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The Academic Interview/Marathon

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Introduction

The academic interview is a crucial part of the job application process, and typically serves as job candidates' first in-person interaction with their prospective employer and colleagues. Throughout the process, employers will evaluate candidates on metrics often difficult to discern through applications or virtual interviews. Interviewers take this opportunity to judge a candidate's skills and fit in their department, both in terms of teaching and research, as well as their ability to work well with potential colleagues and administrators. Similarly, this is an important chance for candidates to evaluate the match between the institution, position, and their own expectations. This chapter will use the style of a discussion between junior and senior faculty to help the reader better understand a typical interview process.

Chris is a fifth year assistant professor of political science. He is pretty new to the job application process, and his perspective is one of junior faculty and more recent job candidates. *Michelle*, Department Head and Professor, has served as a department chair at three very different kinds of universities, as a Dean of Arts and Sciences, and has coordinated a lot of faculty hiring over the last 30 years. So, her perspective may be a bit different than *Chris*'s, but the two hope to demystify this process a bit.

Pre-Interview

Preparation

Chris: Before I went to a job interview, I engaged in some thorough preparation rituals. Among those were mock interviews and job talks—some hosted by my institution, and others on my own—testing the timing of my presentations, prepping for difficult questions I might be asked, and practicing maintaining a professional and confident tone throughout the process. It definitely helped practicing in front of a real audience. I was hit by some good critiques and questions by my advisor and fellow grad students and appreciated having confident responses prepared. What sort of preparation do you recommend, *Michelle*, and have you had some interviewees that clearly did not prepare adequately for their interview?

Michelle: My primary advice is to study the website and investigate the department and the institution thoroughly. Review the advertisement and think carefully about how you contribute to their vision of an ideal candidate. I have met candidates who had confused us with another institution, thought they could teach whatever they wanted, or clearly communicated that we would be so fortunate to have them that they did not need to impress us. None of these candidates were successful.

Chris: I understand that different institutions have different expectations for their faculty, and not

just in terms of teaching versus research. R1 institutions have higher research-related expectations compared to more teaching-oriented institutions, and it's important for applicants to understand and prepare for this. An R1 (research) institution will be much more interested in a job talk that outlines plans for future research, and makes clear the candidate's statistical training and ability to publish. A teaching institution (e.g., a small liberal arts college) will be judging an interviewee's presentation skills more thoroughly, as well as interactions with students. Since I interviewed at an institution that expected a good split of teaching and research credentials, balancing both facets was key, and I made sure that my research talk included elements that demonstrated my teaching effectiveness. See also chapters 36-41 in this volume for more specific insights into hiring at different types of institutions.

Michelle: If a campus is mission-driven—such as a religious institution, an historically black college or university (HBCU), or tribal-serving institution—and that mission is referenced in the ad, it is part of that campus' DNA and you must take it seriously. Think about your ability to contribute to that mission and how comfortable you would be at a campus where that is part of everything they do. I had candidates who interviewed at the HBCU where I taught who had not thought about what it meant to be in an Afro-centric program, focusing on primarily African-American students.

Virtual Interview

Chris: Let us not forget that for most prospective employees, the first step and first interaction with their future employer is not on campus, but over the phone or on Zoom. Typically, the committee conducts virtual interviews of a smaller pool of applicants, asking them a slate of questions in order to determine who is invited to campus. Any of the above regarding attire, confidence, and attitude applies, even without an in-person interaction. I treated my phone interview as seriously as the campus visit itself, and similarly prepped some questions to ask the interviewers as well. Compared to the campus visit though, it was relatively short and most of the questions were pretty surface level. It seemed as though the interviewers were more concerned with checking that I was a serious candidate, had an agreeable personality, and my credentials matched my application. They also asked a few clarification questions on some things that were vague or unclear in the application.

