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Interviewing for the Professorship

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Introduction

Each year, colleges and universities advertise numerous faculty positions. However, some of these institutions experience difficulties filling these vacancies. Contrary to popular belief, these difficulties do not solely stem from the inability to find qualified applicants. They may also be attributed to the candidate's lack of understanding of how to prepare for, participate in, and conclude the interview. As professors who coordinate numerous faculty interviews, the authors will discuss how preparation, participation, and confirmation can help candidates successfully interview for faculty positions.

Before The Interview

Part I: Research and Rhetoric–All in a Day's Relationship

The textbook guide to finding a job, lists: finding out where the openings are; review and revise your resume to fit the opening; craft a winning cover letter, and when called, prepare and interview for the position. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Finding a professorship that is a good fit is all about getting to know your colleagues in your field and making friendships, formally presenting yourself to your future colleagues and crafting a great follow-up plan. Friends are more likely to interview and hire friends when openings occur, especially in academia. Did you ever wonder why George W. Bush selected old friends of his father's to fill several cabinet positions? He may have chosen them because they were trusted and most of all, friends. The same is true in higher education.

A good first step for a graduate looking for a new professorship position is to reflect back on past relationships. These relationships might include those with faculty they trusted while enrolled in their masters and/or doctoral programs, friends who have graduated and moved on to their first faculty positions, or colleagues they have met along the way, perhaps at a regional or national conference. Conferences are an ideal time to make lasting relationships, because you often meet people who attend the same sessions you are interested in attending, and are interested in sharing ideas (and business cards) with you. In addition, conferences give you the opportunity to interact with influential and respected leaders in your field. Many academic circles are small enough that attending a session of notables in your field can generate new relationships, as many established leaders are excited to help new colleagues who are interested in their work. Building relationships with notable colleagues may mean more than just networking as we often think of it. This opportunity has more to do with learning as much about the other person that you can and then making contact, preferably through and introduction by another colleague. This exchange involves listening to, showing interest in and offering help to others with nothing expected in return. By interacting with people in a positive manner when they have a need, you strengthen the association or relationship with new acquaintances—thus increasing the likelihood that they will remember you. Think about it. Hiring a friend or having a friend highly recommend you can outweigh even the most glowing letter of recommendation for someone the committee members do not know.

In case you have not established friendships ahead of time, see if any of your colleagues in the field or former professors know anyone at the university or in the department in which you are seeking a position. This introduction will keep you from starting out as a virtual unknown. Beware that this tactic may also serve as a negative if the person making the introductions is not held in high esteem by the department. Why begin the search at a disadvantage? No introduction or your own personal introduction beats a negative one.

Part II: The Three R's–Research, Review, and Release

An applicant can begin this phase by searching the Chronicle of Higher Education to find a listing of professorship vacancies. Websites of universities, especially those associated with prestigious organizations are also a great source. Sites like http://reference.allrefer.com/ can link you to universities and departments in your specific field. You can then identify positions that spark your interest. Afterwards, you should carefully read each job description to determine the compatibility between your aims and goals and the department's interests and needs. Then call the department chairperson or the chairperson of the search committee, if listed. Inform the department official of your strong interest in the position. Be sure to explain why and how you think you would fit into the department. In concluding the conversation, ask the chairperson to clarify any information regarding the job description. Once you've shared your interests verbally, send a brief follow-up letter to the chairperson of the search committee, confirming your interest in the position and the department. In your letter, state that you will be sending your professional portfolio to the chairperson before the deadline for reviewing applications.

The professional portfolio should contain your official letter of interest and be divided into five sections. They are the biographical section, instructional section, professional section, service section, and the testimonial section. The biographical section consists of the curriculum vitae, philosophical statements, and one-page biography. The instructional section is comprised of course syllabi and samples of your students' work. The professional section highlights your participation in conferences and seminars. This section also contains samples of your journal publications, book reviews, and other scholarly writings. The service section identifies your participation in academic and social services. This section should show that you have engaged in activities ranging from conducting staff developments to providing consulting services for communities, businesses, schools, or organizations appropriate to your field of study. In reviewing this list, prospective employers will gain an understanding of how you have impacted the profession and communities. The testimonial section consists of citations regarding your work. The citations should come from people who are very familiar with your work ethic and professional manner. One testimonial should come from your immediate supervisor. Two references should be from colleagues who can describe your interpersonal skills. The remaining two references should be from community or business leaders who are familiar with your service to the community.

