



INSIDE
HIGHER ED

INTERVIEWS

Career advice from the columns
of *Inside Higher Ed*



INTRODUCTION

Doing well in faculty job interviews is both an art and a science. There may be consensus about some of the things to do (or not to do). But there are lots of strategies – and there is conventional wisdom to embrace and to reject.

This compilation of advice columns from *Inside Higher Ed* is not based on the idea that there is a magic bullet for the job-seeker. Nor is there one guru. Some of the authors included in this collection disagree on some points. We offer these pieces so you can find the best strategies for your personality, your dream job and your “I need something” job.

Many of these pieces are for all academic jobs. Others vary by discipline (although much of what’s stated in those can apply broadly), and there are also

pieces about job interviews at community colleges, teaching-oriented colleges, religious colleges and more. We even have a piece on why you shouldn’t give up if you think you’ve flubbed an interview.

Inside Higher Ed publishes career advice three times a week and you can find the archives here:

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice>

And you can find the best jobs in higher education on our site here: <https://careers.insidehighered.com/>

Good luck with the search. And let us know topics on which you’d like future columns.

--The Editors

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CONVERSATIONAL RAPPORT

By H. William Rice

H. William Rice considers why some good candidates don't connect with those interviewing them, and how to improve your chances of impressing the search committee.

For all that is written about job interviews, very few people address the question of rapport, and with good reason — it is the most nebulous characteristic of any interview. Still, its importance is hard to ignore. The “first impressions” gained in an interview or at an interview dinner often determine decisions among finalists, making those first impressions final impressions for the candidates who do not get the job. The search committee, chair, or dean might sum matters up in this fashion: “Well, she looked good on paper, but in person ... well, I just don't think she'll work here.”

Sometimes specific statements the candidate made will have brought about this judgment. But often the issue comes down to “bad vibes” or “someone who will not fit into our culture.” Given the bleak job market in academe, it seems hardly fair that such life or death decisions come down to such vague assessments. But such is the truth of human interaction: so much of what we think of others is based on impressions that cannot be captured in a word or a phrase.

There is a vast body of literature on body language, looking people in the eye, interview preparation, and dressing for success, but little has been written about what I call “conversational rapport,” particularly as it relates to academic culture. But such an issue might be worth our notice. The interviewer is not only listening to what the candidate says, but is also wondering why the candidate said it or what this particular choice or phrasing suggests about the candidate's future behavior. This is particularly true if the interviewer has interviewed dozens of faculty members, as many senior administrators have.

Some candidates are so eager to prove themselves that they practically jump into your chair with you. Most often these people have resolutely followed all the career column advice on knowing the institution, and they tend to be showy concerning what they know. They have also made plans as to what they will do when they are hired, even outside of those courses they will teach: “I would fit in well with your writing-across-the-curriculum initiative. I took courses in that

area. I advocate it in all my classes.” They plunge headlong into plans for you and your institution — plans that are sometimes scary.

Most hiring committees want to find a candidate who will fit in, not one who will take over. Not all candidates who make this mistake are overly aggressive; still, they come off that way. Unfortunately, conversation is an area of our lives that is controlled by impulse and habit. If we are habitually chatty and prone to be even slightly presumptuous, the nervousness of the interview situations can make that part of our personality more pronounced, undercutting our ability to make a good impression.

The opposite extreme is the candidate who is silent and withdrawn. These candidates might have extensively studied the institution and its culture. They wait to have their say, but the right moment never arrives. Meanwhile, they answer your questions and do not elaborate. They do the same at dinner, so that the search committee members have to pull information out of them.

Though most hiring committees shy away from people who threaten to approach the department with territorial conquest in mind, they are equally afraid of people who have no plans at all — who merely do what they are told and ask no questions. They assume that these people will teach their classes and go home and pull the shades down. We all know quiet people who are the backbone of academic institutions. But once again, the nervousness of the interview situation will cause a candidate’s habitual shyness to take over and create a negative impression, never allowing the committee to see the real person behind the retiring facade. These two examples are extremes, and most candidates fall between them. Still there are relatively few candidates who can hit that middle mark so perfectly that they can interview well. How is it done?

First, candidates must understand their own habits. Machiavelli writes in *The Prince* that leaders are habitually either slow or quick to act (“deliberative” or “rash”) and that sooner or later every leader will be

confronted with a situation that calls for the habit he does not have and thus will fail: the leader who is quick to act will be in a situation that requires deliberation; the deliberating leader will be in a situation that will call for quick action. We might think of interviews in a similar fashion. The quiet candidate must learn to be bold, pushing herself to talk more; the aggressive candidate must learn to tone down his habit of conquest. The first step in this process is self-knowledge.

I am frequently amazed by the number of people I encounter in the academic world who have no idea how much they talk or how aggressive they appear to be even in a conversation at lunch. It is, after all, a profession wherein talking in front of a class is a part of the job. I have been in committee meetings where one person dominated the conversation only to have this very person sum the meeting up for all there in this fashion: “This was a productive discussion.”

A good way to gauge your propensity to take over and talk is to time yourself in social interactions or committee meetings. How much of a normal, everyday conversation do you control? How much time do you spend listening? How much of the listening time is actually spent in listening and how much of it is spent in waiting, planning, jumping in to make your next comment? How many times do you think of something to say in a committee meeting and just never getting around to saying it, letting others do the talking for you?

Do you just reflect other people’s concerns or do you move the discussion along with information that is important to you? Gauging the amount of time you spend talking or listening is often a rather surprising experience. But the results of such an experiment can often give you a sense of where your impulses are leading you in any given conversation.

The next step is to plan for the interview. Planning for the interview is the same whether you are planning to restrain your chattiness or to force yourself to speak up. As so many career column writers suggest, planning must include knowing the institution — finding

out all that you can about its mission, its programs, its history, and the courses you will be teaching. But rather than merely planning for the questions you think you will be asked, plan for the impressions you want to make — go into the interview with an “agenda” of your own.

Though such a suggestion sounds inherently bold, it need not come off that way. The best hires are always going to occur when the candidate finds in the institution something that she can truly believe in and to which she can commit herself. Those sorts of connections should be at the heart of your “agenda.

Speaking with conviction empowers anyone,

whether that person be shy or bold or, as most of us are, somewhere between those extremes. Conviction also has an effect upon your audience. And if in your research, you find nothing in the institution to which you can commit yourself, maybe this is not a good job choice for you.

It could well be that not one of us ever truly hits the middle ground between boldness and shyness in a situation as stressful as a job interview, but we can always improve our chances by understanding our habits and going into the interview with a plan. ■

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MLA INTERVIEW: THE BIG PICTURE

By Cheryl Ball and Katherine Ellison

Cheryl Ball and Katherine Ellison walk you through what to expect in the hotel room meeting with a search committee.

