

PREPARING FOR AN ACADEMIC JOB INTERVIEW: Frequently asked questions for on-site and phone interviews

Prepared by DIALOG VI Symposium Participants

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Congratulations! If you are reading this, you likely have put together a very successful application package and are preparing for an interview. This paper builds on discussions at the November 2004 DIALOG VI Symposium for recent Ph.D. graduate (see <http://aslo.org/phd.html>). Most of the forty participants were in temporary postdoctoral positions so there was great interest in the job-application process. Several of the participants had recently been interviewed, so the symposium provided a useful forum for exchanging information and insights. See also suggestions on applying and interviewing for jobs prepared by the 2002 DIACES Symposium participants, <http://aslo.org/phd/jobhunting2002.html>. We have put together this article to share our insights with a larger audience. We hope you will find them useful.

First of all, always keep in mind that the interview for a position is very important both in terms of giving your potential department a chance to evaluate you, but also for getting a sense of whether the position and department are a good fit for you.

What follows is a list of questions intended to help you prepare for your upcoming interview. To get the most out of your interview, it helps to spend some time thinking about what kinds of questions you might be asked, how to answer those questions and what sorts of questions you would like to ask. We present these questions as a list broken into categories, including research, teaching, institutional/departmental issues, and personal/professional development. We finish by providing some general interview suggestions based on our experience and some suggestions for phone interviews, since these seem to be increasing in frequency.

These lists are not meant to be exhaustive—they simply reflect our recent experience as interviewees. Some of the questions may not be relevant to all positions and universities. And, of course, each interview is different, and you may be asked an array of questions not on our lists. However, we do expect that reading through these lists and preparing answers to *at least* some of the questions will serve at least three useful purposes:

1. It will help you identify the sorts of questions for which you should have ready answers when you interview.
2. It will help you identify (and hopefully answer) some questions that are important for your own personal and professional development.
3. Perhaps most importantly, thinking about these questions and your own answers will get you thinking in “interview mode.” (That is, to get yourself into the routine of thinking broadly about your interests and goals, and articulating these goals in a way that makes a potential employer think: “I’d like to work with this person!”)

Even if the questions presented here are not asked when *you* interview, we hope you will benefit from the practice they provide in terms of thinking through answers. They might also help you think of some questions that you would like to ask while you are visiting.

Phone Interviews:

Phone interviews seem to be growing more common as search committees try to make the difficult decision of who to invite for a campus interview. When one of us was preparing for a phone interview for a tenure-track faculty position, a senior colleague shared a list of questions that he thought would likely come up. As it turns out, he was exactly right, and she was able to sail right through the interview, was invited to campus for in-person interviews, and was ultimately offered the position! If you are not interviewed by phone, these same questions are likely to be asked on site. Questions (in generally the order they were asked):

- Why are you interested in this position?
- How will/could you involve students in your research?
- What courses could you teach here? (Check out the course offerings in the department ahead of time and use actual course numbers to refer to the courses you could step into, as well as new courses you might propose.)
- What sorts of research projects/topics could you pursue here? (Check out the research interests of the other faculty in the department, and mention possible areas for potential collaboration, or possible dovetails with current research.)
- What kinds of facilities would you need to conduct your research and teaching here? (If possible, get a sense of what major items are already in place (such lists are often on departmental/college websites) and talk about how you could use what's there, as well as anything new you would need/want.)
- When could you start in the position?
- What do you see as your greatest accomplishments in your career to date? What shortcomings have you dealt with?
- How would you describe your interactions with students?
- What questions do you have for us? (You should prepare several questions in advance. Asking these questions led to more lively discussion among the interviewers and allowed everyone's individual personalities to emerge.)

On-Site Interviews:

The following questions are in no particular order and reflect our personal experiences. Some of these questions could also come up in a phone interview, although probably not the more detailed ones. So even if you are only at the phone interview stage, it would be helpful to review these, too.

Research

- Why did you choose your dissertation (post-doc) topic?
- Tell us about the theoretical framework of your research.
- What changes would you have made to your dissertation or post-doctoral work if you were to begin again?
- What contribution does your dissertation make to the field?
- Tell me about your research. (Asked by a Dean who didn't know the field)
- Why didn't you finish your dissertation sooner?
- What are your research plans for the next 2/5/10 years?
- What are possible sources of funding to support your research?

- What are your plans for applying for external funding?
- When will you have sufficient preliminary data for a grant application?
- What facilities do you need to carry out your research?
- How does your research fit in with this department?
- Who would you collaborate with?
- What kind of startup package do you need?
- Do you have the permission of your mentor/advisor to take this work with you? (mostly asked of postdocs)

Teaching

- Are you a good teacher?
- What makes a good advisor? Do you think it is important to challenge your students? How would you do that?
- How many MS and PhD students would you try to have in your lab? And what about technicians and post-docs?
- What is your approach to advising graduate students?
- It is the third week of your introductory class and you notice that some students really aren't paying attention, some are sleeping and some aren't showing up - what do you do?
- How do you feel about having to teach required courses?
- How do you motivate students?
- How would you encourage students to major in your field?
- In your first semester you would be responsible for our course in _____. How would you structure it? What textbook would you use?
- What is your teaching philosophy?
- If you could teach any course you wanted, what would it be?
- What do you think is the optimal balance between teaching and research?
- Have you had any experience with distance learning or technology in the classroom?
- How would you involve undergraduates in your research?
- Have you taught graduate or professional students?
- Have you supervised any undergraduate or undergraduate students?

Institutional/Departmental Issues

- Can you summarize the contribution you would make to our department?
- Are you willing to become involved in committee work?
- Why are you interested in our kind of school?
- What institutional issues particularly interest you?

Career and Personal

- You list a number of interesting community service activities on your CV. Would you want to continue with that sort of extracurricular involvement if you came to U of X?
- If you have more than one job offer, how will you decide?
- How do you feel about living here?
- What does your spouse do? (...they are not supposed to ask this but they probably will!)
- What do you do in your spare time?
- Who else is interviewing you?
- What will it take to persuade you to take this job?
- What kind of salary are you looking for?

Helpful advice based on experience:

- Try to enjoy yourself.

- If you enjoy talking to certain people during the day you can bring that up with the committee. They want to know that you enjoy the department.
- Be prepared to tell your story again and again. It may seem like it is getting really old and boring, but try to make it seem fresh to them.
- Say goodbye to people you have talked with individually if you can.
- Read the job description carefully.
- Bring phone numbers and names.
- Bring a print-out of the faculty web pages, particularly those you know you are going to meet but also those of others so you can look them up quickly.
- Practice your talk to death.
- Time it.
- Develop a "cocktail party length" summary of your work that you can spout off.
- Bring extra copies of your vita, dissertation abstract, papers, statement of research interests, handouts for talk.
- Bring a sample syllabus of a course you might want to teach.
- Don't check in anything critical on the plane – carry it with you.

Final words...

Being asked to interview for an academic position is a major statement about how the search committee feels about your preparation and potential as a member of their faculty. You should take pride in reaching this stage of the application process! Based on our experiences, your best bet now is to do a lot of homework (about the department, its faculty/students/staff, its facilities, the overall university and the community/city/part of the country you're visiting) – and relax! These people really want to learn about you, they want to know that you've taken the interview seriously, they want to think about how you could add to their department. Be yourself, remember that you've got skills and interests to contribute, and enjoy the process as much as you can.

Good luck!!

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