After completing the above steps, the applicant should then begin to review the entire department for the position you seek. This review should include but is not limited to:

- names, faces, and curriculum vitaes of each faculty member;
- degree-seeking programs offered to students;
- extended curriculum programs offered to students; and

· requirements for receiving promotion and tenure.

These components will indicate how the targeted position may fit into the overall aims and goals of the department. They will also shape the applicants' perceptions of the social environment that would surround them. Consequently, the applicants should use these perceptions to develop a five-year action plan for each position. The action plan should describe the applicant's yearly goals for research, community service, and teaching. Each component integrates the applicant's interests with the department's needs. The action plan completes the portfolio. Finally, the applicant should then send the portfolio to the chairperson of the search committee

During the Interview

Part I: High Expectations–What to Expect

The competition for job opportunities in an institution of higher education can be intense, especially in the more prestigious universities. Thus, remember that the actual interview begins from the time that the first contact is made until the time that the candidate departs. If you get the interview, the odds are in your favor. The department liked you enough to take their time to visit with you. Translation: There were things about you that interested them. With your foot in the door, you have won 75 percent of the battle. The other 25 percent of the task depends on your seizing control of the interview and landing the job! As such, you must be ready to the interview, especially the interview team.

The interview committee is usually made up of the faculty members of the department and at least one faculty member from outside the department. After the committee interview, the candidate usually visits with the chair of the department and the dean of the college (College of Education and Applied Science Tenure Faculty Search Guidelines 2001). All of these people are important to determining a "goodness of fit" for you and the university. In addition, they are sources for future contacts if you don't find that this position is for you. As such, listening to each person, what they emphasize, how they talk about their university or department will help you not only during the interview but in future interactions.

Interview presentation. During the interview, you may be expected to present an overview of your recent research. Include the following in your presentation:

1. Background for the research
2. Research questions
3. Methodology – population and research methods
4. Findings
5. Recommendations for future research.

When sharing your research, do not spend time sharing personal information, because an opportunity is usually provided later for you to share information about yourself and for the committee to ask you questions during the actual interview.

Interview questions. It is important to note that all questions asked during an interview should be

focused and relevant to the job requirements identified on the vacancy announcement and job description. The questions you are asked should address information that is truly necessary in order to evaluate your qualifications, level of skills, and overall competence for the job in question (Henslee, Fowler, Hepworth, & Schwarts 2003). Problem areas arise with questions inquiring, whether directly or indirectly, about a candidate's gender, race, age, national origin, marital or parental status, religion, disability, sexual preference, or physical standards that are not directly related to the job (Henslee et al 2003). Likewise, you are not obligated to share this type of information voluntarily, as it sometimes makes the interview committee uncomfortable. There may be less formal settings to share this type of information.

The interview questions should match the criteria for each position as they relate to rank and tenure following the criteria of the job posting (College of Education and Applied Science Tenure Faculty Search Guidelines 2001). Some generic questions that may be asked are as follows:

1. "Tell the committee about yourself." The floor is open here for the candidate to share information about themselves such as your work experiences.

2. "What strengths do you bring to the department/program?" Based on the candidate's vita and application, the committee develops perceptions regarding what strengths they believe you bring to the department/program; however, this question provides you with an opportunity to clarify those perceptions.

3. "Why did you choose to apply for this position?" The answers to this question help the faculty develop perceptions regarding the candidate's "fit" in the organization. This is a good opportunity for you to use your research and to share the strengths you have with the needs of the department, as you see them.

4. "What would your chair or supervisor and other faculty members tell us about you?" The answers to this question assists the faculty in understanding your work ethic and work style. In addition, the answers can lead to the understanding of how you work with and relate to others.

5. "Describe a semester at your university as it relates to your teaching load, service projects, publications and presentations." You should be prepared to discuss your work experience even if it has not been in a university setting. This question will give the faculty insight into your perception of the professorate. It will also open an opportunity for the committee to describe a typical semester at their university, which may help you determine if the culture or environment is a good "fit" for you.

6. "How do you keep current in your field?" This is an important question because many university programs are training grounds for practitioners who are encouraged to perform research but who are also expected to relate that research to what is happening in the field. As trainers of practitioners, it is imperative that faculty constantly remain aware of the real life issues that impact the job performance of their students.