Here’s a typical Modern Language Association (hotel-room) convention interview story:

Because you have timed your interviews at least half an hour apart (but an hour is better), you arrive at the next interview hotel with a good 10-15 minutes to spare (i.e., not sweaty). You enter the hotel lobby and there are 200 other suited individuals looking just as nervous as you feel. You, however, appear calm and cool because you’ve done your homework on the

college you are about to interview with, know that your outfit is clean, have your dissertation explanation down to two minutes, and have at least two questions ready to ask the committee. You also have on hand extra copies of syllabuses, research agendas, and teaching philosophies in case the committee will welcome additional materials at the end of the interview. Plus, you remembered to double-check the hotel and time of the interview, so you’re set. Feel free to make small

“There are still pitfalls of the hotel-room interview seating arrangement, including being seated in a prime, cushy chair that overlooks the beautiful view from the 14th-floor suite, only to realize that the committee is sitting in front of the window and you’re staring into the noonday sun and can only see their silhouettes.”

talk with other lobby-sitters. Or go to the restroom.

At five minutes before your interview time (no more, no less!), if the interviewers have told you to call them to find out the room number, go to the nearest house phone and ask for the person designated as contact for the room. Ideally, they will have given you the room number in a confirmation email. If the lobby phones are swamped, most hotels have house phones on the second floors, and some have phones on all floors. Go ahead up the stairs to the second floor and call. Write the room number down, then proceed to the elevator to go to the floor. Make sure you have left yourself plenty of time to wait for a busy elevator, as MLA elevators are infamously slow. At some hotels, you will also literally fight for space in the elevator along with 20 other nervous interviewees. You, however, are not showing your nerves because you know what to expect!

When you reach the door of the interview room, check the time. If you’re early by a few minutes, it’s best to wait until one to two minutes before the hour, then knock. The reason? They may be running late interviewing another candidate, and you wouldn’t want some other interviewee interrupting YOUR precious interview time twice – remember that there was already the in-room phone call -- by knocking too early. But don’t linger. Review your interview notes about the college, which you’ve looked up online and printed out or downloaded to your e-device before you

left town. Have your post-interview questions ready. And remember it’s likely that when that door opens, it may be to let out another interviewee for the same (or, also likely, a different) job. Don’t stress it. You look mah-velous!

When they’re ready, they’ll invite you inside, maybe take your coat to hang (yes, please), maybe offer you coffee/water (sure, if you don’t have some of your own with you, but it’s also O.K. to decline), shake your hand with brief introductions, and invite you to sit.

At this point, there are rumors of MLA hotel-room interviews that need to be addressed. It is the setting that distinguishes MLA hotel-room interviews from MLA job barn, phone, or Skype interviews. Each have their benefits and drawbacks, and one major drawback in hotel-room interviews is that you’re in a hotel room. This can be awkward, not the least of which because the size of the department’s budget often determines the size of the room you’re interviewing in. And it has been said that sometimes candidates end up sitting on hotel beds during their interviews. Awk. Ward. Thankfully, we’ve heard of this happening less and less over the last decade, as departments strive to show their professionalism.

But there are still pitfalls of the hotel-room interview seating arrangement, including being seated in a prime, cushy chair that overlooks the beautiful view from the 14th-floor suite, only to realize that the committee is sitting in front of the window and you’re staring into the

noonday sun and can only see their silhouettes. Or there's a lamp in the line of sight to someone's head. Or the graduate student on the committee was asked to sit slightly behind you. We've experienced/heard all of these scenarios, unfortunately. Do not hesitate to put yourself into a position of strength in the interview by adjusting your seating position, slightly (!) moving the chair, or asking for the curtains to be partially closed (and explain that the sun is in your eyes). Then the interview will commence, and you'll be feeling more confident from the start.

Although it's O.K. in some fields to have notes, sometimes they prove more cumbersome than they're worth and you probably won't have time to refer to them. Know what you're going to say before you go in. There are some set questions (which we'll discuss in a subsequent essay) you'll receive at every interview. Know your answers by heart and have them practiced, but deliver them with ease. You know your stuff! At the end of the 20-40 minute interview, they'll ask if you have questions.

It's likely you won't be able to take notes then, unless you're really good at listening intently while writing. Make eye contact instead and you'll better remember what they said. If one of them has stopped to answer the phone, pause and keep going. After they have answered your questions, you can make the decision about whether you would like to offer to leave copies of syllabuses or other materials you have brought with you to wow them during their final deliberations (that were not in your mailed application packet). Often, a committee will have asked you a question – such as how you would teach a grad course on Y – and you happen to have a syllabus for just that. Perhaps you were even quick enough to reveal your brilliant syllabus at the moment of that question. If not, you can wait until the end. Do ensure that the syllabuses, assignment prompts, or other materials are directly relevant for that institution. They will be impressed if you created a syllabus for one of their catalog courses

that they would potentially like you to teach.

When the interview finishes (and don't just ask questions to ask questions — two or three is plenty, unless you feel the situation warrants more), they will thank you and you will thank them. Shake everyone's hand, if it's appropriate, and leave. Do not elbow the next person waiting for an interview. You are better than that.

Go down the hall to the elevator (out of eye- and ear-shot), or go to the hotel lobby/bar and jot down your reactions to the interview (both personal and professional) as well as any particular questions they asked you about classes or research so that you can follow up when you get asked back for an on-campus interview.

If they asked how you can teach X class and you did not have a syllabus with you, remember to create one and take it with you to the on-campus interview. Also jot down your gut reactions to the interview. Was it invigorating? Bristly? Fun? Did you sense tension of some kind? Remember that these are the people you may end up working with, and these informal notes will go a long way toward helping you decide the institutions from which you want to accept or politely decline on-campus interviews (if you're in the position to turn down interviews — and as rock stars, I expect you might be!).

Make sure to use the restroom, drink water, and eat something, and then head out to your next interview. Remember that it's two miles away and you have scheduled 30-45 minutes to get there. Walk quickly or taxi it. Then repeat. ■

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DON'T BE A SNOB

By Kathryn Hume

Even if you find at a campus visit that an institution isn't for you, never show a lack of interest, writes Kathryn Hume.

An R-1 university job hunter named X got a campus interview at a state university, one that does not register very high on East or West coast radar thanks to regional prejudices. This is, however, a tenure-track, 2-2 job at an institution with a Ph.D. program, so whatever s/he [hereafter he to simplify] may have thought he knew about the university or the part of the country, he should have been seriously interested in the job. As it was, his campus behavior was so marked that I heard about it a few days later from a friend of a friend.

