

Academic Chat #7
The Academic Job Interview
April 12, 2011
Readings

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#1 The Academic Job Talk

One of the most important talks a Ph.D. student or postdoc will ever give is the "academic job talk" presented during the campus interview for a professorship position. An excellent talk could get the person the job, while a poor talk will almost surely eliminate them from contention.

Dr. Michele Marincovich, associate vice provost and director of the Stanford University Center for Teaching and Learning has counseled hundreds of students and postdocs about their academic job talks. Here is her advice:

General Tips:

- * Make sure that your talk has a broader context, so that the importance and implications of your work are clear, not merely implied.
- * If, when you write your talk, you focus on what you want people to be thinking about as they leave your talk, it will help you concentrate on the essentials.
- * Don't wait to prepare your job talk until the last minute - it is more than just a "brain dump" of your dissertation. It's very important to be able to go beyond your dissertation.
- * Be prepared enough to allow yourself to be spontaneous; preparation will also help you handle the unexpected.
- * Make your talk interesting with good examples, relevant anecdotes, and significant details.

- * If speaking to a mixed audience, avoid highly technical or specialized terms.
- * Academia is changing and now includes previously underrepresented groups. Use inclusive language - she as well as he, for example - and language that is respectful of all groups.
- * The biggest correlates of effective teaching are enthusiasm, organization, and the ability to engage your students.
- * Using humor in your job talk can be risky, but if it comes naturally to you, use it. But you don't have to, so don't fake it.
- * There will usually be a "Question and Answer" period. There is no way to predict all the questions you might be asked, but you can practice by having friends listen to your talk and then ask you the hardest questions they can think of.
- * Being a good public speaker helps - a well delivered talk will carry your message more effectively.

Practicing and Nervousness:

- * Practice/ do your talk in front of friends who can give feedback.
- * Try to view any nervousness in a positive way, as energy or dynamism.
- * Few speakers reach everybody all the time--don't focus on unresponsive audience members.
- * Some audiences (especially in science and engineering fields) will be serious and unresponsive on purpose to make it more challenging or simply because they're concentrating on the presentation and critiquing it.
- * Stay in touch with your audience, but don't try to decide the success or results of the talk during the talk.

Note:

If you follow these guidelines and practice several times before your visit, you should do quite well. There is, however, one important follow-up action for you

to take. Write a thank you letter to your host saying how much you enjoyed the visit, mentioning by name the specific people you spent a reasonable time with, and making reference to any matters or observations that you found particularly worthwhile. Conclude by indicating your understanding of the next steps, and be sure to enclose any additional materials you promised to provide. Writing such letters may sound obvious, but you'd be surprised how many applicants don't do it - and, therefore, what a difference it makes when you do.

#2 The Research Presentation

This posting gives some excellent tips of giving a research presentation during the campus interview. It is from Chapter 3 The screen test, in Job Search in Academe: Strategic Rhetoric for Faculty Job Candidates, by Dawn M. Formo and Cheryl Reed. Stylus Publishing, LLC, <http://www.styluspub.com/Copyright> © 1999 Stylus Publishing, Published by Stylus Publishing, LLC, 22883 Quicksilver Drive, Sterling, VA 20166- 2012. ISBN I-57922-010-x (cloth). ISBN I-57922-011-8 (paper). All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. -----

Contrary to what we just told you about the teaching presentation, the research presentation is precisely the moment where an excerpt from your dissertation is most appropriate. Your audience purports to be exactly what it is-a gathering of colleagues. Use the research presentation as an opportunity to showcase your skill at making your research accessible and be sure to add tidbits of why this line of research is ideal for this school. Assistant Professor of Chemistry Jacqueline Trischman, for instance, suggested the following, campus-specific references a candidate could cite in the research presentation:

- * The ready availability of proper instrumentation on-site.
- * Low start-up costs for your type of research.
- * Opportunities to involve undergraduates in research.
- * The cutting edge aspects of your projects.
- * Links to other departments.

If you've been giving conference presentations all along, you're already accustomed to encapsulating bits of your research into brief, discussion-provoking chunks that can be delivered orally. You probably have your own system of marking key words in your back-up text and for finding your place again once you've looked up to make an extraneous point. You may have even practiced performing multimedia presentations. Since your research presentation will most likely be part of your dissertation, you will also have

talked about the material repeatedly, in different configurations, with different audiences and varying intents as your writing developed. So, you know your material quite well, and have already practiced delivering it in public.

