

Academic Job Interview Advice

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The following is the text of a talk that I gave at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, as part of the ASA Students Committee-sponsored session on Job Interviewing, Sunday, Nov. 3, 1996. You are welcome to link to or to reproduce this page so long as you include the credit line above and do not alter the content. Please let me know how useful you find the advice. I will try to adjust and maintain the content according to your feedback.

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I was on the job market between 1984-87. During those years I applied for about 140 jobs. I participated in a couple dozen convention interviews and about six campus interviews. The advice that follows is based on those experiences as well as my experiences more recently on the other side of the fence, interviewing job candidates.

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Good morning. My job this morning is to give you some general advice on interviewing for academic jobs, with a special focus on graduate degree granting institutions. My first piece of advice--and probably the most important one I give--is that you should market yourself for the specific job and come to the interview prepared to talk knowledgeably about what you have to offer that specific institution. Academic institutions fall into four general categories and we're going to cover at least three of these this morning:

1. Ph.D-degree granting institutions
2. State university or college branch campuses (non-flagship universities), many of which will be excellent places to be but which will often carry heavier teaching loads
3. Small universities or colleges offering a liberal arts curriculum
4. And community colleges, most of which have very local constituencies and a large percentage of fully mature students.

Each institution will be interested in different qualities in its job candidates; this will become evident in the types of questions you're asked at interviews.

Carolyn de la Pena, Chair of the ASA Students' Committee, asked me to speak about the competition for tenure track jobs at a graduate-degree granting university. What does it take to land a job at the University of Maryland, College Park, or a similar place? I don't have to tell you what a depressing subject this is--the nature of the market right now makes the competition ridiculous. And it's worth remembering that it's ridiculous because you need to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with what seem like and are impossibly high standards, especially for entry level jobs. Search committees interviewing candidates for a tenure-track entry level position at a graduate degree granting university will look for the following credentials, as a general rule:

1. Ph.D. in hand (or 3/4s of your dissertation to show by December-January)

2. Book or book contract (no, this is not fair. I was once told that I did not make the short list of 10 for a tenure track job because I didn't have a book published or nearly finished).

3. Other publications--placing publications in refereed journals is especially important. One article in a well-thought of academic journal makes a real difference.

4. Teaching experience--you need something in addition to teaching assistantships. Search committees will want to know whether you have lectures written, whether you can teach their department's service courses, and whether you can manage graduate students. They will prefer that candidates have some teaching experience post-Ph.D. or outside of a graduate assistantship and they will look for evidence that you can handle a full load of teaching (anywhere from 2/2 to 4/4)

5. Some evidence that your work has been recognized by others. This evidence usually comes in the form of honors, awards, grants, and fellowships that you have received. In these times of tightening budgets for higher education everywhere, a streak of entrepreneurship--the ability to bring in money to support your research or some other academic enterprise--may seem very attractive.

6. Recognition of your work by scholars in your field outside of your home university. This may simply come in the form of letters of recommendation from scholars outside your home university in your credentials file.

7. Evidence of connectedness. Have you been asked to do the sorts of things that come by networking--write book reviews, serve as a commentator on panels, serve as an officer in the local chapter of your professional organization, organize panels, etc.?

8. Administrative ability--such as service on program committees, organization of conferences, academic advising, etc. What is the evidence that you work well as part of a team?

9. Collegiality. Do not underestimate the importance of "the lunch test".

10. Firm plans for future research. This is important for a department's assessment of whether you're likely to achieve tenure at their institution. Being able to go to an interview and give a first rate paper on a subject other than your dissertation is especially impressive.

A good 5-20 people per job may have all or most of these credentials (at least in quantity if not in quality), That's what you're up against.

To get to a campus interview, most job applicants have to survive interviewing at a convention. The convention interview is challenging because you must present yourself so strongly in such a short time. The logistics are as follows: You will generally be called in advance to schedule the interview, but "in advance" may be as late as 2-3 days before the conference starts. It is important that you try to agree on a time and place before the conference starts--it's surprisingly hard and stressful for the candidate to try to reach search committee members during the convention--no one is ever in his/her room. The interview will probably last from 30-45 minutes. It may go longer if they like you.

Convention interviews are usually divided into four components:

1. questions about research

2. questions about teaching. These may very well predominate and will often take the form of specific questions like "what books would you use to teach ..."
3. They'll tell you about the school and the job
4. They'll let you ask questions

My survival advice for convention interviews is:

1. Be prepared. Be sure that you have researched the school so that you have ascertained their needs and can direct your remarks to what they appear to need. This includes knowing who's on the staff, who teaches what and how territorial the place is. You don't want to outline a course that someone else is already very invested in teaching. I prepare a cram sheet for each interview that records my research for the job, my analysis of their needs, and the anticipated questions I'll need to address. It also includes the questions I want to ask them.