Whenever X was asked whether he had questions about the institution, he said no. About the department: no. When asked whether he would like to see the town: no. When shown the library and asked if he wished to see any of its special collections: no. X had done no research on the hiring committee members, so did not know which ones were from his field and which

were not. He knew nothing about anyone's research there. In short, he came across as a snotty person who despised the university, people, and job, one who was clearly not interested in it and was wasting their scant money and time.

What bothers me about this is the gruesome lack of political savvy (or training) that this demonstrates. Here are some things that all candidates should realize.

Any specialty is a small field, and X will be meeting these same people over and over in the next 30 years at conferences. They will read his articles for journals or his book for a press. If they remember him as a supercilious snob, that will not incline them favorably to his work. If X gets a job somewhere and then tries for another elsewhere some years later, he might very well find someone from that snubbed university already at the new place, and that department will be

told that X is uncollegial and stuck up — and he may not advance to the list of finalists.

Here is another consideration. Stories get around, and six degrees of separation in the academic world will take your story anywhere that you most prefer it not to go. From that university to someone else to me to various friends and local students and now to *Inside Higher Ed*. Information travels. Does X realize that he has become a bogey used to horrify and educate job hunters at two universities already, only three weeks after the interview? He is right there with an assistant professor who made an extremely stupid political mistake in material put up on Facebook, which I learned about in the same week from friends and used in the same professionalism session as this case. Does he realize that his behavior also reflects on the institution where he was trained, on the way it professionalizes graduate students and on how it influences their attitudes? He clearly does not understand how anyone connected to an institution — university or business — is enmeshed in a variety of invisible networks, and he can never again act purely as an individual; the institutional networks will be affected by what he does.

Campus visits are a great time for enriching cross-pollination of ideas. You learn how that college teaches its service courses (as opposed to the system that was sacred and not-to-be-criticized at your doctoral university). You meet faculty as equals. In most colleges, you deal with the people you meet on a first-name basis, something that may not have been common when you were a graduate student. You talk with great intensity, often one-on-one, and can find points of shared interest with a great many people. They genuinely want to know about you as a scholar and as a teacher. Some teaching technique that you rely on may be of great interest to one of your interlocutors. Some digital assignment you like may strike them as worth trying. The same, obviously, goes for what you can learn from them. You need to absorb all you can about this college and what it might offer so that you can make an informed choice should

you have the rare option, these days, of more than one offer.

Visit any college with an open mind. Regional prejudices are often ill-founded. Find out how well the other faculty members (from all over the country) enjoy living there.

You will probably be surprised. Elitist assumptions are almost certainly inaccurate; nearly 40 years of mostly bad job markets mean that very bright people with prestigious Ph.D.s doing genuine research are teaching at non-elite institutions. Even if you decide you do not wish to be there, it probably has some particular virtue, and that might be something to bargain for elsewhere.

Pre-judging a college can be spectacularly mistaken. Some job hunters have found, for instance, that a very elite institution in a highly desirable city left the visitor to find his or her way in from the airport (quite complicated by public transport, but a taxi would have cost \$100), left the candidate to find the way from the hotel to a distant restaurant, and generally did nothing to make a stranger welcome. Another prestigious state university, on closer inspection, proved not to have had raises for several years and suffered from a fairly toxic atmosphere of personal infighting and snubbing, including misbehaving rather badly to the visitor at a lunch. One job hunter was overjoyed to get a campus interview at a Ph.D.-granting university in a state system, only to be told in private by several junior faculty members, “Don’t come here. You’ll bitterly regret it.”

The people you meet on campus visits could become professional friends and read articles in progress for you. They might collaborate in setting up sessions at conferences or editing collections. Everyone you meet in your during a campus visit is a potential colleague there or elsewhere. You should not throw away this vital chance of enlarging your personal network. ■

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BOTCHING THE INTERVIEW

By Eliza Woolf

Eliza Woolf recounts her mistakes when going up for a nonacademic job.

““ Can you tell me about yourself?” This is the most common – and, for me, dreaded – question asked of job candidates during nonacademic interviews. And since finishing my Ph.D., I’ve found myself invited to answer it on several occasions. While such an open-ended query need not be intrinsically more challenging than pointed questions about research or teaching interests, I nonetheless find it incredibly difficult to sell myself in terms unrelated to my advanced degree.

Like many other would-be scholars contemplating Plan-Bs outside academe, I’m still learning how to construct a compelling and legitimate employment narrative, one capable of both justifying my life choices thus far and translating skills learned in the academy into terms understandable and attractive to a potential nonacademic employer.

For example, my response to this soft-ball question in a real one-on-one interview setting for an editorial assistantship at a commercial publishing house began something like this: “Well, I hold a Ph.D. in history and have received several postdoctoral fellowships since completing my doctoral program last year. While these positions have enabled me to continue researching and writing history, I’ve come to realize that I’m much

more interested in pursuing a career in publishing rather than in academe....”

I honestly don’t remember what else I said as I struggled to describe my circuitous career path and lack of nonacademic work experience, only that my initial opening statement was flawed from the outset. Rather than demonstrating how my educational background, career goals, and personal interests made me an ideal fit for the position, my off-the-cuff response raised more questions than answers. If anything it demonstrated a questionable commitment to the world of commercial publishing. Given that this was my first foray into the unfamiliar realm of full-time nonacademic employment, this impression wasn’t too far off the mark: I was more curious than committed.

Things got worse for me as the interview progressed. When asked if I would miss university teaching, I admitted that most students write atrociously and don’t want to come to class anyway, and that consequently I would greatly prefer to read, edit, and discuss the work of educated scholars and other authors on a daily basis. During the copywriting test I not only corrected typos and misspellings as instructed but also pointed out poor grammatical constructions and sloppy writing. I don’t think this is what they were looking for,

however. I also openly acknowledged that I had no intention of giving up my scholarship but planned to continue it on the side or even during periods of down time at the office. (A very serious no-no as it turns out. But for the reason this issue came up in the first place, see question 7 below.)

Other questions asked at the editorial assistantship interview included:

1. What three words would your references use to describe you?
2. What three words would you use to describe yourself?
3. What is your greatest weakness?
4. Can you meet deadlines?
5. Are you detail oriented?
6. Can you handle a busy office environment?
7. Some aspects of this job will involve repetitive or dull tasks. Will that bother you? How will you cope if things start to lag?
8. When can you start, and what are your salary expectations?

While these questions may seem like no-brainers in comparison to those asked during interviews for tenure-track academic positions, they're most certainly not. Nor are they to be taken lightly or answered without preparation, especially by Ph.D.s such as myself lacking real-world employment experience. Hiring managers take initial interviews very seriously; they're looking to employ someone who fits the bill precisely, and there are plenty of other candidates for them to choose from if one mucks up, like I did, during the first round of interviews.

