

## The Interview Process:

# Gaining Access to Higher Education

**O**n average, it takes an interviewer less than four minutes to make a decision about a job candidate. With so little time to make a good impression, it's vital that you make the most of it. Here's a quick guide through the interviewing process for positions in higher ed, although many of these tips are useful no matter what field you're looking to enter.

### The Purpose of Interviewing

Remember that the interview is a two-way street: You're seeing if the position is a good fit for you just as much as the potential employers are evaluating you for the position. In the case of higher education, the institution is looking to assess your interest in the position, your research skills and training, your potential for success as a teacher and researcher, and your ability to fit into the campus community.

### How to Prepare

Before you show up to the interview, you've got to know yourself cold. What are your interests—in research, in teaching, in serving the profession? What can you bring to the program and the department that will benefit students and faculty? What do you hope to accomplish in your role as a faculty or staff member?

Employers seek candidates who:

- fit in with current faculty, so be aware of who's in the department and what their interests are
- have a proven track record
- are ambitious
- are committed, loyal and dedicated. Will you stay for several years?
- will have interest and skill in both teaching and research
- are intelligent and adaptable
- have a solid education.

### Practice Interviewing

The Career Center offers mock interviews, so all you have to do is call and schedule. There's also computer software called Interview Stream that you can use at home if you have a Web cam—otherwise, schedule to use one at the Career Center. Interview Stream will generate questions for you and will record your answers. Afterwards, it can tell you how many times you said "like" and "um," and you can send the footage to yourself or someone else to critique.

Doing your homework has never been so important as it is before a job interview. Learn about the enrollment, diversity and composition of the student and faculty population. You

should know the mission statement and core values of the university, as well as any strengths or weaknesses. This may give you some questions to ask during the interview. Try to find out the organizational structure of the institution, some recent topics or issues of interest, whether they're on the semester or the quarter system, the relationship of the university and the larger community, the availability of facilities and resources, and of course, all about the department you're interviewing in. Remember that a good fit for a position goes both ways, and that you're evaluating the compatibility of the position, too.

### Types of Interviews

There are three main types of interviews you may encounter while searching for a job in higher education: the conference interview, the phone interview and the on-campus interview. The conference interview, which is often a placement exchange at a national or international conference, depending on your field, can be intimidating. It's short—usually 30 minutes on average. Be sure to schedule time in between each interview to regroup and prepare for your next one. You want to maintain professionalism from the first one until the last one. The phone interview is usually used as a screening tool to get a sense of who you are, so the employer can determine whether they want to bring you to campus. This will probably be your first interaction with the institution. It's really important to confirm the time for the interview—don't forget to take time zones into account. Use a landline for the best connection, and have your application materials right in front of you, so you and your interviewer are looking at the same things. Be sure to use your voice as much as you can, because you won't have the luxury of using nonverbal cues, so be enthusiastic and articulate, and smile.

The on-campus interview is the most involved process and the longest of the three types of interviews. After the phone interviews, the institution will usually invite two to four people to come on campus. If you get asked, you will have the opportunity to meet with several different people: possibly the dean, faculty members, usually the chair of the department, maybe students. You might be asked to present your research or teach a class. The interview can take place over a day or two, so it's important that you maintain your energy and enthusiasm over the entire visit. Ideally, you'll receive an itinerary before you arrive that will tell you who you'll be meeting with. Be aware that you might be asked to pay for your own expenses ahead of time and the institution will reimburse you later.

### What To Expect

The interview schedule itself is typically very hectic, and you may be shuttled from one activity to another: meals, meeting with administrators, meeting different levels of students, presenting your research, maybe showing your ability to teach or attending a reception. If you're not being offered enough downtime, ask for it.

Remember that statistic about employers making a decision about candidates in the first four minutes? Well, more than 70 percent of first impressions are based on appearance. The bottom line is, look your best. Wear dark colors, and clean, well-pressed clothes. Keep your hair neat and off your face and your shoes clean. Don't have a bunch of bags hanging on your arms, and women should be wearing minimal jewelry. Wear clothes that you feel good in. You don't want people to be struck by your clothes—they shouldn't speak for you. You want to be taken seriously for the position you're applying for. Expect to look better than the people who are interviewing you (academics are not known for being the best-dressed bunch!)

Arrive 10-15 minutes early to individual events and familiarize yourself with your surroundings or freshen up if you need to. Introduce yourself confidently and have a solid handshake. Use body language to show interest: stand up straight and make eye contact. This may seem obvious, but listen well to the questions you're being asked so you can be sure that you're answering them accurately and fully. When you ask questions, listen to the answers they provide.

### Questions to Expect

- Know why you're interested in the institution, the department and the position.
- Review your résumé or C.V. very well. You might be asked about anything listed on it.
- Know your research and your teaching style, and be able to describe it.
- Be able to articulate how you can contribute to the institution and department, so that not only will you be able to explain why it is a good fit for you, but also what you can offer them.

Many people look great on paper but can't articulate well enough to sell themselves in person. Your résumé probably says you've got good communication skills, so prove it! This isn't a time to be shy.

In addition to answering the interviewers' questions, you've got to ask a few of your own. When you're researching the institution and department, try to come up with some questions that show you've done your homework. Prepare different questions for each person or group. Don't ask about

salary or benefits until they've made an offer.

It's illegal for potential employers to ask about certain topics. These include your national origin/citizenship, religion, age, race/ethnicity, disabilities, marital/family status, and arrest record (NOT your conviction record, which is fair game). You might be asked a variation on one of these questions, and you can decide whether to answer it or not. To deflect it, you can ask why the information is relevant to the position, or simply state you're not comfortable answering.

Odds are that during the course of the on-campus interview, you'll be eating at least one meal with your prospective employers. Be professional throughout the meal, and remember that manners are just as important as conversation. Don't be indecisive or nervous about ordering. Order food that's easy to eat and isn't the most expensive thing on the menu. It's okay to ask the server about recommendations. You probably shouldn't order alcohol at all, even if it's offered to you.

### Presenting

Know how much time you'll have to present. It may be a class period for students or longer for a research talk. Know your audience: if you're speaking to faculty, you can probably use the lingo of your field, but to students, be simple and clear. Manage your time by only presenting the highlights of your research, even though you're probably really excited about it. Use visual aids, but definitely have alternatives available. For example, email a PowerPoint presentation to a contact at the institution ahead of time, but also email it to yourself for easy access, and bring printouts in case of technology glitches. And of course, practice your presentation ahead of time.

### Following Up

Upon leaving the on-campus interview, reiterate your interest in the position and ask about the next step in the hiring process. Make sure you have business cards from everyone you spoke with individually so you can stay in contact and send thank-you notes. These should be sent within 24 hours. It's up to you whether to send an email or a physical note; either will be appreciated, and it usually depends on the culture of the field. Remind them of things you talked about that seemed to be high points or connections you think were established. ■

*Based on the Graduate School seminar "The Interview Process: Gaining Access to Higher Education" by Marian Higgins, Career Consultant & Diversity Coordinator, UGA Career Center; and Merrily Dunn, Assoc. Professor, Department of Counseling and Human Development Services. To view this seminar in its entirety, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.*