However, the rhetorical task of the research presentation is not identical to the conference presentation. Whereas the conference presentation aims only at getting information across and (when things go well) generating a discussion with colleagues, the research presentation is geared to showing something about your own professional style, as well. Associate Professor of Management Regina Eisenbach tells us that, in her discipline, candidates are expected to present their scholarship at on-campus interviews. She encourages candidates to focus on making the paper presentation interesting and accessible to the widest range of potential hearers: from the undergraduate with no coursework in the major to the senior faculty member in the discipline. As Eisenbach points out, candidates who are able to make their research presentation accessible and interesting to faculty and students alike are also demonstrating their teaching skill. In other words, your research presentation should simultaneously be a teaching moment.

One professor we interviewed offers a good example of a "teachable moment" that occurred in one of her on-campus research presentation. Just as she began to explain the significance of the data on the overhead she presented, an audience member raised her hand to point out an error in the data. The presenter admits to feeling embarrassed at first, but says that she decided rather quickly to use her typo as a teachable moment. She played into the comment by saying, "I have made this presentation three times and you are the first person to bring that error to my attention. That error has implications for my analysis. Let me show you what some those implications mean for my research results." Rather than crumbling in chagrin or slinking off in utter failure, this candidate took charge of seemingly being "caught out." She showed how she could think on her feet, and how she could teach through those awkward moments. Cheryl calls this a "good save" when she teaches interviewing to her undergraduate social science writers.

The best research presentations, then, show how teaching and research connect. And, if you can draw community service into this mix (as in, for example, a dissertation on professional issues backed up by related service in the academy, as our contributor Alan Kalish has done) you are way ahead of your competition. Since, as we discussed above, your dissertation research will probably already have generated several possible presentations for you, your task in crafting the research presentation is adding that personal/relational

dimension to the intellectual content already extant. How can you be personable, intellectual, and even entertaining and still communicate vital information to a large group of people in a short space of time?

Leonard Bernstein, the late conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, was a master at this. His "Young People's Concerts," which spanned the late 50's through the early 70's, lured a generation of children into thinking about tricky bits of musical "rhetoric" such as intervals, modes, and bitonality. We strongly recommend watching videotapes of these concerts, especially the later ones: they demonstrate a clear, passionate, accessible presentation of small scholarly treasures (see appendix 5 for titles). Bernstein is clearly in love with his subject, his medium (the orchestra), and his audience, and his obvious delight in drawing the three together absolutely radiates from this tiny podium. Incredibly, camera pans of the audience show that he has the rapt cooperation of his small, squirmy auditors. What is he doing? What can you do without a teleprompter and the New York Philharmonic to back you up during your presentation?

How to "Conduct" Your Research Presentation

- * Choose a manageable chunk of your complex subject to share with your listeners. Don't try to get too much information in too small a time slot. (Bernstein often took an entire hour's program to explain one musical concept.)
- * Choose material that you've used before, preferably that you've presented in different conference and classroom settings.
- * Present material you will enjoy talking about. Try to find a part of your dissertation that you still accost people to talk about at parties.
- * Remember that people recall only a small portion of what they hear; some researchers say information is only remembered once it's been repeated five times. If your argument is really complex, give your audience a painfully clear frame to hang it on.
- * Prepare good notes, and refer to them when you need to, but don't perform a formal "reading." (Bernstein left his notes casually on the piano and, in later concerts, seemed to use them only as launching points.)
- * Back up your points with visual and experiential media (your Philharmonic).

* Tie in complex ideas to ones your audience is already familiar with. (Bernstein often-seemingly on impulse-leaned over the piano and played a popular song or advertising jingle to illustrate complex terms like the "mixolydian" mode.)

* Step into your role as "conductor." Rather than presenting information in a linear path from you to your (ostensible) judges, think about inviting the audience to participate in your enthusiasm for a topic you've explored in some depth. Make your presentation a communication triangle among your material, your media, and your audience. If you relate only to your audience, you're relying on the component of this triangle over which you have the least control.