For me, performing well meant coming up with six well-chosen adjectives on the spot to describe how I am perceived by others as well as how I perceive myself (see questions 1 and 2 above). Again, I answered these seemingly uncomplicated questions all wrong, choosing adjectives like determined, ambitious, and motivated rather than friendly, hard working, and likable — attributes better suited to an entry-level position. I characterized my greatest weakness

as a difficulty letting go of projects, an answer that prompted additional questions about whether I was truly capable of meeting deadlines. As countless former Ph.D. job seekers have since warned me, employers in the private sector are always concerned that academics cannot or will not meet deadlines, so my self-proclaimed weakness turned out to be a poor choice indeed.

I also took missteps as the interview wound down and they opened the floor for my questions. First, I inquired about internal advancement opportunities and how quickly they occur, and then I asked whether or not editorial assistants have any real input in the publication process or are more or less office gofers during their temporary stint at the bottom of the totem pole. (The latter question came across much less abrasive at the time.)

Worst of all, I accidentally dropped my poker face when the hiring manager revealed the shockingly low, non-negotiable salary details for the position. No one wants to hire someone who thinks they deserve better than the job in question, particularly if the job entails working as the primary interviewer's personal assistant.

At this point I'm sure I could catalog this experience under the "What NOT to say during a nonacademic job interview" category; although it is true that my performance sounds worse in retrospect, and that I'm selectively revealing my most appalling moments. I did have the entire contents of the publishing house's 2007 and 2008 catalogs memorized; a firm grasp of the company's history, current market, and potential for growth; and an understanding that the future of commercial publishing lay primarily in e-books. In this sense, I was well prepared.

But what most depressed me about the whole experience was actually not my lackluster performance but the fact that my potential boss and her colleagues were all the same age as me, if not younger, and that the rest of the candidates lined up to interview for the position were 21-24 year olds. I may have had a Ph.D.

to distinguish myself but I no longer had my youth or a recent internship or coursework, or any relevant work experience for that matter, to set me above these fresh-faced college graduates. Additionally, I had serious post-Ph.D. debts to pay off and couldn't afford to leave the ivory tower on a permanent basis for less than \$25K per year.

When a slim rejection letter arrived in my mail box several weeks later, I was already convinced that an editorial assistantship wasn't for me. In fact, I was convinced the moment the interview concluded and I saw the other young, genuinely eager job

candidates waiting in the wings. Yet I learned a great deal from this experience. I realized that preparing for a nonacademic interview doesn't mean simply memorizing details from an organization's website or checking out books from the library: I'd have to learn to sell myself too.

Readers, do you have any embarrassing nonacademic job interview stories you would like to share with Inside Higher Ed? Or am I the only Ph.D. (or A.B.D) out there who routinely puts her foot in her mouth in untried, high-stress situations? ■

Eliza Woolf is the pseudonym of a humanities Ph.D.

DID I SAY THAT OUT LOUD?

By Cheryl Reed and Dawn M. Formo

Cheryl Reed and Dawn M. Formo offer advice on how to prepare for Skype and telephone interviews.

Technology, it seems, has gradually caught up with our intellectual fantasies. We have entered the predicted "convergence culture," in which interactions such as faculty interviews are

portable and shaped by media, and have evolved beyond a merely physical space.

Either that, or our current economic woes have made us more appreciative of connections that involve

(free) software instead of dashes through airports.

Whatever the reason, it's becoming more and more common for hiring committees in national searches to use telephone and Skype (with or without video) for what was once the "conference" interview. Institutions are warming to the potential for Skype (the greatest thing for distance collaboration since e-mail!) to connect far-flung colleagues. No long, expensive treks to conferences: conduct your faculty interviews for free, right from a laptop in your conference room.

What does this mean for faculty job candidates? How is the Skype interview different from a face to face Q&A? As you can imagine, the use of "new" media interjects a whole new dynamic into a traditionally social scene.

On the up side, "telephonic" (verbal-only) exchanges allow you to focus entirely on the information being exchanged. Without the face-to-face visuals to distract you ("What is that search committee member frowning about?"), you can concentrate on the questions being asked and the points you want to get across. No need to dress up — you can interview in your bathrobe, scratch your nose, chew your nails, and consult your notes at will. Visual communicators may feel like they're interviewing blind, without the usual cues they rely on to interpret responses. But in the verbal interview, the entire focus is the pure exchange of ideas, something most of us came to grad school to experience. Just lock the cat in the bedroom and wait for the call.

On the other hand, a connection with visuals poses an interesting mix of the thrills of the face-to-face interview and the spills of the technologically mediated exchange. You will be visible to committee members during the whole exchange (at least from the waist up -- with current configurations you do still have the option to interview in shorts, if you choose). However, you may not be able to see your interviewers. There may be a lag between being asked a question and seeing the expression on the face of the person behind it. In fact, the camera may be pointed the wrong way

for you to gauge reactions to your responses at all. We recall one interview where the candidate's view was a lovely tabletop with the hint of a window in the distance as she listened to the disembodied voices emanating from her laptop.

So, how to prepare? In October, we recommended that you think through possible answers to hard questions and get very comfortable with "talking" about yourself on paper. Now's the time to take it verbal. One of the best ways we've found to do this is the mock interview. Mock interviews force you to articulate all those fabulous responses lodged in your head and outlined in your notes -- in real time. With real people. Who have real responses. Now, of course, in the mock interview these people will probably be your friends and peers, if not your instructors. But they'll give you a chance to hear yourself respond: how you organize your thoughts, present your ideas, react to surprises. How you sit, how you pause, how you breathe, or sneeze, or clear your throat. (We'll stop there for propriety's sake.)

Now's the time to realize how hard it is to talk about yourself out loud. We're all trained from conception onwards not to praise ourselves. Go ahead. Try it right now. Try out one of those stellar answers you've mapped out in your head. Say something nice about yourself, right out loud. Feel silly? Sort of like when the mail carrier catches a glimpse of you in the middle of your Xtreme Cardio Fat-Blasting Black-Ops Kickbox workout? We seem to have a social taboo against being in process, and we cover that with humor (or worse, vagueness and self-deprecation). It's even harder when you're facing a friend, colleague, or someone you hope will become a colleague instead of your own image in the bathroom mirror. Mock interviews will help you wear that self-deprecating gene right out of your body.

Mock interviews can also help you find out how your body language reflects whether or not you're happy to answer a question. What does your face do when you're pausing to pull your thoughts together?

“Go ahead. Try it right now. Try out one of those stellar answers you’ve mapped out in your head. Say something nice about yourself, right out loud. Feel silly? Sort of like when the mail carrier catches a glimpse of you in the middle of your Xtreme Cardio Fat-Blasting Black-Ops Kickbox workout?”

