

The campus interview

I've compiled this list after my experiences interviewing at five different universities as well as observing recent job searches in my own department. I have attempted here to give more specific and useful advice than I have found in the typical "how to interview for academic jobs" resource. I welcome suggestions of other things you thought were important, or things that I have listed here that you disagree with. If anyone has experience with undergrad-only or teaching-centered universities, or industry or government positions, please add your comments and suggestions to make this guide more widely relevant.

The goal of the interview is to convince the department (not just the search committee) that you are 1) serious about the job and 2) would be a good fit for the department.

Criteria for "a good fit" (not necessarily in order of importance):

- Personally compatible: you are not psychopathic, sociopathic, terminally shy or awkward and can hold a conversation and have things in common with the other faculty members.
- Intellectually compatible: you do research that is interesting to the faculty, are interested in the research of the faculty and can hold a meaningful discussion about their research
- Collaboratively compatible: you have sufficient areas of overlap that allow a real possibility of collaborating on projects.

An additional goal of the interview may be to establish that you are 1) serious about teaching and 2) can do it effectively.

Added perks: enthusiasm, creativity, confidence, maturity (this is especially important), sense of humor.

Avoid seeming arrogant, disinterested, immature (also includes naïve and green, referring to both emotional and professional immaturity), unprepared, disorganized, sloppy.

If you are invited to interview at a place you don't think you're interested in based on the website, type of institution, or location, go anyway. You may be surprised, and it's great practice. If you know you probably wouldn't want to be at, say, a high-powered research university, a teaching university, or an undergrad-only institution, you shouldn't be applying to these places. Only apply to places where you would actually be willing to interview.

Before the interview

Researching the department and university

- Look up what everyone in the department does for their research, and when their last publication was on Web of Science or PubMed. This will tell you if their research program is still productive. If possible, look up what they teach and note the number of courses. Bring a cheat sheet in a notebook with faculty's names, what they do, and the date of their last publication. That way, if there are unexpected additions to your schedule, you won't look like an ass for not knowing what they work on (or even if they're still productive).
- Think ahead of time about who you could collaborate with and explicit ways your research programs overlap.
- If you're not prompted for requests to meet with certain people, contact the search chair a couple weeks before the visit with suggestions of people to include on your schedule.
- If possible, you should also request to meet with someone from the Office of Sponsored Research, or the equivalent that assists faculty with preparing and submitting grants.
- If possible, you should also request to meet with whoever in the department directs the grad program.
- Check the courses offered and identify gaps that you could fill. Have a list of courses you can rattle off if you are asked "What courses do you think you would want to teach?"
- Find out how many grads and undergrads are at the university, as well as postdocs.

Dressing

- Dress smart. A nice suit is a good investment.
- Wear nice but comfortable shoes, as you may be walking all over campus to talk to people and administrators.

Traveling

- Bring plenty of snacks (Clif bars, fruit, etc.) in case you're on your own for a meal or get stuck in an airport with nothing good to eat.
- If you're a caffeine junkie, stock up on coffee in the morning. Drink a cup on your own, if possible, and fill a travel mug with a second cup to keep you going later in the day. It will be a long, long day.
- If you need daily or almost-daily exercise, get up early and go for a run, or do it the evening before. Many hotels will have a workout room, so ask the search chair or office administrator where you're staying and look it up online or give them a call so you can pack accordingly.
- Wake up early so you have time to relax and get prepared without feeling rushed. Three hours is good, depending on how much time you need to get ready in the morning.

During

Generally speaking

- From the moment you are picked up at the hotel to the moment you are dropped off at the hotel, you are on stage and are being judged. Expect all the faculty, students and postdocs to report back to the search committee, chair and/or each other any and all details, conversations, impressions about you. Watch the off-hand side remarks; nothing is "off the record."
- If people are willing to talk about the department, just let them talk at first, without directing them with questions. They may reveal a lot without prompting and give you an idea of what are areas of strength or weakness in the department, as well as quirks about certain departmental members.
- Be appealing. This may preclude the commonly given advice of "Just be yourself". Remember, it's easier to make a bad impression than a good impression.
- Pay attention to the long pauses people may give before they answer a question. They may be telling you something.
- Ask the same questions of many people at different levels. This will tell you about the range of experiences in the department and how differently things may be perceived by different people.
- Let people do the talking at first. People may reveal a lot about their feelings on the department without any prompting from you. Ask for pros and cons beyond just "do you like it here".
- Ask people about their research and come up with questions for them.
- Ask where people live, what areas are nicer, crappier, how long the typical commute is.
- If it's a university that emphasizes teaching, ask about the perceived gaps in courses offered (which you presumably could fill). Repeat this question for the chair and grads.

Faculty

- If it's a teaching-heavy university that still expects an active research program, ask professors with active research programs how they balance teaching and research.
- Ask what is the range of teaching loads and what is typical.
- Find out who has grants and what kind they are, from what agencies. This will give you a sense for how easy it is to get funding there.
- Think about the kind of equipment and resources you would need (including computing and university software licenses, general online journal availability, interlibrary loan) and ask to see core facilities, animal rooms, greenhouses, etc. Make sure you see your future lab space. Anything that isn't satisfactory can be addressed at the negotiations phase, if it comes to that.

Director of grad program

- Ask about grad requirements for matriculation.
- Ask about the grad application process, how grads are selected, what determines which faculty get how many grads.