#3 Questions To Expect, To Ask, And To Not Ask During Your Campus Visit

My thanks to Ms. Page Blauch for calling my attention to an excellent posting on how to prepare for a successful campus interview. The 3,000- word article, which I will make available as a handout at the chat, is one of the best descriptions I have come across on this subject. It can be found at: [http://www.usc.edu/programs/cet/private/pdfs/sego_interview_tips.pdf]. The guide, written by Trina Sego and Jeff I. Richards, has five parts:

- (1) What They Are Looking For
- (2) What You Should Expect
- (3) How to Prepare
- (4) Some Questions You Should Expect
- (5) Some Questions You Can (or Should) Ask.

Below is a copy of Parts 4 and 5.

SOME QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD EXPECT

It is not uncommon for candidates seeking faculty positions to be asked any or all of the questions listed below.

Think about each of these before you go to your first interview, so you will be prepared with a cogent and appropriate answer. * Why do you want to come to [this school]? * Tell me about your dissertation.

- * How far along is your dissertation?
- * When do you expect to defend your dissertation?
- * What classes do you like to teach?
- * What are the strengths/weaknesses of you Ph.D. program?
- * What do you think of our curriculum?

- * Do you know, or what do you think of [a specific professor at U.T.]?
- * What do you think of qualitative/quantitative research?
- * Tell me about your teaching techniques (e.g., group projects, case method, etc.).
- * How would you teach [a specific class, e.g., media]?
- * Are you interested in working with the Ad Club (or taking a team to the AAF Competition)?
- * What specific ideas do you have for improving our Ad Club?
- * What do you think of "Integrated Marketing Communications" (or Interactive Media, or any current "hot" topic)?
- * What is your favorite lecture, and why?
- * What research do you want to do in the next 5 years?
- * In what journals do you expect to publish?
- * Tell me about your industry experience (if you have any)? How would you bring that industry experience to the classroom?
- * How important do you feel industry experience is for an advertising professor?
- * If you have no industry experience: How do you expect to be able to teach students about the field if you've never worked in it?
- * What is your favorite theory or theorist?
- * What do you consider your teaching strengths/weaknesses?
- * What do you consider your research strengths/weaknesses?

In addition, you should expect questions about anything and everything on your curriculum vitae. And it is quite common to get the same type of interview questions that you might when seeking any type of job, such as "What is the last book you read for fun?" or "What are your hobbies?"

SOME QUESTIONS YOU CAN (OR SHOULD) ASK

You will be meeting many different people, and will need to be prepared to ask intelligent questions of each of them. The following are some ideas of what you can or, in some cases, should ask. They are roughly categorized to give you an idea of whom you might ask them. In addition, of course, as you progress through the interview you should constantly try to develop additional questions based upon what you see or hear.

Search Committee Chair, your contact person, or whoever picks you up at the airport.

- * What are you looking for in filling this position? (i.e., what qualifications?)

- * Do other faculty members have different expectations/desires regarding what they are looking for?
- * Are there any "land mines" of which I should be aware? [E.g., any topics to avoid discussing, any faculty members who might be difficult]
- * What courses are most/least in need of instructors?
- * Is there anything I should expect when talking to the Dean? To the Chair?

Dean of College

- * How much interaction will an assistant professor have with the Dean?
- * What research funds are available at different levels of the university?
- * Tell me about the health plan.
- * Tell me about the retirement plan.
- * Is this position fully funded (or might it disappear before anyone is hired)?
- * What are the most dramatic changes you expect for the college in the next 5 years? How about 10 years?
- * Where do you expect the advertising department/program to be in 5 years? 10 years?
- * What is the financial state of the college? Of the department?
- * How is tenure approved at different levels of the university administration?
- * Is there an annual review of performance for assistant professors, so they know whether or not they are making adequate progress toward tenure?
- * As Dean, you are in the position to see many tenure decisions. What practical advice would you give to a new assistant professor about securing tenure?
- * How might you describe the advertising department/program to a fellow administrator? [I.e., try to assess their attitudes toward the program.]

Department Chair and Senior Faculty

- * When does the faculty meet as a group, and for what reasons do they meet?
- * What is the teaching load? Will it change over time?
- * How many new preps can I expect in the first 3 years?
- * How large are the classes? [Ask about specific classes.]
- * Do faculty have any input as to when and where their classes meet?
- * Is there any teaching relief for service activities such as Ad Club, directing theses and independent studies, etc.?
- * Who makes teaching assignments, and how is that done?
- * Is there a sabbatical system? How does it work?
- * Are there opportunities to develop new courses?
- * Do assistant professors teach graduate courses?
- * Which courses are in greatest demand by faculty?

