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10 Tips To Help You Get A Faculty Job

Faculty from around the country share stories to help candidates 'ace' the interview process

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Every year, numerous graduate students and postdocs carefully prepare their CVs, scour the classified ads looking for open academic faculty positions, and apply to those in their areas of expertise. For a lucky few, their application results in an on-campus interview and an opportunity to wow the hiring institution.

Getty Image

Nerve-Racking Earning a faculty position is not without stress.

Although preparing a knockout CV, blanketing institutions with applications, and waiting to hear about a job prospect are stressful pursuits, the campus interview presents a unique challenge. After all, candidates have only a day or two to convince a panel of established professors that they are up to the task of leading a research project, teaching various courses, and being a valued colleague.

Navigating the interviewing process takes some practice, but there are several things that candidates can do (or avoid doing) to increase their chances of succeeding. To help shed some light for first-time candidates on the dos and don'ts of academic faculty interviewing, C&EN asked several faculty members at large research universities around the country to share their advice based on stories about memorable interviews. The following are the top 10 tips offered by this group, in no particular order.

Tip 1: Use all available resources. It should come as no surprise that the more applications candidates send out, the greater their chances of getting a job. This wisdom holds true for all jobs, including those in academics. But in order to apply, candidates must first find an opening.

A candidate's academic mentor is often a great source of finding open positions in line with one's research interest. A common mistake made by students and postdocs, however, is assuming that their mentors can get them the job, points out Peter J. Stang, organic chemistry professor at the University of Utah. "A mentor can open doors, but the candidate must get the job," he says.

Tip 2: Spend some time learning about the faculty and the university you are visiting. Perhaps hiring a private investigator is going too far, but it's worthwhile to spend some time reading about the research interests of the department faculty and learning details about the university and its surrounding community.

"Not knowing some of the important scientific players in the department, whether the institution is public or private, and a little bit about the local history does not go over well," says Morton Z. Hoffman, chemistry professor emeritus at Boston University. For example, Hoffman notes that one of the candidates who interviewed in his department wasn't completely sure about the difference between Boston University and Boston College, leaving Hoffman to wonder if the candidate knew where he was that day.

Aside from simply knowing where you are, doing your homework on the faculty can come in handy. "One of my favorite anecdotes was when a candidate interviewed for a junior faculty position at Ohio State," says Alan G. Marshall, chemistry and biochemistry professor at Florida State University.

According to Marshall, the most renowned organic chemist in the department asked the candidate to justify the feasibility of one of the reactions in his proposal. "Without missing a beat, the candidate cited one of the faculty member's own publications as rationale," he says. The moral: Candidates should always prime themselves on the research of the faculty at the target institution.

Tip 3: Be polite, professional, and warm. It may seem obvious, but interviewing committees are looking for someone they can connect with and who will represent their department well. They want someone who is not only smart, but also friendly with at least some degree of social skills.

"One of my very good postdocs was having trouble with his interviews," explains Ronald Breslow, chemistry professor at Columbia University. After talking with his colleagues who took part in the interview, Breslow learned that his postdoc was "presenting his work and ideas with a reserved, cool manner."

Breslow worked with his postdoc to help him convey enthusiasm about his work, and after some practice, he was a "roaring success." Even though, as Breslow explains, his postdoc was then perceived as a bit "hyper," he was offered the job.

California Institute of Technology chemistry professor Harry B. Gray tells C&EN a similar story. Gray notes that it's often difficult to judge people in the short span of the interview, and sometimes brilliant people who are perceived as cold are ranked below others who may not be as accomplished professionally but come off well in the interview. The take-home message is to focus on connecting with the faculty in addition to showcasing your scientific knowledge.

Part of connecting with others involves social skills. "Although you can be forgiven for not knowing which fork to use in a multicourse dinner, don't be a boor who exhibits no evidence of any social graces," Hoffman says. "It might be helpful to know something about the world situation and local politics in the event that dinner conversation strays away from a discussion of your latest research result," he advises.

It's also important to be professional and to treat the interview seriously. While he was an organic chemistry professor at the University of South Florida, Douglas J. Raber, consultant with GreenPoint Science, tells C&EN that he once went to the airport to pick up a faculty candidate. As soon as the fellow landed, he asked how far it was to the Everglades. "We soon realized that he really had no interest in the position at USF, but he did want plane fare to visit Florida for a short vacation," Raber explains.

Tip 4: Use a mirror. Again, this may seem like common sense, but stories exist of candidates who gave presentations with their pants unzipped or food in their teeth. These simple faux pas can be distracting and cost a candidate a job offer.

"One candidate had neglected to cut the tacking on the vent in his new suit jacket," says Marcetta Y. Darensbourg, chemistry professor at Texas A&M University. "For some reason, the audience just couldn't focus on the chemistry, knowing that he could have been a little more with it," she notes.

Tip 5: Keep your presentation on target and on time. Aside from the standard presentation tips of not packing slides with lots of words and then reading them to the audience, many of the faculty contacted by C&EN stressed the importance of not running long during presentations.