Michelle: The virtual interview can seem rote because committees are replicating the same questions every interview in order to control the potential of implicit bias, so you need to be specific in answering but not excessive, ensuring all questions are covered and there is time to ask your own questions. At teaching-focused institutions, it is always safe to ask the committee to talk about their perception of their student body, at research institutions ask about resources for new faculty, and at hybrid institutions you can ask both questions. Have some charisma—this is a bit of a performance. If you do not seem excited to be there, the committee will ask themselves why they should keep you in the pool. If asked to a campus interview, you should contact whoever invited you to inquire about the types of presentations you will make, forms of technology available, and who constitutes the audiences. While you should receive an itinerary beforehand, departments often do not clearly share their expectations with the candidates. Even if they promise technology is available, it does not always work, so have a plan B (handouts, etc). Candidates who react with grace to the unexpected and recover are viewed very favorably. If you have dietary parameters and no one asks you ahead of time about these needs, contact the itinerary coordinator so that they are aware of your needs as they plan your visit.

Campus Interview

Purpose

Chris: Once all your preparation is complete, it is time for the on-campus interview. The exact process and specifics may vary by institution, but typically the on-campus interview involves some social dinners, a teaching and/or research presentation, and some interviews or meetings with administrators and faculty. My graduate program made a point of something that might be unclear to others preparing to leave grad school—that it is important for the interviewee to ask questions of their prospective employers, not just the other way around. I had a list of questions prepared, with some already answered

based on my research, but that I wanted to ask anyway. They included questions regarding teaching load, research and service expectations, travel funding or allowance, expectations for tenure, and other quality of life questions about living in the area. I always thought it important to ask some things, even if your own research or convention made the answer rather obvious, if only to ensure you get a clear response and have clear expectations for the job.

Michelle: I agree, asking questions signals your seriousness regarding the position. I encourage candidates to ask the same questions of the different people you interact with so you can gauge if you are receiving similar or very different answers. One such question might be: what is the reputation of the department on campus and in the community? Another important question that can result in different answers is: what is expected for tenure and/or promotion?

Chris: Obviously, the goal of the on-campus interview as a candidate is to convince the institution to hire you. However, what are the goals of the on-campus interview from the employers' perspective?

Michelle: One of the major goals is to gain a sense of how you will engage in the life of the department and assess your collegiality. For tenure-track jobs, the campus interview is like one blind date before you become engaged to be married. So, the faculty are asking will you “wear well” as a colleague and contribute to their needs longitudinally. Meals are a great way to get to know candidates in an informal setting and for candidates to gain a sense of the department's personality and environment. See meals as part of the interview and bring your “A” game. Everything you do and say will most likely be communicated to the larger department. I often have untenured faculty take out the candidate for the first meal in order to make it less stressful and gain a better sense of what the candidate is like in more informal circumstances. I have seen candidates be so relaxed with junior faculty that they forget these colleagues are part of the hiring committee—do not do that.

Chris: All of the above should be on the candidate's minds, and also, they should be evaluating the fit of the institution and its faculty as well! The meals and social interactions should be two-way, and the candidate should be asking themselves if they feel comfortable in that environment. If it is a tenure track job, in particular, this could be their working environment for 5+ years! I echo your call to remain professional and err on the side of formality—it is far more likely to be a problem if a candidate is too casual, rather than too formal.

Campus Norms

Chris: Another important thing to address—having the proper attire. While subtle, arriving to an interview dressed appropriately is crucial, as failure to do so can send a signal that the interviewee either does not take the job seriously, or will not fit in with their peers. It is always better to be a bit too formal than a bit too casual, especially at institutions that have more of a “conservative” culture when it comes to attire and professionalization. It is advisable to wear formal attire, including suits and jackets. I have heard stories from senior colleagues about interviewees who arrived in sandals and shorts, or other informal attire, and it sank their job prospects.

Michelle: Every campus and department has its own norms and culture; follow the lead of the department in terms of address. If you are referred to by a title, refer to everyone else by their title, but if you are called by your first name, reciprocate with others—you are there to be a colleague, not a student (see chapter 9 in this volume for more about titling). Dress more professionally than you probably would on a daily basis, realizing that some campuses—like HBCUs—are generally more formal in dress and address all the time.

Chris: It can be difficult as a junior faculty or ABD graduate student to address your colleagues by first name. I typically stayed on the side of caution by referring to my interviewers by title first unless otherwise corrected. Colleagues are not the only ones we need to think about in terms of professional interaction—what about students and administrative assistants or staff?

