

How to Survive an Academic Job Interview

By Clyde Freeman Herreid and Robert J. Full

Editor's Note: Career development is an important issue, and there are aspects of finding the right position that are particular to science faculty. Although the following article does not follow the usual format and subject of submissions to our Point of View column, we have chosen to publish this as a service to our readership. It is adapted from a similar article that was published on the website of the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology (www.scib.org/careers).



Thousands of PhDs are abruptly thrust into the academic marketplace each year. Most are ill-prepared for the experience: They have never written a curriculum vitae or resume, they do not know how to give a seminar, they are not prepared to ask intelligent questions during an interview, and they do not know what to look for in a job. They have spent perhaps five years in graduate school and another couple in postdoctoral training aiming for this moment—learning research and teaching skills—yet they have no earthly idea how to get employed. The faculty has not prepared them for this critical step; this benign neglect is a holdover from the days when academic appointments were plentiful or from a time when job-grubbing details were considered beneath the dignity of professionals. The time is past for such ennui.

To offset some of the uncertainty and pain of the job interview, a

process that usually involves one or two days and offers innumerable occasions to say and do regrettable things, we offer a checklist of questions to ask. Some queries are more appropriate for the chairperson and other administrators (if you get an opportunity to see them); others are better asked of faculty or students. Of course, many questions will be answered without you openly posing them at all; information will naturally flow as you linger over a coffee or beer. Other information can be gathered before going on the interview as you browse through the website of the prospective school, or ask your acquaintances about the place, or look up the publications of your potential colleagues. However, let us emphasize this point—many questions should be asked of more than one person. People do not always have the same perspective. A chairperson may think everything is fine (or the chairperson will not elaborate

on a problem, especially if he or she wants to sell you on the department). A faculty member, on the other hand, may think the place is in turmoil, and a student may think the department is the pits. Consequently, talk to as many people as possible, even though this is an exhausting process.

With this checklist in hand or tucked away in a folder, you should get most of the major information you need to make an intelligent decision. You should be able to give the impression that you are an informed, bright candidate, rather than a naive neophyte—and you can always keep the conversation flowing even in the most tension-laden situation by just throwing out another question. As the questions are answered, check them off, so as not to omit any vital concerns. Do not hesitate to make copious notes during the interview; with the barrage of facts and figures, notes will prove invaluable during later reflection.

We have divided the checklist under three headings that seem reasonable: General Information, Teaching, and Research. The purpose of most questions is evident, but not all are of equal importance. Some are vital to a decision, others are merely for information. Before turning to the checklist, some general comments are useful.

Questions on department organization are vital, although most young job candidates tend to ignore this area entirely. The basic thrust of your discrete inquiries should be to see if the faculty trusts the chairperson and upper administration. Find out if he or she is a tyrant. Is he or she honest? Weak? Even-handed? Is the department stable or chaotic with warring factions? The answers to such questions will usually determine the psychological health of the department and your chance for development. Do not underestimate the power of a chaotic department or a despotic chairperson to thwart your career.

Questions on retirement plans and health insurance seem a nuisance to individuals seeking their first job. These topics should not be neglected, as a couple of illustrations should make clear. If you plan to start a family, most health plans will take care of the maternity costs, but only if you are a member of the plan some months before the pregnancy begins. Check on this timing or it can cost you thousands of dollars. Also be aware of the fact that most schools remove part of each paycheck and set that aside for your retirement program. Hence, your annual take-home pay will be several hundred dollars less than you might expect based upon the salary you will be quoted. Moreover, different schools vary greatly in their contribution to the benefits package. Some institutions chip in benefit funds to social security, health, and retire-

ment, which is equivalent to many thousands of extra dollars above their quoted salary. This should be enough to prompt you to check out the benefits package.

