request a syllabus for the course, as well as a copy of the accompanying readings from the textbook. Other departments may ask you to teach a sample class on a topic of your choice. These can be artificial situations and difficult to gauge, since there may be faculty as well as students present, which changes the nature of the class discussion. Your presentation may be videotaped. Be prepared for anything. When possible, and if appropriate to your discipline, try to engage the students in discussion. If you run an interactive class, have a backup plan in case the students are silent. In both situations--the formal job talk and the sample class--you're being judged on the content of your presentation as well as your public presence and ability to think on your feet.

Take advantage of any opportunity you can to practice your job talk and/or sample class with your peers and advisors.

Sample Questions

ON RESEARCH

Tell us about your current work on _____.

How did you choose your dissertation topic?

How does your work contribute to the field?

What theoretical framework did you use in developing your research?

How did you conduct the survey? What methods did you use in analyzing the data?

What did you think of _____'s book on _____?

If you were to begin it again, are there any changes you would make in your dissertation?

Why didn't you do _____ in your dissertation?

Of course you know that several members of our department tend to approach this topic very differently than does your advisor.

Tell us about your publication plans.

What are your research plans for the next 5-7 years (through tenure)?

How do you plan to fund this research?

What equipment (facilities, staffing, etc.) will you need to pursue your research agenda?

ON TEACHING

How would you teach a required course on _____?

Your work is very specialized. How do you feel about teaching undergraduates?

What do you see as the main differences between undergraduate and graduate education in this field?

What texts would you use in a junior seminar on _____?

How would you structure a course on _____?

What is your teaching philosophy? How does it influence your approach in the classroom?

What do you think is the fairest way to evaluate students? Straight scales? Curves? Exams, or papers?

How do you feel about establishing ongoing relationships with graduate students and undergraduates? Do you enjoy mentoring and advising?

Many of our students are less talented than the students at the University of Chicago. How will you deal with that?

If you could teach any course you wanted, what would it be? How would you teach it? What texts, assignments would you offer?

ON YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL

How do you feel about working at a school in rural _____?

How do you feel about working with older students, and teaching evening courses?

Why are you interested in our type of school? Why are you interested in our school?

What kind of service do you expect to do when you arrive?

We have a very close community here, and we foster close relationships with our students. Why do you think you are suited to this kind of environment?

(Many of these questions are adapted from Heiberger and Vick, *The Academic Job Search Handbook*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.)

Some General Advice

Make sure your answering machine is working properly and record a brief and professional message, which includes your first and last name. Keep a pen and paper by the phone along with your calendar and a list of questions you want to ask your contact when you are offered an interview.

Wear comfortable but professional clothing that does not detract from what you have to say about your work or experience. You want people to remember what you said, not what you wore. Think about the fact that you will be walking around campus when choosing shoes, that you will be in and out of cars and sitting in different kinds of chairs when choosing a skirt, etc.

Last, but not least, GOOD LUCK! Although interviewing is perhaps the most difficult and stressful part of the application process, keep your spirit up and be good to yourself.

Suggestions for Further Reading

These books, among others, on academic jobs and the job process are available in the Career Library, 3rd Floor, Ida Noyes Hall, or in the Regenstein Library:

Heiberger and Vick, *The Academic Job Search Handbook* (**University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001**). A comprehensive and realistic guide for graduate students conducting an academic job search, written for new Ph.D.s as well as junior faculty who are changing positions. Many sample C.V.s, letters, dissertation abstracts, etc., which may be useful as guides in preparing your own application materials.

Newhouse, *Cracking the Academia Nut: A Guide to Preparing for Your Academic Career* (**Harvard University, Office of Career Services Press, 1997**). This book details all aspects of seeking an academic career from the start of graduate school to the academic job search.

Reis, *Tomorrow's Professor: Preparing for Academic Careers in Science and Engineering* (**IEEE, 1997**). Comprehensive guidebook for graduate students and postdocs interested in academic careers in the sciences and engineering.

Boufis and Olsen, *On the Market: Surviving the Academic Job Search* (**Riverhead, 1997**). Numerous articles on the application process, convention and on-site interviews, etc., as well as the intersection of personal and professional issues.

Showalter, et al, *The MLA Guide to the Job Search* (**Modern Language Association, 1996**). A series of articles on the state of the job market as well as the practical matters of the job search for students studying language and literature.

Formo and Reed, *Job Search in Academe: Strategic Rhetorics for Faculty Job Candidates* (**Stylus Publishing, 1999**). A guide that treats the faculty job search as a rhetorical framework and provides essential advice for negotiating the terrain.

Blaxter, et al, *The Academic Career Handbook* (**Open University, 1998**). General guidebook for those thinking of a career in the British university system.

Web Resources

The Chronicle of Higher Education
<http://chronicle.com/jobs/jobs3.htm>

Academic360.com
<http://www.academic360.com/>

Science Next Wave
<http://nextwave.sciencemag.org/>