Michelle: I have found that one of the most telling indicators of what kind of colleague a person will be is in how they treat those they perceive as having little power. To that end, I ask the administrative assistant about their experience in working with each candidate—someone who treats the admin rudely or dismissively will not get the offer. You might be surprised how frequently this occurs. I know how candidates talk to me and treat me is not indicative of how they treat others they perceive to be

“less important.” First of all, as political scientists we should understand that the admin has tremendous implementation power in the department. Second, if someone is rude to the admin how will they treat our students? Alumni? Prospective students? Do not yell or snap at the admin or forget to thank them; they just want to help you.

Chris: I cannot agree more. Administrative assistants are vital to the job process and crucial to administrators and departments alike—treating them poorly is a very easy way to draw the ire of an entire department and impede the entire process. How quickly people forget who is handling the paperwork, entering the data, and otherwise helping interface between departments, colleges, and colleagues! That, and it’s the basic human decency anyone should expect—and I certainly would not want to work with or under anyone who acts that way.

Engaging Students

Chris: While I have been more insulated from that aspect of job interviewee missteps, the one I have encountered more frequently is disastrous interactions with undergraduate and graduate students. Every institution cares deeply about its students, and while teaching may be more or less central to the candidates’ desired position, positive interaction with students is vital. While a graduate student, we have had multiple job candidates with impressive resumes either bore the students with their lecture or outright demean or condescend to them. These complaints were forwarded to the hiring committee and almost certainly doomed their application, which was otherwise quite strong. At institutions where faculty are expected to mentor graduate students and serve as their advisors, demonstrating not just teaching effectiveness but the ability to positively interact with graduate students is essential.

Michelle: At institutions that define themselves as student-centric, the meetings with students—graduate and undergraduate—can make or break an interview. The students who participate in these interviews are often those with the strongest ties to the department and the closest relationships to the faculty. Once, we did not hire a candidate because the students felt he did not take them seriously and instead talked to them like peers. Show students you like them and are excited to teach them, listen and be accessible, and be the mentor to them you wished you had as a graduate or undergraduate student. Again, this is part of the interview and anything you say will go back to the committee. Please realize that the department cannot control what students say in an interview and that student perspectives are just that.

Job Talk

Michelle: I do want to say a few words about the job talk, as this is often very stressful for the candidate and in my experience very relevant for the decision of the department. Think about the nature of the institution as you design your talk. A teaching talk that is pure lecture with no student engagement may not send the right message; but a talk that is all small group work where faculty do not see your ability to engage students does not sell you sufficiently. Most graduate students find the research talk the easiest, but remember you are presenting your research to people from multiple subfields so you are giving this talk for generalists, not your committee. The hardest talk is the hybrid, where you present your research to undergraduates. In this situation, you want to demonstrate you can clearly communicate the significance and purpose of your research to a very elementary audience. Do not condescend to undergraduates. Instead, attempt to bring their knowledge into play in your presentations (theories, definitions of basic terms, key literature, etc).

Chris: My experience with the job talk was that it seemed to be a test by the faculty of the ability to present myself and ideas clearly, and their first real experience with me in a professional environment. I have attended other job talks where a candidate appeared excellent on paper but was not particularly effective at communicating their ideas—which reflects poorly on both their research skills, as well as their future teaching abilities. The job talk is the place to distinguish oneself from other equally qualified candidates, by demonstrating your value.

Michelle: There is a bit of a dance that is done at the interview. We want to sell our community, our

campus, and our department in a way that meets your needs, but we are also (or should be) very aware of all the questions we cannot ask to learn what your needs may be (a partner's employment, children, religion, need for a welcoming community). So, sometimes departments try to anticipate your needs and guess wrong, or share personal things in the hope you will share as well. Sometimes these conversations are done with good intentions and sometimes not. If inappropriate questions are raised I would encourage you to alert the department. If it is the department head who is the offender, you can let the search chair know. If you directly report to the Dean or Human Resources, most likely that job will not be offered. You have some choices to make when inappropriate comments are made: you can alert people during the interview (see above); you can wait until the decision is made and then contact human resources; or you can do nothing. These are complicated decisions. If a comment is made in a public setting, watch how the others in the room respond—are they embarrassed? Act as if they expect this individual to behave this way? Surprised? Do they challenge him? Or are others oblivious to the problematic nature of the comment or question? The response of others in the room may help you decide how to navigate the complaint. In my experience, when inappropriate questions are asked, I used humor to indicate that I recognized the question was inappropriate and so I would not answer. After the interview, I evaluated the event to see how it impacted my relationship to the institution (to report or not report).