7. "Describe your teaching style. Share how you incorporate technology into instruction." This is your chance to shine. All universities are looking for good teachers, as well as researchers. As the student bodies of universities become more diverse, the need for diverse instructional methods also increases. The committee members want to know if you have more than one way of reaching students. Share the

different approaches and tools you use, such as how you use technology in the classroom. Keep in mind that you are looking for a goodness of fit, too. Thus, if technology is important to you, this may be an opportunity to ask what is available.

8. "Discuss your attempts and successes in obtaining external funds." Most universities seek funding and your ability and/or past experience in obtaining grants and other external funds can be a valuable asset to the department and university. Your ability to obtain grants also demonstrates your ability to conduct research. Consequently, you should emphasize the purpose and results of your grants as well as the amount of funding you obtained. You may also share your experience as a reviewer or evaluator of grants or other external funding. Keep in mind that your attempts—not just successes– are important. Therefore, you should place this information in your vita and be prepared to talk about them.

9. "Discuss your research interests." Discuss all studies, regardless of the size of the population, including any syntheses of literature that you may have conducted. The committee is looking to see if you can focus your efforts on areas important to the department. Again, here is where the information you gained about the department can become valuable to you. Make the connection between your research interests and those of the other members of the committee or department. Often interviewers are looking for candidates who can complement, not duplicate, the research areas of the current faculty. This is probably not a good time to share everything you know or are interested in—stay focused.

10. "Discuss your involvement in dissertation/thesis committees as chair or a member." You may or may not have any formal experience in this area, but this is a good time for you to share your abilities to assist candidates with their dissertations. If you do not have a record of committee work in this area, think of how you have assisted students in literature reviews, data analysis, research, writing, editing or other areas related to completing a dissertation.

11. "Share with the committee any examples of your professional service opportunities." This is where having been active in local, state or national professional organizations help demonstrate your continued commitment to the profession. It is not necessary to have been an officer in these organizations. Other areas to expand upon might be your committee work or participation in reviewing conference proposals or facilitating sessions. Committee participation is important at the university level. The interviewers want to know that you will pull your fair share of the load. Service outside the teaching assignment is important, so share any work you have done to enhance your current or past organizations, such as participating in awards committees or student orientation and recruitment events.

Responses to the questions. In the interview, your responses need to be specific and detailed. Candidates who tell the interviewer about particular situations that relate to each question will be far more effective and successful than those who respond in general terms (Hanson 2005). Ideally, you should briefly describe the situation, what specific action you took that had an effect, and the positive result or outcome. It is helpful to think of your responses as stories. Become a great storyteller in your interviews, but be careful not to ramble. Framing your responses using this three-step S-T-A-R process will help. "S" stands for the situation, "T" for the task or problem, "A" for the action, and "R" for results or outcomes (Hanson, 2005). These three steps are described below in detail.

1. Situation or task. Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to

accomplish. Be specific in your description of the event or situation. Don't generalize what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to see your talents for working within a certain context. This situation can be a job from a previous position, from a volunteer experience, or any other relevant event.

2. Action you took. Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on your abilities and actions. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did-not the efforts of the team. Avoid describing what you might have done. Instead, tell what you did.

3. Results you achieved. In this step, you need to answer the following questions: What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn? (2005).

As you answer the interview question, include examples from service activities, team participation, community service, presentations, special accomplishments (personal and professional), and work experience to illustrate your past behavior (Byham & Pickett, 1999) and abilities. During the interview, listen carefully to each question and discuss only the examples that provide appropriate descriptions of how you demonstrated the desired behavior. With practice, you can learn to tailor a relatively small set of examples to respond to a number of different questions (Hanson 2005).

After the Interview

They've Got Mail

Most candidates think that they have concluded the interview after asking the search committee members a few questions about the position, department, and university. But the candidates should realize that they complete the interview only by mailing "Thank You" letters to every member of the search committee. The candidates should begin the letters by sincerely acknowledging the committee members' willingness to interview them. The candidates should then review a significant topic that was discussed with each committee member. The candidates should conclude the letter by explaining how they will apply the discussion towards strengthening the position, department, and university.

Conclusions

Landing that new professorship involves determining a "goodness of fit" before, during, and after the interview. Successful candidates seek to determine a match by takes a proactive role in all three stages of the interview process. They conduct preliminary research on the department and university. Then the candidates use the research to demonstrate how they "fit" the aims and goals of the department and university. Afterwards, then confirm formal and informal communications by sending heartfelt letters to the interview team and other department officials. By following these steps, current and aspiring professors will successfully interview for an university faculty position. Equally significant, they will have found a position that is the exact "fit" for their professional and personal interests and needs.

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