- * For which courses does the department have the hardest time finding instructors?
- * How are graduate student applications evaluated? [Follow up with other questions about the grad program, if any, such as how many grad students come from the department's own undergrad program.]
- * Where are your undergrad students usually placed? Your grad students?
- * What are the strengths/weaknesses of the department?
- * What, in particular, are you looking for in filling this position? Are there different agendas within the faculty?
- * What are the most dramatic changes you predict for the department in the next 5 years? 10 years?
- * What kind of summer support is available? [Be sure to find out how it is calculated. Some schools offer 1/6 of salary for teaching a summer class, while others offer 1/9. And, summer teaching may be available only upon a seniority basis.]
- * What does it usually take to obtain tenure (e.g., number of publications)? [Ask specifics about the process, e.g., "A" vs. "B" journals, external reviewers, number of years before you can go up for tenure, balance of teaching vs. research vs. service.]
- * What are your expectations for tenure?
- * Who was the last person to go up for tenure, and what happened?
- * What is the role of part-time, adjunct instructors/professors?
- * What is the relationship between sub disciplines (e.g., speech & journalism)?
- * How much interaction is there between advertising professors and [journalism, marketing, PR, etc.] professors?
- * How does being housed in [this college or department] affect the advertising program's mission?
- * What travel money is available?
- * Are there set limits on such things as phone calls, Xerox copies, etc., that can be done by a professor?
- * How is teaching evaluated? [E.g., student evaluations, peer reviews, etc.]
- * Especially if you're a woman: Who is the highest ranking woman in the department/college/university?
- * Who is the highest ranking minority in the department/college/university?
- * How active is the Ad Club? What involvement do faculty have?
- * In what competitions do students compete? [E.g., AAF's NSAC, One Club, Direct Marketing Assoc., Yellow Pages, etc.]
- * Who does advising for undergrad/grad students?
- * How many grad/undergrad students are enrolled in the program? Is this number increasing or decreasing?
- * Ask about specific courses, e.g., how they're taught, prerequisites, etc.

- * What is the financial outlook for the department/program?
- * How are raises determined? [e.g., merit, cost of living, do less active people get the same raises, etc.]
- * What would you like your new hire to teach during their first semester here?
- * Are there any labs for experimental research, or phone banks for survey research? [More specifics on research facilities?]
- * In what areas do you consider this department to be a leader?
- * What research are you doing?

Junior Faculty

- * Ask about parking, postage, photocopies, computers, software, long- distance telephone charges, and office space.
- * What classes did you teach in the last year? How many students were in each? How many preps? How much influence did you have regarding which classes you taught and when?
- * How is your teaching evaluated?
- * How are you expected to spend your summers?
- * What support do you receive for your classes? [E.g., TA support, AV support, availability of videos, secretarial support, teaching training, faculty advise/assistance, supplies, etc.]
- * Is there any formal mentoring system for new faculty?
- * What support do you receive for research? [E.g., RA support, photocopies, postage, teaching release, secretarial support, computer & statistical consulting, grants, etc.]
- * Is there a distinction made between "skills" courses and others?
- * Do you like living in this city/town?
- * Are you satisfied with your benefits? [E.g., health, retirement]
- * What do you consider to be the strengths/weaknesses of the department?
- * What is your greatest frustration with your job?
- * What is your opinion regarding the quality of undergrad/grad students here?
- * To what extent do faculty members socialize with one another?
- * Where and with whom do you usually eat lunch?
- * What service are you involved in?
- * What are the expectations regarding service? [Including university service, community service & professional service.]
- * Do you find the journals you need are available in the library? [Other specifics about the library and research materials?]
- * When you teach a course that has been taught before, or is simultaneously being taught by someone else, are you encouraged to depart from the previous syllabus? Do you independently select the text used?

* Is consulting encouraged or discouraged? * How many office hours are required for every hour in the classroom?

Graduate Students

- * How do you address faculty members? [E.g., "Dr.," "Professor," first name,]
- * What kind of support do you get from faculty? [E.g., reading & commenting on your work, research collaboration, helping to secure funding, etc.]
- * Are you working with anyone in particular? Do you co-author papers together? * Which professor serves on the most graduate student committees?
- * Do you have more class contact with some professors than others?
- * Where do you go when you have questions about research methods? About theoretical issues? About industry issues? About teaching?
- * Do graduate students get travel funds?
- * Do graduate students and faculty socialize with one another? When? [E.g., eat lunch together, do faculty socialize with particular grad students or as a group?]
- * Why did you choose to get your graduate degree at this school?