LeRoy N. Sanchez/Los Alamos National Laboratory

Presenter Effective use of PowerPoint presentations is one key to navigating the interviewing process successfully.

"The candidate should have practiced his or her presentation for timing and content," Darensbourg advises. She recalls a presentation in which a candidate ran over the allotted time by 25 minutes. It was his first interview, she notes, adding that although everyone tends to give the candidates some leeway in their first interview, going too long reflected poorly on the candidate.

Underscoring this point, Hoffman says, "If your seminar is scheduled for a one-hour slot, plan your presentation for 45 minutes to allow for the fact that you are apt to be interrupted by questions and to leave plenty of time for discussion." He adds that "it's bad form to push the schedule so no one can ask questions," because the interviewing faculty might wonder if that was done deliberately.

"Nothing is more exasperating than a candidate who uses up all of his or her time trying to include every possible prior or proposed project and leaving no time for discussion," Marshall agrees. "The question-and-answer period is the best place for a candidate to show his or her ability to think on his or her feet and to demonstrate knowledge going beyond what is on the slide," he explains.

Tip 6: Don't be afraid to add some scientific theater to your presentation. Giving a presentation doesn't have to be a boring run-through of slides. In fact, Darensbourg says when she was interviewing for her position, she brought along a prop. "I carried with me a giant molecular structure that could be used to point out reaction spots, and it gave me a chance for eye contact with the audience as I explained it," she says. And, although PowerPoint presentations have become popular for their razzmatazz appeal, using a prop is still likely to be effective.

Scientific theater can also be brought into a presentation by including a mistake on one of the slides and correcting it during the presentation, notes Roald Hoffmann, chemistry professor at Cornell University. "This gives people the impression that this person is not just reading his or her slides, but that they're thinking as they're giving the talk," he points out.

Tip 7: Don't fake it. Although building in some scientific theater may be helpful, candidates should be careful not to go overboard. Stang tells C&EN that he sees a lot of young candidates using glitzy PowerPoint presentations. "A good PowerPoint is appreciated, but candidates must make sure the glitz doesn't overshadow the science," he cautions.

In the end, the interviewing faculty are looking for a candidate who knows his or her science. "Don't try to dazzle the interviewing committee," Hoffman notes. "Faculty, having dealt with students and colleagues for years, have seen it all, and can detect baloney and insincerity in a nanosecond."

Simply put, "if you don't know the answer to a question, say so-don't try to fake it," Marshall says. He adds that candidates should remember to keep answers to questions short and not to use them as an excuse to add several minutes to their presentation.

Tip 8: Work out the details. Developing a research proposal is not an easy task. It requires candidates to outline feasible research projects and provide some idea of the costs for doing the work. If either component is off, it could spell disaster.

Because no research proposal focuses on just one project, candidates should rank their proposed projects. "Make the first one achievable in one year, and also have some backup plans in case the hottest idea fails," Marshall suggests.

It's also important to be realistic about start-up packages. In interviewing a top prospect, Michael P. Doyle, chemistry professor at the University of Maryland, notes that although the research plan was excellent, the requested start-up costs were unreasonable.

When Doyle asked for a list of start-up costs, "the candidate reached into a folder and handed me a list whose bottom line exceeded any reasonable deliverable," he explains. "Obviously, the list had been prepared in consultation at the current institution without regard to what was available at Maryland and actual needs for a developing program." Doyle adds that they did make this candidate an offer with a revised start-up package, but he did not accept it.

Tip 9: Be your own person. It's important to remember that institutions are looking to hire you, not your mentor. "Demonstrate that you are not a clone of your research mentors with regard to your research ideas," Hoffman says. "Independence of creative thinking is sought in the world of academic scholarship."

Showing that you are a good researcher is also important to being your own person. "I can recall a particularly memorable seminar by a junior faculty candidate in the area of total synthesis," says Cynthia J. Burrows, chemistry professor at the University of Utah. "The candidate described numerous different synthetic routes—some quite elegant," she explains.

"But every one of them seemed to fail at the penultimate step, necessitating a completely new approach that essentially started over at the beginning," she says. Although she notes that he learned from these failures, it would have been nice to share some successes and end the presentation on a high note.

Tip 10: Always come prepared. In addition to knowing the details of past, current, and proposed research cold, it may not be a bad idea to bring along a granola bar.

ACS's assistant director of the Department of Career Management & Development, David E. Harwell, tells C&EN of an experience he had when interviewing for his previous academic position at the University of Hawaii. Harwell, who was traveling from mainland U.S. to Hawaii, arrived late in the evening. He was picked up by his host, who was going to take him to get something to eat, but as it turned out, it was a local holiday and everything was closed.

Harwell ended up staring down a pack of peanut butter crackers in the hotel vending machine. After scraping together some change, he was able to buy them. His experience shows that it never hurts to carry spare change.

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