On the question of salary: Before your interview, you should get a good idea about the salaries of academicians nationally. Such information is available from the back issues of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Also ask people at your home institution about starting salaries. If you have this information, you will be better able to respond to a possible salary offer and appreciate what it means compared with the cost of living in the town. Some schools have excellent salaries, but the cost of living is terrifically high. Try to talk to other newly hired people at the interview site and find out in general terms if they are happy with the salary. Inquire if the school publishes a list of the salaries of their faculty; most state schools must do so. Also find out if summer school teaching would be available for additional money and if you can supplement your salary from summer grant funds.

The teaching questions are designed to help you avoid ending up with a monstrous teaching load. Find out what a normal load is: Don't listen only to what the administrators and faculty say, but find out what actually happens. Simply ask faculty members what they are teaching each semester. Find out if they keep up a research program with this load. (Again, don't take their word for it. Look at past and present course schedules online. Ask about their research and facilities. Look and see whether their lab is active. Ask for reprints of their latest papers. This should give you the answer.) Check with the other assistant professors in the department and see what their teaching loads are. Answers to such questions will allow

you to avoid being overloaded. It is not uncommon to assign new faculty the heaviest teaching schedules. This can be highly detrimental to any research plans and can virtually wipe out your chances for promotion. Similarly, beware of heavy committee assignments; they can kill you. In a university setting with an emphasis on research, no one (and we mean *no one*) will ever take your heavy teaching or committee commitments into account when promotion time comes around and you have an inadequate publication record to show.

In many schools, especially those that call themselves universities, research is the name of the game. Here, your entire survival in the promotion and tenure race is dependent upon your skill in getting grants, conducting research, and publicizing your findings in journals and meetings. If you are going to play in these leagues, you had better know about the written and unwritten rules at your school. The checklist should help you get the answers. You must pay particular attention to recent tenure and promotion decisions and learn why people managed or failed to make it. When you are interviewed, find out if the school can provide you with the time, space, and start-up money to run your operation immediately. Extract firm commitments from the chairperson or dean. Do not be misled by vague promises. You must find out how serious your prospective school is about helping you develop a research program.

Establish if faculty members with active research programs have lower teaching loads than those without such programs. If such differential teaching loads do not exist as a department policy, you can be fairly sure that the institution is not dedicated to promoting research but considers it an extra. Find out if there are productive

young research investigators surviving on the faculty. If not, again this is a sign that the institution is not serious about research. Finally, if the department asks you to teach two or more lecture courses per semester, they are not an institution with research as a major goal, regardless of what they say. So if research is important to you, take a hard look at the evidence.

Throughout the interview process, you and the interviewers, especially the chairperson and search committee, will be stepping through a delicate ballet of negotiations. They will be sizing you up and asking about your needs, and you will be checking them out. Do not be too eager but be prepared. Bring to the interview a list of major research equipment that you need and the approximate costs. Any chairperson interested in research will get around to asking you about your requirements, and it is at this moment that you should bring out your list. Also, have your space requirements in mind with an estimate of square footage for lab space. Be sure and ask to see the lab space set aside for the new person. It may not really exist as they describe it. During the interview process, perhaps at the end of your visit, the chairperson will probably mention a salary range for new faculty. Realize there may not be a great deal of room for negotiation on assistant professor salaries. Where you stand will depend upon your experience and your skill at making them want you. The optimum position from which to negotiate is a situation in which you do not need the job or when you are being seriously courted by another institution. If the latter situation exists, be certain and casually mention that you have just returned from another interview. If you have heard a better salary quoted for other schools, casually mention this to the chairperson. By all means,

always indicate if you are involved in negotiations with another school if such is the case.

Be honest in your statements at all times. Be clear about your requirements and do not underestimate them. Remember this vital point about negotiations: You will never be in a better position to negotiate for time, space, and money than before you are hired (assuming the school wants you). You will not have the same leverage once they have you signed. Also, once they have offered you a position, get everything down in writing. Ask for written clarification of points. If you have trouble getting certain points clarified, write a letter to the chairperson or dean (depending on whom you are dealing with) that explains your understanding of the offer and ask them if it is correct. Remember, keep all correspondence for future reference. Do not reject any other job offer until you have clarified matters with your first choice. Things may not look as good as they seem at first glance.