Do you cover your mouth when you talk? Mumble? Grind your teeth, rub your nose, bite your nails, massage your temples, peel your cuticles, or squint before each answer? Would your mom tell you to sit up straight? We all do these moves, and in face-to-face encounters, our listeners have many modes to consult in order to interpret our message. In the virtual interview, listeners have only image and sound. Just make sure both are working for you.

The mock interview can also be a good run-through with the technology. You don’t want to find out during the interview that you, for example, are distracted by hearing your own breathing (or wonder if your interviewers think you’re panting because that microphone is so darn close to your mouth).

Practice/strategize how to get through the inevitable glitches gracefully, with good humor. And if the video feature in Skype is on and you want to see each questioner, get comfortable asking interviewers to turn the camera. The mock interview can help the technology become the background noise it should be instead of a phantom presence during the interview.

If your institution doesn’t have a formal mock interview set up for you (and it probably won’t), get with others in your same position: your peers. Interview each other over and over until you are all tired of

hearing about it, and owe each other for life. Hit the questions that scare you; hit the big three (teaching, research, service):

- Walk me into your classroom. What are you teaching? How? How do students respond?
- Tell me about your research. What are your plans going forward?
- What kinds of committee service interest you?

This will feel awkward at first. The tendency is to kid around, creating intentional “bloopers” and outtakes. That’s pretty much the way all mock interviews start out. It’s just the way social beings get through uncomfortable interactions. But once you’re through the initial nervous silliness, get serious. Your interviewer(s) should not let you off the hook. Make them ask you the hard questions. Make yourself answer them. Then ask how you did, and go again. Once you get the hang of it, the actual interview can feel like a lively conversation among colleagues. We’ve both had interviews like that. No reason you can’t. ■

Cheryl Reed, who teaches at San Diego Miramar College, and Dawn M. Formo, who teaches at California State University at San Marcos, are the co-authors of [Job Search in Academe: How to Get the Position You Deserve \(Stylus\)](#).

THE INTERVIEW IN THE SCIENCES

By Prodigal Academic

A faculty member shares tips for candidates for tenure-track jobs.

It is interview season in my fields, and we have a few searches going on here. I know I've blathered on about interviews here, here, and here before, but more tips can't hurt, right? Here are a few things I've been noticing this time around:

- You MUST be able to answer questions/think on your feet. If this is a weakness, practice! When you give a practice talk, ask your colleagues, friends, or labmates to grill you. Even the best prepared talk will not erase that "deer in the headlights" look.
- You should be able to articulate the central problem(s) your lab will be working on and how many people you need to do this.
 - Both your job talk AND your chalk talk need to be accessible to people outside your sub-field. Everyone gets a say on the candidates (even if only the committee votes).
 - Your research plans should look like they will last more than the next three to five years.
 - Be ready to answer questions about your competitor labs. Who are they? What will be special/different/better about your lab or approach? What is your edge? Do not position yourself in competition

with your advisor(s) if you can avoid it.

- You should be able to articulate clearly why you need anything on your start-up list (especially the really expensive stuff and/or stuff you could potentially share) AND talk about the research significance of the resulting data.
 - You don't need to propose formal collaborations, nor do you need to know what everyone in the department is doing before you arrive. However, if after meeting with someone one-on-one, you see a new overlap possibility, it is a great idea to mention it in your chalk talk! We had someone do this to nice effect.
 - Try to behave like a colleague (but not an arrogant ass). If you feel and act like a student or postdoc, the faculty will respond to you like one. If you feel and act like a colleague, the faculty will see you as one.
 - Be nice to the students! We listen to them.
- Good luck to all those on the tenure-track job hunt this year!

Prodigal Academic is the pseudonym of a scientist and blogger.

FUMBLER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

By Claire B. Potter

Claire B. Potter reviews the most common mistakes and how to avoid them.

As has been frequently indicated over the four years of my blog's existence, Interviewing R Us. Why? Well, it is probably not too modest to say that over the years we have interviewed a great many people in hotel rooms, been interviewed by more than a few hiring committees ourselves, and have hung out in the bar afterward talking to other hiring committees about what they saw that day. Over time, we have developed a perspective on what works and what doesn't. It isn't the only perspective, but to paraphrase Monty Python, it is the perspective which is ours.

So for those of you lucky enough to have American Historical Association or Modern Language Association interviews, here is our list of the most frequent fumbles and how to avoid them.

Know how to talk about your dissertation. You newbies out there would be shocked to know how many of you blow it coming right out of the gate. When you can't talk intelligently about your own work, my friend, you have a 98 percent chance of being absolutely dead in the water for the rest of the interview.

It is a lead-off question understood from the

perspective of the hiring committee as an icebreaker. It is a big, fat softball that we toss up there, gleaming white, intended to set you at ease as you triumphantly hit it out of the park and then relax, showing us your very best self for the rest of the interview. And yet, so many of you -- probably half of the people I have met in a hotel room for this purpose -- get this deer in the headlights look, and before you know it I can hear my beloved Phillies announcer Harry Kalas in my mind saying: "It's a ... SWING! andamiss."

So don't sit there with a look on your face that says, "Huh? Dintcha read my letter?" Don't, if you are a historian, go off on a long, rambling narrative that is some combination of an extended, muddled chapter outline and a nighty-night story that happens to be historical. Don't talk to me about the IWW as if this is something I have never heard about and you are rescuing it from the ash bin of history. Do have the following prepared:

- A concise, five-minute statement that identifies the specifics of the topic; any interesting people who are part of the project; the archives you are using that are either new or that you are reinterpreting; why your archives are new/in need of reinterpretation; the

scholarship that influenced your choice of topic; and a statement on how you are improving on or adding to that scholarship.

- A sentence about how far along you are and when you will be finished that matches what your dissertation adviser has said.

- That's all: five minutes, then stop. Remember, the whole interview is between half an hour and forty-five minutes, so if you ramble on about what they have already read, they won't have any time to get more information about you, which is what this interview is at least partly about.

- Next comes the opportunity for the committee to ask you questions about your thesis. This is what you are leaving all that extra time for. You have no way of anticipating what they will ask except to do your homework on the faculty in the room ahead of time and make informed guesses about what their interest in your work will be. But as part of this phase of the interview, you should make sure you squeeze in:

- A statement about methodology.
- Reasons why you chose this particular topic to write about that you can link to your enthusiasm for the field more generally.

- A reference to some feature of your research that allowed you to do something creative in the classroom.

- A name-dropping opportunity. Feel free to mention one scholar who doesn't work at your university, and with whom you have discussed your research or appeared on a panel, but make it substantive. This doesn't make you look connected; it means you are connected. Extra points if you are a male-bodied person and the scholar you name-drop is a woman.

