

ACADEMIC INTERVIEW ADVICE

Your job talk:

A common misconception among candidates is that the people where you are interviewing are mostly interested in your research. They are mostly interested in your potential to be a research leader and enhance the reputation of the department. So while the seminar must demonstrate some depth related to your research for specialists, it must also show why the results are important to non specialists, and show an overall research vision that is compelling to both specialists and non specialists. This is a tricky balancing act, but the right balance makes a big difference in the outcome of the interview. Keep in mind that you only have the first few slides to make people realize that they should be paying attention: make sure the "big picture" and importance of your results comes through here. Expect non-specialists to tune out during the middle of your talk, where you should provide some depth to show that your work is nontrivial, but make sure you come back to grab people's attention with the last few slides, including a sense of where your field is going, and what role you expect to play.

The interview:

It is very valuable to do some research up front about the university where you are interviewing. Try to get your schedule in advance, and find out the areas of specialization for the people you will be speaking to, and potential areas where you can collaborate with them. People love to talk about themselves, so be sure to ask each person you talk to about their work.

Be prepared to give a 5-10 minute summary of your interview talk with people that you talk to (some may miss your talk, or you will meet them before your talk), in particular your most significant results and why they are significant. Also be prepared to discuss how your research fits in with their department and institution (up front research helps a lot with this).

Remember that you are being evaluated even during the social parts of the interview (dinner, lunch, etc.) Be prepared with some "ice breaker" questions for this social part as well as with individual interviews if the conversation stalls. These questions should convey your enthusiasm for the institution and a desire to know more about it and your potential colleagues. Some examples of ice breaker questions include:

1. What are the best (and worst) aspects of this department?
2. What are the opportunities for research collaboration?
3. Tell me about
 - a. Your work (for individuals),
 - b. The research center for XXX (find out about research centers related to your field), etc.
4. What are the graduate students here like?
5. What are the most important things to be successful here?
6. "Make your own ice breaker questions". There are lots of them.

Here are some typical interview questions (in no particular order), be sure to have good responses to all of them:

1. What are your research accomplishments and their significance?
2. What is your 3-5 year plan for research (and why)?
3. What is your 10 year plan for research (and why)?
4. What type of research group do you envision forming (how many students, how broad, how interdisciplinary, experimental vs. theoretical or a mix, etc.)?
5. What research programs within the department will you create or strengthen?
6. What classes do you expect to teach (know the course numbering for the university if possible and give them the numbers, also have 1-2 undergraduate and graduate courses you would like to create)?
7. What type of research environment would be your ideal in a department?
8. Why is your research field important and where is it going?
9. How would you mentor both graduate and undergraduate students?

If you have some specific concerns, you can certainly raise them, but be careful of how you phrase them so as to keep the conversation upbeat.

After you get the job offer is the time to ask the hardball questions and do hard negotiation. The interview is not a time to raise issues of startup packages, salary, or even tenure. While it's okay to discuss these issues, it takes valuable time away from selling yourself, which is the purpose of the interview. Most of your time should be spent discussing your research, the research of your potential colleagues, and how these will be so synergistic that they absolutely must hire you.

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