This interview process is not all one-sided. You hosts will want to ask you questions. Many of these are predictable. They will surely ask you about your research. That should be no problem. But you need to be prepared for questions about your future plans, where you are headed in the grand scheme of things, your probable grant applications, what you want to teach, and how you plan to involve graduate and undergraduate students. And don't be surprised if you are asked, "Would you come here if you were offered the job?" Be cautious here. Clearly, you can answer that there are many very attractive features of the college or university and that you would have to see what their offer might entail. Also, say that you appreciate their taking the time to point out the many strengths of

the institution, but that you will have to weigh any offer with your other possibilities. (They may press you for information on these, and you need to be prepared to either be vague or straightforward in your answers.) If anyone asks any questions that are out of the ordinary, there is nothing wrong with saying that you don't know the answer and that you need to have time to give it more thought.

Finally, if you are so unfortunate as to not get the job you want, remember this—sometime virtually everyone gets rejected. Although it bruises the ego, one should not consider such apparent failure a serious blemish; we know of one excellent individual who was rejected by perhaps 30 schools before being suddenly hired without serious competition at an outstanding school exactly suited for his talents. From the candidate's viewpoint, the most frustrating thing about most rejections is that one seldom knows the reason. Search committees often have unstated, unvoiced, and even unrealized objectives as they screen candidates' credentials. Their choices, though not capricious, can be erratic and frequently unpredictable, depending upon subjective likes and dislikes. Having served on many search committees, we can only say that the faculty often does not know exactly why they make certain choices, either.

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ACADEMIC INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

University and department organization

1. How is the university organized? What are the major units? Who are the administrators of the school and what are their responsibilities? Who reports to whom? (i.e., What does the organizational flow chart look like?)
2. What types of programs are available for new faculty? Formal mentoring? Orientation? Handbook of policies and guidelines? A teaching and learning center?
3. What is the size of the department and how is it organized? Is it a dictatorial or democratic system of government? How are decisions made? How is the chairperson determined? How long is the term of office?
4. What are the permanent committees in the department? How important are they to the function of the department? When they make decisions, does the chairperson overrule them?
5. How often are departmental meetings held? Are decisions made in departmental meetings, that is, are votes taken? Are students involved in department decisions?
6. Are there departmental bylaws or procedural guidelines?
7. Is there an annual report I may have? (Recent changes in departmental policy and trends are listed here.) Where is the department going in the next 5 to 10 years? Is the department growing or shrinking? What are the future hiring plans?
8. Are there recent reports conducted by outside reviewers evaluating the university and department? (If so, get them. They are relatively unbiased and loaded with information.)

Criteria for promotion and tenure

1. What are the printed and unspoken criteria for promotion and tenure? That is, what is the relative importance of teaching, research, and service?
2. What is the average time in each academic rank? That is, how long is it before assistant professors are reviewed for promotion and tenure?
3. Are there annual reviews before tenure? What are the steps of the tenure and review process? Who decides what is appropriate or sufficient?
4. Approximately what percentage of new faculty receives tenure? What are the reasons for failure? Is there a quota system in place for the numbers of full, associate, and assistant professors?

Salary and benefits

1. What is the proposed salary? How is it paid: Weekly? Biweekly? Over 10 or 12 months?
2. Can grants be used to supplement salary, especially in summer?
3. What is the salary scale for assistant professors? Associate professors? Full professors?
4. Are individual salary figures published? Where?
5. What type of retirement program is there (TIAA-CREF or ...)? What percentage of the salary goes to retirement? What does the school contribute?
6. What type of health program exists? What are the costs and benefits? Where can I get information?
7. Is the school unionized? If so, what role does the union play in the university? Is there a union handbook? How strong is the union? What are the union dues?