- Know how to talk about the courses you will be asked to teach. Seems like a no-brainer, eh? But here are the ways I have seen this portion of the interview tank:

- When asked about a period survey, the candidate talks about one small part of that period.

This is a particularly egregious interview flaw if you are an Americanist, because whatever else might be challenging about our field, the amount of time we must cover in a semester tends not to exceed 200 years. There is one excellent graduate school that seems to churn out candidates who all interview as if they are prepared to teach the period of their dissertation and no more. It is just stunningly weird to hear someone talk about the colonial history survey, for example, as if it only had to cover the years between 1688 to 1724. But it also reveals you as narrow in your interests and knowledge -- narrower, perhaps, than you actually are.

- A candidate being asked why s/he chose a particular book and not being able to say. This makes us think that the syllabus you are talking about is from a course you T.A.'d for, or worse, a course you pulled off the web. Yes, I have heard of people on search committees being handed their very own syllabus by a complete stranger. This, by the way, makes you look like a psychopath.

- A candidate saying sincerely that s/he believes in the Socratic method (which in and of itself makes it sound as though you have never actually taught at all) and not being able to say what that means in a real live 21st-century classroom.

- Prepare at least two courses you would like to teach. Common ways people screw this up?

- Not having thought about this at all. True.
- Proposing a course that is a slight variation on the survey they will be responsible for.

- Proposing a course that someone, perhaps someone who is actually in the room, already teaches and seeming to be completely unaware of that.

- Particularly if the interview is going well, you should fall into a happy, general conversation in the last 10 minutes or so, so that even if you aren't specifically asked about new courses, these are good to have in your hat to show them an aspect of yourself they might not have seen.

- Don't trash a search committee that evening

in the hotel bar. Leave the hotel and go far, far away if you must trash a search committee, and even then make sure you have your back against a wall and a good view of the door.

- Extra points if you don't go on the job wiki following the interview to leave a few observations about what \$hit heads those on the interviewing committee were and how unappreciated you felt. There are two good reasons you should not report on your experience, other than the fact that it is childish and you probably don't even really believe that you are giving other candidates information that they need (if you did think you were helping them, would you

give it to them? Really?):

- Your view of the interview could be very different from the committee's view. Not only are academics not always aware of it when they are treating people badly (you knew that!), but the people who behaved badly may be marginal to making the decision. Why is this important?

- Because we read the job wikis too, and bitching out the committee could cost you your campus interview. ■

Claire B. Potter is professor of history at the New School. This essay is adapted from a post at her blog, [Tenured Radical](#).

ACING THE INTERVIEW

By Melissa Dennihy

Melissa Dennihy wants you to be prepared.

Job market candidates can spend months preparing written materials such as research statements and teaching philosophies, but invitations to interview usually leave candidates with only weeks or even days to prepare. What are the most important things to do before and during an

interview? Here are a few suggestions for job seekers:

- **Do your research:** Before the interview, learn as much as you can about the department, the faculty, the students, and the institution. What courses does the department offer? What are the research interests of the faculty members you will interview

with? What are the cultural, educational, linguistic, and geographical backgrounds of students? What resources, opportunities, or innovative initiatives does the institution have that you would be eager to make use of or become involved in? You probably already did some research to write your cover letter for the position — and, presumably, did a good job of it, since you've landed an interview—but now is the time to both refresh your memory and dig even deeper. Knowing as many specifics as possible will make your answers to questions more successful, and also gives the impression that you want this job, and not just any job.

- **Know what to expect:** Interview committees can consist of as many as eight people, and it can be overwhelming to walk into a room and find so many unfamiliar faces staring expectantly at you. Try to determine beforehand how large the interviewing committee will be and who will be on it (it's not unreasonable to ask the committee chair for this information if you can't find it out on your own). As you interview, continually remind yourself to make eye contact with each committee member, no matter how many there are. You should also be prepared for the possibility that one or more committee members may not be faculty in the department you are interviewing with — representatives from campus diversity committees or affirmative action programs may also be present, and tend to ask different types of questions than department faculty members.

- **Prepare answers to possible questions, including follow-up questions:** Spend as much time as possible thinking about questions you might be asked and sketching out answers to them. You should also try to anticipate the follow-up questions interviewers might ask in response to your answers. While initial interview questions are fairly easy to predict and prepare for (“tell us about your research”; “describe a successful assignment or practice you use with students”), follow-up questions may be more likely to catch you off guard.

- **Don't say anything that could be offensive or off-putting to committee members:** An example: I teach courses in contemporary multi-ethnic American literature, and when asked in an interview how students respond to these texts, I said, without thinking too carefully, that they find them a lot more relatable than “outdated” writers like Shakespeare — only to find out that one of the interviewers was a Shakespearean scholar. Choosing your words carefully is crucial when interviewing: be sure that you know how to speak with enthusiasm about what you do without being critical, dismissive, or condescending of other research interests and teaching approaches.

- **Bring a teaching portfolio:** Interviews are the time to break that portfolio out: if the committee is interested enough to meet with you face-to-face, they will likely be interested in seeing your teaching materials as well. A compilation of sample syllabi and assignments, student evaluations, and faculty observation reports provides a more in-depth and comprehensive look at your pedagogy and practices than can be gleaned from an interview, and also leaves the committee with a set of materials to remember you by.

- **Know what to do if you are asked to interview virtually:** Using FaceTime, Skype, and other forms of video conferencing to conduct first-round interviews is becoming increasingly common, but virtual interviews require different forms of preparation than face-to-face interviews. For one thing, you need to do all you can beforehand to prevent technical difficulties and practical problems on the day of. Practice by video chatting with a friend or family member prior to the interview, in the same space you will use for the interview itself, and check things like the lighting in the room, the speed and reliability of your internet connection, and the size of your face and volume of your voice from the perspective of the other person. On the day of the interview, do all that you can to ensure the space you are in is free of unwanted noises, distractions, and interruptions — you don't

“You should try to anticipate the follow-up questions interviewers might ask in response to your answers. While initial interview questions are fairly easy to predict and prepare for (‘tell us about your research’; ‘describe a successful assignment or practice you use with students’), follow-up questions may be more likely to catch you off-guard.”

want the cat to hop on your lap or an alarm to start going off as you are answering a question. During the interview, try your best to address and make eye contact with every committee member, even if you find it difficult to see interviewers’ faces clearly. If you can’t hear what is being asked, be sure to say so rather than hoping that you heard the question correctly.

