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The First Interview

By Steven M. Cahn

One of the crucial steps in obtaining an academic position is the initial interview. Understanding its dynamics is critical to success.

If you are a new Ph.D. or will soon be one, you may know the basics of the initial interview: The encounter usually takes place at a professional conference, either in a hotel suite or perhaps at one of numerous desks arranged in a large meeting hall. Two or more faculty members will talk individually for 30 to 40 minutes with a dozen or so candidates and choose about three to come to the campus for a second interview.

You may also know some general rules about first interviews: You are responsible for your expenses; check and recheck the location; wear something that, without appearing unnecessarily formal, will place you among the better-dressed attendees at the conference; and don't be late. In addition, you should know basic information about the institution that invited you.

What you probably don't know is what will happen during the actual interview.

When you're called in and introduced to your interviewers, look them in the eye, shake hands firmly, try if you can to remember a name or two, and, most important, smile. In fact, throughout the interview, you can't smile too much. When smiling, all of us look more approachable and amiable. You'll also put the interviewers at ease, a vital goal.

After all, an interview is not akin to a doctoral defense. You are not being questioned to reveal in your work whether you overlooked an obscure reference or failed to grasp a subtlety in someone's argument. Consciously or unconsciously, interviewers are asking themselves: Do I like this person? If they find you appealing, then those interviewers will give you the benefit of the doubt when they assess your answers. If they don't feel comfortable in your company, the details of your answers won't matter. (Of course, if you exhibit a flagrant lack of knowledge or fundamental unsuitability for the position, even the most charming personality

won't help.)

At a doctoral defense, you can be personally obnoxious, yet impress the members of the committee with your grasp of the subject; at an interview, obnoxiousness is fatal. At a defense, you can express yourself with timidity and still win admiration; at an interview, your own lack of confidence leads others to lack confidence in you.

Why are the two situations so different? The members of your doctoral committee are only interested in the quality of your scholarship, whereas interviewers are concerned not only with your research but with your potential as a teacher and colleague. To award someone a doctoral degree doesn't require anyone to enjoy working or socializing with that person; your interviewers, however, expect to see you often in both formal and informal settings, and they want to enjoy your company.

As to the questions you'll be asked, the first is almost a certainty: "Tell us something about your dissertation." Prepare by having practiced a two-minute answer that explains the essence of your work. The temptation is to go on at length, but resist that impulse. The interviewers have limited time, and if they want to hear more, they'll ask.

Do not assume they are specialists in your area of research, for almost surely they are not. If they were, they wouldn't be searching for someone in your field. The challenge is to convey as clearly as possible the reason your topic attracted you, the insights you gained, and the relevance of your work to broader interests the interviewers might have. Don't use arcane terminology or refer to obscure sources. Your primary goal is not to show off your profundity but to demonstrate how effectively you can communicate. If you can't express yourself clearly to your interviewers, they will doubt you can do any better with students.

After your two-minute summary, you may be asked questions that test your ability to defend your views. Even if an interviewer's inquiry seems elementary, take it seriously. The most simple-sounding question can turn out to be challenging. Moreover, an apparently naïve query may be a test of how well you can respond to uninformed students.

If an interviewer's manner is pugnacious, stay calm. Some like to test how you perform under stress, so even if provoked, don't display annoyance.

When a decision is made regarding whom to invite for a second

interview, even a single negative vote can be decisive, for if several candidates are acceptable to all, why choose someone who isn't? For that reason try to remain on good terms with everyone, regardless of the tone of their remarks.

If you're questioned about a controversial issue, don't offer your views in a manner that suggests no reasonable person could possibly disagree. Some of your interviewers probably see things differently. You don't know where they stand, so the safest course is to have your say without scoffing at contrary viewpoints.

You are likely to be asked how you would teach a course in an area of your competence. Be prepared to respond in detail. You might even have available multiple copies of syllabi that you can distribute on request to the interviewers. For each course listed on your vita, you should know the texts you would use, the topics you would cover, the readings you would select, and the methods of evaluation you would employ. After all, you have claimed to be able to teach particular courses; you should, therefore, be prepared to explain how you would do so.

If you have experience as a teacher, you can rely on it as a basis for answering questions about pedagogy. If you haven't had classroom experience, your answers can nevertheless be effective so long as you have prepared carefully. The decisive factor is not how many courses you have taught but how detailed and persuasive you can be about your approach. Suppose in responding to a question about how to teach a particular course, a candidate replied, "I'm not sure. I'd have to think about that." Now contrast that answer with this one: "I'd use the new, third edition of Smith and Dale and concentrate on the readings in sections two and four." Which candidate would you prefer?

You may be asked whether you could teach a course you haven't listed. If it lies completely outside your areas of interest, say so. But if, given reasonable notice, you might be willing to try, then an effective response is, "I'd like to do it, but I'd need a few months to prepare."

Why are you being asked about that particular course? Obviously because someone is needed to take it on. If you appear ready to accept the assignment, that willingness might be crucial to your being offered the position, particularly if the course is one with which few applicants are comfortable.

If you are asked about your interests in the discipline apart from the subject of your dissertation, be sure to have a couple you can

discuss. Even though specialization is the heart of graduate school, interviewers appreciate a breadth of concerns.

Most interviewers realize the inappropriateness of asking candidates personal questions that have no bearing on performance as a faculty member. For example, no one should ask you, "Will your spouse be living with you?" If such a question is posed, be noncommittal. Few interviewers will probe further.

Toward the end of the interview, you will be asked if you have any questions. Because having none suggests a lack of interest, have one ready, but don't use the occasion to embarrass your interviewers by calling attention to a weakness in their program: "Any reason the library holdings are so meager?" Nor should your question suggest that you are concerned with trivia. My favorite of this sort was posed by a candidate who inquired seriously: "Does the school provide free pencils?" He never had the opportunity to find out.

Here's a more promising query: "Do you have a visiting lecture series?" If the answer is positive, you can offer to help administer it. If the answer is negative, you can indicate your willingness to try to establish one. Either way you appear to be an interested colleague, to have the welfare of the department at heart, and to be prepared to do your share of the work.

Ask one or two questions but no more. Time is limited. If you're called back, you'll have the opportunity to raise as many issues as you like. Furthermore, don't ask about salary, benefits, moving expenses, travel money, and other matters involving dollars and cents. You're being presumptuous by assuming you've already been chosen as a finalist, and you're also asking the wrong people in the wrong setting.

One additional warning: Don't go out of your way to tell jokes. Spontaneous humor can relieve tension and be helpful to you, but you're not auditioning to star at a comedy club. What one person finds funny, another may consider silly.

Before leaving, you're entitled to ask when you might hear something further about the progress of the search. Regardless of the answer, express your appreciation for having been invited, and, as you shake hands, acknowledge by name as many of the interviewers as you can while you do one other thing: smile.

If you've rarely been interviewed, your first attempts are apt to leave you dissatisfied with your performance. Don't despair. As in

so many areas of life, practice helps. For that reason, assuming you have even slight interest in a position, you should accept any interview offered. Gradually you'll become more at ease, and eventually you'll know the most likely questions and be able to relax and even enjoy the interaction.

One final suggestion. When nervous, some people become passive, displaying little energy or enthusiasm. Others become aggressive and try to seize control of the situation. Both approaches lead to failure. Just be friendly and display enthusiasm for whatever the interviewers want to discuss. Your goal is to persuade them that you present no problems and can make a positive contribution to the success of their mission. If you succeed in conveying that impression, you'll be on your way to a campus visit.

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