8. Are moving costs to the school covered?
9. Are sabbaticals available? Are they automatic? What is the application process? Do benefits continue?
10. Are there tuition benefits for family members? Are there resources available to assist spouses find jobs? Are there mortgage assistance programs?
11. What are the family leave policies? Maternity leave coverage? Day care?

Living accommodations

1. Is housing plentiful or is there a shortage in this area?
2. Where do faculty members live? Can I see a typical faculty house?
3. How do faculty members get to work? Walk? Car? Bicycle? Subway? Bus? How's parking?
4. How much should I expect to pay to rent or buy a house? (Ads in local newspapers and on websites will help answer this question).
5. What is the cost of living? (Find out costs of standard items such as bread, milk, gas.)
6. How good are the elementary and secondary schools and day care centers? Where are they? How much do they cost?
7. What is the crime rate? Where are the high crime rate areas?
8. What are the major cultural events inside and outside of the university? Is there opera? Ballet? Orchestra? Theater?
9. What outdoor sports exist? Hunting? Tennis? Fishing? Skiing? Boating?

Teaching

General questions

1. How many undergraduates are presently in the department? Are their numbers increasing, decreasing, or stable?
2. What are the university and departmental requirements for majors? Nonmajors? (The university website will help answer the questions.)
3. Is the school on a quarter or semester system?
4. What kind of undergraduates come to this school and department? That is, what is their cultural and educational background? How does the undergraduate (and graduate) advising work?
5. Where do the undergraduate students go after graduation? Medical school? Graduate school? Industry?
6. What are the teaching facilities like? Lecture halls? Laboratories? How big are the classes? Are teaching loads determined by the number of students in a class? Do most faculty lecture or do they use active learning strategies?
7. Are student computer labs and smart classrooms available? Software? Support staff?
8. How wired is this campus? Are the classrooms and dorms wireless?
9. What type of electronic course management system is used? Is it integrated with enrollment and grading?
10. How good are the libraries on campus? Are they centralized or are there branches located around campus? Open or closed stacks? What is the policy for placing books on reserve? Interlibrary loans? Photocopying articles? How many e-journals are accessible?
11. How large is the office staff? What are their roles with respect to undergraduate education?

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12. What is the importance of teaching in promotion and tenure cases?
13. Is summer school teaching available for additional income?

Specific questions

1. Which courses do I teach each semester or quarter? Will I have a relatively free hand in organizing the courses? Will I have an opportunity to design a new course?
2. How many lectures and labs will be involved in my course and for which days of the week are they scheduled?
3. What are the course descriptions for my courses? Who taught the courses previously? Are there course outlines from the past? Which books were used? How soon must books be ordered? Were readers used?
4. What types of exams have been given? How many each semester? Who grades tests? What are the general grading guidelines?
5. What types of students will I teach? Majors? Nonmajors? Premeds? Paraprofessionals?
6. How do my courses fit in the overall curriculum? Are my courses required? Are there prerequisites?
7. How many students will be in each class? Am I involved in a team-taught course? If so, how are decisions about textbooks, lab manuals, exams, and course organization made?
8. Who teaches similar or complementary courses?
9. Can my course commitment change? Who determines this? By what procedure is a change made?
10. What is the teaching load of other faculty? How does mine compare?

Teaching laboratories

1. Are there labs associated with my courses? What is my role in these labs? Am I personally involved in teaching labs and organizing them, or is another staff member in charge?
2. How many labs occur per week and what is their duration?
3. Is there a lab manual or are previous lab exercises in existence?
4. How many support staff are committed to the lab? Are there lab preparators? Graduate or undergraduate teaching assistants? (Talk to these people if at all possible.) How are these people trained?
5. Who sets up the lab physically? Who is in charge of setup and cleanup?
6. How much supply and equipment money is budgeted for the labs? How soon must the budget be prepared and supplies ordered?
7. How do I get new equipment or repair old? How much technical support is available?
8. What kind of laboratory teaching space, supply rooms, stockrooms, animal quarters, and equipment already exist?
9. What are the computer facilities for teaching inside and outside of the department? What are the future plans for computer use expansion?

