
Your Upcoming Job Interview

Posted on [12/18/2014](#) by [Ricardo Cortez](#)

Many of you are in the middle of the job search process and are going to have interviews pretty soon, so I wanted to offer some thoughts on how to prepare. I am hoping that other readers can add their own tips. I will discuss separately what to do before the interview, during the visit, and afterward.

Before the interview.

You will receive an email or phone call from a hiring committee Chair requesting an interview. Try to sound excited about it and make sure you do what you can to accommodate the requested days of the visit.

Understandable reasons for negotiating different dates are (1) if you already have another interview trip planned or (2) if you are speaking at a conference. However, other “minor” reasons like not wanting to miss class or wanting to take a personal trip are not acceptable because they project a lack of interest in the job or the wrong priorities (from the point of view of the employer).

If they contacted you by phone, write down the name of the person that called you so that you can communicate with him/her as needed. To prepare properly, make sure the visit schedule is clear to you. Not all visits are the same: you always give a talk but you may also be asked to give a “teaching talk” either in a student seminar or during a regularly scheduled undergraduate class (which might be the same as teaching the class that day on a predetermined topic). You will meet with faculty members either in small groups (e.g. the hiring committee) or individually. You may also be asked to meet with groups of students and/or postdocs. Typical interviews also include meeting with a Dean.

Regarding the talk(s), you should know who is expected to attend. Typically, the research talk will be to the entire department including students, so you should make it understandable and enjoyable to non experts in your area. Avoid presenting details that are too technical but prepare backup slides with details in case an expert asks about them. Prepare slides that convey the essence of your work using familiar examples and give an idea of the elements that go into the work. Emphasize the significance of the work, not the technicalities. If you are asked to give an undergraduate student talk, make sure you know the level they expect and get some information on the students’ background (classes they have taken, etc.). If you will teach a class, find out the textbook they are using and the sections they have covered so far.

Look through the department’s web site and note the faculty that are in areas related to yours. If the schedule includes individual meetings with some faculty, read up on their work beforehand.

Although it is not appropriate for anyone to ask you personal questions unrelated to the job (like marital status or two-body situations, etc.), sometimes these questions are asked. You don’t have to answer them but how you

respond is important so think ahead of time what you might say. The goal is not to be caught by surprise and always be in control.

During the visit.

The first thing to know is that *everything* that happens during the visit is part of the interview. This includes what you might consider informal conversations during coffee, rides to the airport and casual chats over drinks. Always be aware of comments you make.

When you talk to faculty you might mention something you have read about their work or if there is some connection to their alma mater. People like being recognized. Keep all conversations at a professional level, be yourself but stay away from humor that might be considered offensive to anyone.

Think of the interview as a two-way information gathering meeting. Your goal is to find out as much about their department and institution as they want to find out about you. So, ask questions like: (a) when was the last time someone was denied tenure in the department? (b) how many of the last 5 hires are still in the department? (c) Is there departmental funding to attend conference? Etc. In general, questions that require a quantitative answer are better than those that ask for opinions or qualitative answers. Ask about how the teaching assignments are made, if there are opportunities to create new courses, if undergrads get involved in research, how many graduate students there are, what is expected of a junior faculty during the first 2-3 years, etc.

When you talk to the Dean you can ask questions about the college. You can ask what the average pay raises have been the last 5 years, what opportunities there are on campus for professional development (teaching and research) or for collaborations across schools/departments. Ask about the availability of internal funding opportunities for junior faculty and any faculty mentoring systems in place. Try to get an idea of how much support you can expect from the college.

Before you return home, ask the Chair of the department (or the hiring committee) when they expect to make decisions about the offer. This way you will have an idea about their timeline.

After the interview.

Send a thank you email to your host and to the faculty members that met with you individually. You don't have to write to the Dean. If during a meeting you offered to send prints of papers or other material, follow up right away. It is important to come across as responsible. Don't bombard people with emails after that. If you happen to get an offer from another institution but you prefer University X (where you interviewed but haven't heard back), do send an email explaining that you would really love to get an offer from them and that you have only limited time to answer the offer you have (you do not have to disclose who made the offer).

Once you receive an offer, you will have time to discuss the terms of the offer and amendments to it. Stay tuned for a post in late January on negotiating faculty positions!