Faculty Member in Another Department

- * You are probably meeting this person because of his/her research interests, so obviously you want to ask them about their research, support they receive, whether anyone in Advertising seems interested in their research, etc.
- * Do you work with anyone in Advertising? In what capacity? [E.g., research, committees, team teaching]
- * Would you be interested in collaborating with someone in advertising who had research interests similar to yours?
- * As an outsider, what would you say are the strengths/weaknesses of the advertising program/department?
- * For someone in the same college or school: What is the relationship between the disciplines?
- * For someone in the same college or school: How does being housed in [this college or school] affect your program's mission?

Last Meeting with the Chair

- * Will you be interviewing other candidates?
- * Who will make the decision regarding whom to hire?
- * What is your timetable for filling this position?
- * At this point you may want to clarify: tenure requirements, teaching requirements, travel money, summer support, computer equipment, etc.

* If you are asked about salary expectations: What salary range has been established for this position?

Aim a little high when you state your expectation, and back it up with a good rationale.

SOME QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD NOT ASK (UNTIL LATER)

Generally, avoid discussing salary until they bring it up. Don't try to negotiate your salary when you don't yet have an offer. Not only is it tacky, they may have one amount in mind before you arrive, and that amount may change as they learn more about your value to their program. Consequently, unless they specifically ask you about salary or make you an offer, save those questions. It may be that you won't get an offer until weeks later.

You can ask the following questions at that time:

- * Always thank them for the offer, even if you're not interested.
- * Clarify teaching load for the first year.
- * What kind of computer hardware/software and office space can I expect? [Ask for the best, then negotiate down if necessary. You probably won't get another computer for years.]
- * Will moving expenses of your new hire be covered? [Probably not! Generally, universities only pay moving expenses for high level positions (e.g., Chairs).]
- * In some cases you may want to ask for something special. For example, if you do experimental research, you may want to try and negotiate for laboratory space and equipment.
- * Is there any summer research support available for a new hire? [Try to get at least the first summer paid, without teaching, so you can get your research program moving.]
- * How much time do I have to decide? [You should get 2 - 4 weeks. Whatever you do, don't accept their offer on the spot. Give yourself some time to think about it, and to check other places you have interviewed, to see if they intend to extend an offer to you.]
- * If salary is lower than expected, say: I am very excited about the prospect of coming to work here, but I am a little disappointed about the salary. Is this still open to negotiation?
- * If you already have another offer, and it's higher, be sure to tell them. They may be able to go back to their Dean and get more, using your other offer as leverage.

* Make the best deal you can, because you will never again be in a bargaining position unless you have offers to move to another school.

If you decline the offer, be diplomatic. Never burn your bridges. Express appreciation for the confidence in you as a candidate, and say something positive about the department. Focus on your personal reasons for declining the offer.

GENERAL ADVICE

* Perhaps it goes without saying, but show a definite interest in each of these people and in the research/ teaching/projects they are doing. People tend to be more positively disposed to someone who is interested in their work than someone who shows no interest in it. Where possible, point out how their work might dovetail with your own, and how there might be an opportunity for joint research later.

* Show a sincere interest in their program/department. I've seen candidates come to our Advertising Department to interview, and all they talk about is their research & teaching of journalism classes, without ever mentioning how that experience would transfer to, or benefit, our department. They seemed to forget what department they were in! If you're not really interested in their program, don't interview there.

* Mention ways that you could see yourself contributing to their current efforts. Talk as if you could see yourself working there, to help them visualize you working there.

* Tact! Remember that different faculty members have different opinions and agendas. For example, some feel that classes should focus on giving students useful skills, while others feel classes should help students learn to think without any need to teach them practical skills. Be honest, but don't unnecessarily offend.

* Think before you answer a question.

* Be a good listener. Don't talk when someone else is talking.

* Don't call a faculty member by their first name unless they invite you to do so.

* Be confident and show your knowledge, but avoid arrogance.

* Be nice ... to everyone.

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<http://www.utexas.edu/coc/adv/JR/InterviewPrep.html>