2. Strike fast. Try to establish your candidacy in the first 5 minutes of the interview. The standard pieces of advice for business interviews apply here, too. Look people in the eye. Answer questions succinctly. Have ready good snappy short and medium length answers to the standard questions. **DO NOT** drone on for 15 minutes about the minutiae of your dissertation.

3. It's an old cliché, but try to relax and be yourself. Don't try to hide who you are. Be careful about creating different personas for different interviews at the convention. You will be seeing search committee members throughout the weekend and you need to remember who you are for each encounter. Believe in your skills and give it your best shot.

4. Dress distinctively (but don't violate too many conventions). After 2-3 days trapped in a hotel room interviewing, search committee members are completely fried or bored or both. It'll be hard to remember you if you looked and dressed like every other candidate.

If you are lucky enough to get a campus interview, a "flyback," the advice I gave earlier about marketing yourself for the specific institution becomes triply important. Do your homework. Read the catalog and all the literature you can get your hands on. Call friends or acquaintances who are familiar with the university. Pump your networks for the inside dope. Be prepared to be specific about how you might enhance any one of the department's programs or initiatives. The logistics are that they will generally fly you in for 1-2 days. The atmosphere of the campus interview (barring severe factionalism) is usually quite pleasant. You will most likely be treated well and given every consideration.

What should you expect for a campus interview at a Ph.D.-granting institution? Your presentation will most likely be the most important part of the interview. Have your remarks prepared, after ascertaining what they want, who your audience will be, how long they expect you to talk, and whether they want you to give a formal paper or an informal seminar on your research. How you handle questions will be closely evaluated. On occasion, depending on the circumstances of the search and what kind of folks your future colleagues are, the Q&A session following your talk may get adversarial. Don't let them see you sweat. Be prepared to talk about your research often and in detail to different constituencies of the department and university. They must evaluate your prospects for passing a tenure review in 5-6 years. (It may help you to know that at some institutions, a tenure line will not be returned to the unit automatically after a tenure denial. Your success, therefore, may be vital to the unit's ability to maintain its present size and strength.)

Be ready to discuss how you would teach at least 3 undergraduate courses and 1 graduate seminar. Most of these should be classes you know they expect you to teach. One should be something special,

entrepreneurial--something drawing on your strengths that could really enhance their curriculum and that other candidates would not be able to offer. The inability to talk knowledgeably about more than one course is unimpressive. Search committees will expect you to be prepared for these questions. If there is some kind of special initiative that the dept is working on, being ready to say how you could contribute to it will be impressive. For example, my department is using the World Wide Web for a lot of undergraduate teaching and we're building a virtual museum which serves as the base for this work. What skills or ideas could you bring to this project?

Although negotiations concerning the job will be conducted with the Chair or Head of the department at a graduate-degree granting institution, you may be booked for an interview with the Dean. If so, this will be an important interview; deans authorize offers. Be prepared to explain the importance of your research to someone who has no training in your field. Be able to demonstrate your "connectedness" and high regard within your field. If the Chair hires a star, the Dean will get credit for it. The Dean wants to know whether landing you will enhance his or her (university's) standing. If you can, use the Dean interview to educate him or her about the importance of your subject matter and, by extension, your new department to current scholarly doings. You may be asked to comment on all kinds of developments in higher education that the dean is interested in. There is no substitute for regular reading of the Chronicle of Higher Education at a time like this.

Be ready to sell your candidacy to the graduate students. Making the separation between being a graduate student and teaching them is not easy. Put some thought into how you will handle this before the interview.

Exercise good manners and display collegiality at all of the social occasions. There is NEVER a time when you are visiting that you are NOT being interviewed. It's an obvious point, but watch your drinking. It's surprising how many candidates get nervous and overimbibe--usually not to the point of drunkenness but enough that they don't feel very well on the second day. Do not let your guard down and confess things--fears, misgivings, shortcomings in your work, where you REALLY stand with your dissertation writing to ANYONE while you are there. Last year I was invited to the dinners for all five candidates for a position in a neighboring department and I was often the last person the candidate saw that day. Every single one of them said something to me that he or she shouldn't have.

Here are a few last bits of advice: Search choices are mind-bogglingly arbitrary. You must develop mechanisms for dealing with this aspect of the process. (I took to ritually burning my rejection letters in the fireplace after the first 30 or so piled in. Silly, but it helped). Thorough preparation for a campus job interview takes far more time than you may have. Plan ahead and manage your time to do the best you can. Don't stint on this part of the interviewing process.

For a checklist of all the generic steps in the job application process, see my Academic Job Application Checklist. For a list of all the generic questions I've ever been asked at a job interview, see Academic Job Interview Questions. Feel free to send me feedback and suggestions for improving this site.

Good luck in your job search. May you remember that there really was a reason you went into this business and get a chance to do what you do so well.

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