Research and graduate study

General questions

1. What types of research are going on in the department?
2. What are the department's research strengths and weaknesses?
3. Is there a plan of research development in the department? What are hiring plans for the future?
4. Are there animal rooms? Greenhouse facilities? Instrument rooms? Stock rooms? Environmental chambers?
5. What types of major shared equipment already exist in the department? How extensive is their current use? Are high-powered microscopy or other facilities available? How busy is their staff? Who pays for their use?
6. How large is the office staff and what are their roles? How many staff members assist in grant submission, graduate admissions, post doc hiring, and facilities management?
7. Is there a research office on campus to help faculty write and develop grants?
8. Who handles grant bookkeeping? How rapidly are purchase orders handled and what is the general process?
9. Who pays for internet connections, photocopying, phone calls, reprints, and page charges?
10. Is there a machinery and electrical shop on campus? How good are they? How long does it take to get work finished? Is there a charge?
11. What are the libraries like? Are the key e-journals for your research accessible? Are all the major search engines available? If you want a new book or journal, will they order it? What is the library photocopy and interlibrary loan service like? Who pays?
12. What type of computer facilities exist on campus for research use? High-speed Ethernet? Wifi? Who pays?
13. Are there different teaching loads for faculty doing research?
14. What is the research productivity of other members of the department? (Outside reviews of the department should have this information.)
15. How important is research in determining tenure and promotion?
16. Do interdisciplinary programs for research and graduate study exist?
17. Is outside grant support essential for promotion and tenure? How much?
18. Is there a graduate program? Masters only? PhD?
19. How many graduate students and postdoctoral fellows are in the department? What are their qualifications? What are their areas of interest? Do graduate students with teaching assistantships have time to do their own research?
20. Why do graduate students come to this school? Where do they come from?
21. What are the graduate program and requirements like?
22. How are graduate students supported? Is summer support available? Are there training grants? Do they get NSF and NIH fellowships?
23. How do graduate students select research advisors? Do incoming students do rotations?
24. Are undergraduates used in the laboratories as research assistants? If so, are they paid or do they work for course credit? Are work study students available?

25. Do all undergraduate majors do research and/or write theses?

Specific questions

1. How much research am I expected to perform? Can I buy out of teaching obligations?
2. Do I have a research lab? How large is it, and what does it look like?
3. Is the size of my lab set for all time, or is there a chance for expansion or construction? How and by whom is the space allocated?
4. If I need animals, who pays for animal care? Are there animal caretakers?
5. How much setup money do I get? Will someone advise me on what equipment is already available to avoid duplication and ensure that my money will go as far as possible? Can I spread my money for setup across two or three years?
6. Is there annual or occasional university or department financial support for research and supplies?
7. Are there local institutional grant funds available? How large are these? What are the criteria for selection? Are new people more likely to get these? How often can these be obtained? When are the deadlines?

8. Is there department or university money for meetings and trips for faculty and students? How much can be awarded? How frequently? What are the criteria for selection?
9. Who is on campus or nearby with whom I might collaborate? What kind of equipment do they have that I might borrow? Is there a general willingness to share equipment, especially those items that I need to borrow initially?
10. Will my teaching commitments give me sufficient time to do research?
11. Is this a new position? If not, why did the previous incumbent leave? Will his or her equipment be left for my use in the lab or has it been promised to others? (i.e., is "What I see, what I'll get?")

Service

1. What service expectations are there?
2. What are the "standing" department committees?
3. What are the service responsibilities at the department, university, community, and the national levels?
4. How does undergraduate and graduate advising work? What would my responsibilities be?

Final question

How soon can I expect to hear a decision about my appointment?

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- Gather peer-tested resources
- Share your know-how with others
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