- Ask if your student mentorship and committee work count toward teaching release (it probably won't).
- Ask about the quality of the grads in the program, what do they do when they leave the program.
- Ask what they are paid, how much are tuition/fees, what are their benefits, how much does it cost a grant to support a grad.
- Ask what the department does, if anything, to recruit grads.
- Ask how often grads start out as undergrads in the department.

Dean/Chair

- Ask about the teaching load.
- Ask about departmental goals and visions over the next 5-10 years. "What do you want the department to look like in the next 5 or 10 years?"
- If they are "expanding with more hires," ask if there is a strategy to the hires, such as strengthening certain areas, filling gaps in research or teaching areas, increasing breadth of the department, or hiring colleagues for (certain) faculty. If there are hires that year or last year that have not yet arrived, ask who they are.
- Ask about departmental goals with the current hire.
- Ask about requirements for tenure.
- Ask about benefits.
- Ask if they provide monetary assistance with moving and/or buying a house.
- If you have any special circumstances, such as an academic spouse, a request to defer starting by a year, etc., now would be a good time to bring it up. No one likes surprises in the negotiations process.
- Ask how family-friendly the department is, if you care about that. That is, how's the maternity/paternity leave, what's the general culture and attitude.
- Ask the dean about support for research and gauge his or her willingness to provide adequate start-up and release from teaching.
- Get information on any limitations to what you can spend start-up on or by when, sources of teaching release, and internal funding.
- Remember that faculty may give you different answers to these questions than the dean or chair, but the admin are the source you should go by (and if there are any discrepancies in stories, be sure to get information in writing at the negotiations phase, if it comes to that).
- Talk to newer faculty and ask how the transition into the faculty position went for them.
- Be sure to talk to established, senior faculty members as well as new faculty. Ask people for what they think it takes to start a successful lab in the department.
- Get a feeling for the department's relationship with the dean(s) in the college and the level of support they get for their teaching and research.
- Find out what kind of support is offered from the Office of Sponsored Research that helps you submit grants. Is there a grant-writer on board? Can they help you

find funding sources for students (PhD students with masters, international, masters students, etc.). How much support do they give in the grant selection, writing, submission and administration stages?

Office of Sponsored Research

- You will want to get the down-low from them on what kinds of services and support they offer faculty in finding, writing, and submitting grant proposals.
- Ask if they have a grant-writer on staff and how much assistance he or she can give with the process
- Ask about internal, local or state sources of funding.
- Ask if they have notifications of funding opportunities and their deadlines.
- Ask about the process of writing teaching release into grants.

Grads

- Ask how long it takes to finish, degree requirements.
- Ask about the amount of training and support they feel they get from the department
- Ask if there are any courses they would like to see offered that currently aren't
- Ask what they want to be when they grow up, why they decided to go to grad school.
- Look for discrepancies in faculty-student responses. Also ask students if they feel like they have enough time for research. Ask how grads are supported, through TA's, RA's, etc. Ask what student pay is, tuition/fees, benefits. This will give you a sense of how much it would take to support a student off a grant so they don't have to teach, for example.

Postdocs

- Postdocs may be a little more plugged in to any faculty dramas or political minefields in the department and are often more willing to be frank about what they like and don't like. You can ask them the questions that you might not ask faculty or administrators.

Presentation

- Make your talk comprehensible to a general audience (Easier said than done. Less is more.)
- Focus on the narrative. Does the presentation tell a good story that flows well from beginning to end?
- Write out your talk, then memorize it. This is to give you confidence only. When you actually give the talk, don't feel you need to stick to your script. It will rescue you when you get stuck, but try to give the presentation in a more relaxed, conversational manner.
- Don't hide behind a podium. Don't be afraid to come out and walk around.
- Don't be afraid to boast a little in your talk and explain why your results are so damn amazing. Not everyone will know.
- Don't go over time.

Chalk talk

- The point of the chalk talk is so the department can see how you would fit in and what your research program would look like, what will be your first grant (or two?)
- Outline a two and five-year plan. If you have longer-term goals, describe those.
- Treat it like a proposal for future research but in presentation form. You need to convince them that you are asking interesting and innovative questions, know enough about your system, and have the methodological expertise to be fundable. Specify what funding agency/agencies you would target.
- Be explicit about how you would fit in as a collaborator and colleague with the department in your chalk talk. If there's no chalk talk, include it in the future directions section of your presentation.
- Review main take-home messages from the day before
- Give up to a 5-year plan
- Emphasize potential collaborations in the department by topic, not by name
- Point out uses of novel approaches when applicable
- May be organized according to hypothetical (or real) grant aims
- Outline steps in a logical way
- Methods should be in sufficient detail to demonstrate expertise and clear planning.
- Give examples of possible results, perhaps using other studies
- You may need to highlight how your research program differs from your current lab's

After

- Contact the search committee and the departmental chair to thank them for the visit, ask any follow-up questions, get back to them with any questions that they may have had that you couldn't answer at the time, or add any information. This would also be a good time, if you didn't find out during the interview, to ask when they might come to a decision.
- You may also want to contact any faculty that you had identified as being potential collaborators with a similar e-mail.
- Wait a week until after they said they would come to a decision and contact the search chair to politely inquire as to the status of the process. If you have any updates (changes to CV), you can provide them at this time.