- **Have a few good questions of your own:** Almost every interview ends with the committee asking what questions you have. This is another opportunity to prove that you have done your research: find a few department activities or university initiatives that you would be interested in participating in as a faculty member, and ask questions about these. You should also ask at least one or two questions that show you are thinking about long-term plans and goals (especially if you are interviewing for a tenure-

track position): inquire about tenure and promotion requirements, funding for research and travel, and opportunities for professional development.

- **Be likeable:** As impossible as this might seem, try your best to relax and be yourself during the interview. Committee members are looking for a promising scholar and capable teacher, but also for someone they will enjoy working with, and, in the case of tenure-track hires, potentially having around for years to come. Don’t let nerves or anxiety make you seem awkward or robotic—smile, laugh, be friendly, and be relaxed. Give the impression that you are a colleague others will want to collaborate with. ■

Melissa Dennihy is assistant professor of English at Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York.

LANDING THE JOB

By William Helmreich

William Helmreich explains how to excel in an interview.



If you get an interview, then you've vaulted from one out of 100-200 to a select group of 5-7. Now the competition is much stiffer even as the odds become far better. Here are some critical suggestions and guidelines:

1. **Attire. Dress professionally.** It's expected since it's a job interview. If you feel "that's just not me," then at least wear something between casual and professional. Remember that you'll also be meeting with a dean and possibly even a provost, whose ideas about how to dress are different from those of many faculty members. That said, what to wear does depend, in some cases, on where you're applying, and you have to determine that.
2. **Arriving for the interview.** First, ask to use the restroom. You need to check out your appearance. It's a small, yet crucial detail. I know a fellow who believes it cost him a job. He'd had a piece of cake and a cup of coffee before his interview. When he got there he was ushered in to meet the search committee. He thought it went fine, though he felt some unease in the room. As he left he went to the restroom and discovered, to his horror, that there was chocolate around his mouth. "And they looked at me for an hour without saying a word. But

what must they have thought?" he groaned. He didn't get the job.

3. **Discussing your research.** The time to do this is during the formal interview with the committee. But be concise. Remember that they will be looking to see if you're too long-winded. This may give the impression that you lack focus and organization. The question about your long-term interests is very important and they're likely to ask it: "Where do you see yourself 10 years from now?" They're thinking of a possible 10- to 20-year commitment. Project that you're a straight-shooter, but don't do it to the point where honesty becomes synonymous with abrasiveness.
4. **Social situations.** At lunch, or other social opportunities, focus on the research your interviewers are doing rather than your own if the conversation is an academic one. If it's personal, give them some idea of your interests and background, but try to quickly shift the conversation to their lives. It shows interest in others and also lessens the risk that something about your personal life might turn them off. In general, understand that most people, alas, would rather talk about what they're doing, be it their work or pleasure, than what you're doing.

That's life.

5. **Personality.** In general, being personable is critical. Of course, being intellectually qualified comes first. But then, once you've met the standard in that area, what you're like as a human being becomes crucial. Remember that an academic job is a lifetime gig. No one wants to give tenure to a jerk. If you come across in any way as nasty, conceited, inflexible, weird, in short, "difficult," as they say euphemistically, you're not going to be hired, no matter how smart or productive you are. Why? Because departments are terrified that they'll give someone tenure and then be stuck with a person they hate. In short, they don't want to be wrong about this decision. A sense of humor is always helpful. If you don't have one, develop one. You want them to say later that they really enjoyed meeting you.

6. **The job talk.** Assume that most of your audience hasn't read the articles or papers you've sent them. Thus you should play it really safe and discuss something that even people who are completely out of your area will understand. At the same time you should also present some advanced stuff so that no one will say your talk was simplistic. Keep track of your time limit. By this time of the day the search committee is getting tired in general and some of them won't have the patience to listen for very long. Using PowerPoint is fine. It gives people something to look at. Make sure to allow lots of time for questions because that's what they'll most enjoy doing and you certainly don't want them to think you're afraid of being stumped, even if you are!

If they're critical of what you say, don't be defensive.

Acknowledge the possible validity of their comments and then try to respond as best as you can. Never knock a person's question. Saying: "I'm glad you asked that," or "That's an interesting point" is a good way to respond.

Remember that if you in any way embarrass a

questioner, you're probably finished. They'll not only be annoyed; they'll lobby against you.

After the Interview:

Be sure to follow up with a nice thank-you letter telling them how much you enjoyed the day, how much you liked the department, and reiterating your interest in coming. Do it a few days later, while their memory of who you are is still fresh. Of course they'll see it as an effort to land the position, but they still want to hear it. Think of how uninterested you'll look if you don't send a letter.

If you receive an offer, don't be afraid to ask for more money, no matter how good you think the offer is. They have no idea that you think it's a great deal and you shouldn't tell them. No offer was ever rescinded, as far as I know, because someone asked for more; at that stage, you already have the job. More than likely, they'll respect you for it. Be careful with joint appointments. They can make you more attractive to the college, but you need to know the exact deal upfront.

Finally, even if you don't get an offer, it's not necessarily over. Their first choice may have a change of heart and that may result in the committee turning to you.

These ideas, some of them counterintuitive, apply to most, but not all, situations. You must be ready to adapt them to the specific institution.

And above all, keep in mind, that the market is very competitive. That's not surprising when you consider that there are very few jobs that are guaranteed for life, provided you do reasonably well at them for five or seven years. ■

William Helmreich is professor of sociology at City College of the City University of New York and the CUNY Graduate Center and deputy chairman at City College. He is the author or editor of 14 books, including What Was I Thinking?: The Dumb Things We Do and How to Avoid Them (Rowman & Littlefield/Taylor Trade). Helmreich's latest book, The New York Nobody Knows: Walking 6,000 Miles in the City, will be released this fall by Princeton University Press.

2-YEAR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

By Eric Baer

Eric Baer shares questions asked of those seeking to teach at community colleges.

Education and Experience

To help us get to know you better, would you briefly tell us about your education and experience and specifically how it relates to the _____ position at ____ Community College.

- Could you tell us about your experience, how you feel it applies to this position, and what you have to offer to the community college student?
- Can you tell us about what led to your choices of _____ as a field and teaching as a profession?
- Within _____, what is your strongest area of expertise, how did you acquire it, and how have you been able to apply it?
- What skills will you bring to us at _____ Community College, and how do you see these skills fitting into our current offerings?
- The lack of time and resources makes it difficult to pursue significant professional research at a community college. How do your background and future goals fit into this reality?
- What activities and experiences do you have that would strengthen your candidacy for this job?
- Please describe your leadership and management style, giving us examples that

demonstrate this style.

- What have been some of your most satisfactory professional achievements?