After the Interview

Chris: Once the interview is completed, and job candidates return home, they often consider the process complete and simply wait idly by for a response from the institution. Is that wise?

Thank You Notes

Michelle: I think the first thing a candidate should do upon returning home is write a thank you note to the people they have met. A note a few days after your visit is an excellent opportunity to remind the committee why they liked you and to stand out from the other candidates. You could send an email to everyone you met (they are all listed on your itinerary) or mail a handwritten note to the entire department. In your missive, discuss what you discovered in the interview about the department or university and why you are still excited by the position. This leaves a very positive impression with the department.

Decision-Making Process

Chris: Another source of anxiety for many candidates, myself included, is the waiting period following an interview. I know from experience that this can be lengthy through no fault of the institution. Even when my institution interviewed only one candidate, it took a week to gather the faculty and debate a final decision on whether to make an offer, then another week to get the necessary paperwork and administrative things together.

Michelle: The time after the interview can be nerve-racking in that you expect a decision to be made immediately after the last candidate leaves. However, there are reference calls to make, feedback to collect from all of the participants in the interview, meetings to schedule with the search committee, and a department chair, dean, and maybe a provost to be convinced of the right decision. And so much documentation to file with the Office of Equity and Inclusion and Human Resources. This process can take much longer than you expect. So, no news, may simply be the complicated timetable of resolving these decisions. Once permission is given to make an offer, a phone call will be made to see if the preferred candidate is still interested. While candidates often want the offer in writing, institutions may not allow written offers until the candidate demonstrates that they are still interested.

Negotiating

Chris: While the offer is a moment of elation for many candidates, it also raises one last important hurdle—negotiations. I learned I was the only candidate to whom an offer was made, and likely missed out on a chance to get a slightly higher salary.

Michelle: Negotiating an offer can be tricky and this varies greatly from institutions. This is where your graduate faculty may be less helpful unless you are navigating an offer from an R1 institution. Be sure to research as best you can to obtain a sense of the salary range at the institution to which you are applying. Some institutions may be able to offer start-up funding, guarantee a teaching release the first semester or year, or have pre-tenure sabbaticals on offer. For other institutions, none of these things are possible and it would be tone-deaf to demand them. Your discussions with junior faculty during the campus interview may help you determine what are realistic asks. This is also the time to discuss spousal hiring, which is harder for smaller campuses to accommodate than larger. See chapter 48 in this volume for more on navigating spousal hires.

Chris: What are your thoughts on deferring a decision, and should candidates be open about their competing offers and ask for more time, or use it as leverage?

Michelle: Yes, if you are only asking for an additional week, I think that is fair to ask. If you have not had the other campus interview yet or it is several weeks away, you would have to truly be the only competitive candidate for a department to be able to wait that long. This is a decent time to be transparent and see what the response might be—but if you accept the position, you need to withdraw from the other search. Political science is a smaller discipline. You do not want to get a reputation for going back on your contracts and word. (For more advice on negotiation, see chapter 46 in this volume.)

Chris: Thank you so much Michelle! It's been fascinating to hear about the interview process from someone with such extensive experience on the hiring side! This definitely helped clear up some misconceptions on my part about the process, and hopefully will help guide job candidates at every stage of the process to a more professional and effective interview!

Michelle: The interview process is difficult especially when the power resides in the hiring party and if the candidate feels as if they have to accept any job that is offered. You combine the many different personalities that we have in academic departments and the situation can be stressful. The interview process not only tells the department about the candidate, but the candidate can learn a great deal about the department in the process as well. Listen to what you learn, so you can make the decision that results in the best outcome for you and your long-term career.