Teaching

- Tell us about the best teacher you had. How do you demonstrate these qualities?
- What three personal or professional values do you think are important for an instructor? How do you exhibit these characteristics?
- What is your educational philosophy and how do you implement this philosophy in the classroom?
- What do you believe are the key components/courses that should be included in the _____ curriculum/program. What is your vision of the program five years from now?
- What are the key concepts that should be included in any beginning _____ course?
- What do you want your students to gain from taking a _____ class? What kind of qualities and values do you wish to instill in them?
- What techniques have you used to assure effective communication?
- Describe how you would approach teaching a college-level geology class and, especially, focus on

the outcomes which you expect from a college-level geology learner.

- Of the classes we offer (Geology 101, etc.) which do you feel qualified to teach?

- What forms of technology do you feel you would need to successfully teach Geology at _____?

- What do you find most challenging in teaching _____, and how do you meet these challenges?

- What is the most interesting thing to you about teaching _____?

- Describe your most inspiring teacher and indicate why you found that person to be inspiring.

- How do you see the _____ field changing and how do the changes impact the curriculum you teach?

- Community College and Fit

- What do you understand the community college philosophy to be and how do you feel about that philosophy?

- How interested are you in becoming involved in a learning community, linked courses, or team teaching?

- Community colleges are unique learning institutions as compared to four-year universities, for instance. What contributions will you be able to offer the _____ department, the _____ division, and the campus in general?

- If you were selected for this position, how would you see yourself in the wider scope of campus activities, outside of your role in the classroom?

- What values or qualities would you bring to _____ Community College that would make a positive contribution to the campus? Give us examples of how these values are manifested in your teaching, the work of your students, and in your work at your current institution and its outlying community.

- Some of the courses offered at _____ Community College are a reflection of the faculty interests. For example, a course in marine geology

may be scheduled because a certain instructor likes to teach it. What do you see as a positive and/or negative effect of this arrangement?

- Would you please outline for us your professional goals for the next five years?

- Our classes begin at 7 a.m. and go on until as late as 10 p.m. Are you flexible as to the hours when you would be willing to work?

Working With Diverse Populations/Students

- Would you share your experiences working with a diverse population and provide us with any specific examples of how your personal knowledge, influence, or expertise has helped women or persons of color advance in _____ or other areas?

- You will have students in your classes from a wide range of backgrounds and with a wide range of abilities. What are some strategies you might use to enhance the learning opportunities for all of them?

- How would you deal with the diversity of age, preparation, motivation, and background of your students?

- What experiences and/or studies prepare you to promote the value of and work with a multicultural population?

- What challenges does a culturally diverse classroom present to a teacher, and how do you meet these challenges?

Dealing with Situations/Problems

- A student comes into your office and says he or she is thinking about entering your academic field. How will you respond? What questions would you ask and what advice would you give?

- Please describe a teaching project or new curriculum element that you tried to implement that did not work. Describe why it failed and how you would successfully implement it.

- What is the most difficult student problem you have had to deal with? How did you resolve the problem?

- Some of the current concerns at the

community college level involve student retention. What would you do to encourage retention?

- A student is not prepared for classes, is not getting homework completed, is not attending class daily, and cannot understand why _____ is such a difficult subject. What advice do you give?
- A student received As in other classes with the same effort and is getting Cs in _____. How would you respond to this student?
- Can you give us specific examples of how you have accommodated students who lack language and reading skills, are too immature, and/or are generally underprepared academically for college level courses?
- What does grade inflation mean to you? If there is a problem, do you have suggestions for its solution?
- Describe the worst working or teaching situation that you have been in. How did you handle that situation?
- What kinds of concerns or apprehensions do you have about the position?
- What do you think will be the hardest part of your first year of teaching?
- The following is a hypothetical statement by an instructor. "State law requires the use of lab safety eyewear, but several of our lab exercises do not involve hazardous materials, so I don't require my students to wear their protection in those situations." Comment on your reaction to this statement.

Role of the Faculty

- What values or qualities would you bring to _____ Community College that would make a positive contribution to the campus? Give us examples of how these values are manifested in your teaching, the work of your students, and in your work at your

current institution and its outlying community.

- Aside from the teaching of classes and holding of office hours, what do you think are the components of a faculty member's job?
- What is your idea of what shared governance means? What are you doing in your present assignment that demonstrates your commitment?
- As a faculty member at _____ Community College, you will be called upon to work in many group or team situations, both within your department and across campus. Please share with us what strengths and skills you bring to team work and what strengths and skills you look for in your fellow team members.
- Describe a project that you have been involved in where you had to work collaboratively with your colleagues.

References

- If we could bring your most recent supervisor to this room for a private conversation, what would he or she tell us are your strengths and weaknesses?
- How would your recent supervisor describe the quality of your work and your attitude on the job?
- What would your last class say if we asked them about your strengths and weaknesses?
- How would your present students describe you?

Wrap Up

- Besides your expertise in your field, what would you bring to _____ Community College that you feel makes you an attractive candidate?
- Is there any other information you would like to share with us?
- Do you have any questions for the committee?

Eric Baer teaches geology at Highline Community College.

RELIGIOUS COLLEGE INTERVIEWS

By Susan VanZanten

Susan VanZanten offers advice on some questions that may differ from those you would be asked at secular institutions.

Interview processes at colleges and universities typically cover three areas — scholarly goals, teaching abilities and collegial potential — but if you land an interview at a religiously affiliated institution, you may find some additional emphases, unusual twists, and unexpected encounters. Here's what to expect and how to prepare:

Questions about faith: Perhaps the most surprising experience for some candidates occurs when they are asked personal questions about faith and religious life. At religiously affiliated colleges, these kinds of questions are legally permitted, although inquiries about spouses, marital status, and children are off-limits. If religious faith is deemed an essential part of an institution's mission, a right to raise questions of personal faith and practice is recognized in law, by accrediting agencies, and even by the American Association of University Professors. It's controversial but true; religious institutions are allowed to discriminate on the basis of religious faith.

So at some point during the interview process, you will probably be asked about your faith commitments and activities. If the application process involved writing a spiritual autobiography or faith statement, you might be asked to elaborate on or to explain

further these comments. You also face questions about your church participation and involvement, or what kind of volunteer and service work you've done. Other queries might concern the religious tradition in which you were raised, if any, and how you currently view that tradition.

If the college expects that its faculty be supportive of, rather than profess, its religious mission, you may hear questions about how you would respond to a hypothetical hot-button situation. It's helpful to consider how you might act when your personal beliefs differ from the institution's position. Are there ways in which you can, with integrity, hold a different opinion without undermining the college's mission? Are you willing to do so? If you are pro-choice on abortion, would you be willing to work at a Roman Catholic university? On what issues would you agree to disagree respectfully, and what issues are deal-breakers for you or the college?

Questions about teaching: Because most religious colleges are primarily teaching institutions, you will probably face more questions about your teaching than about your scholarship. Although many graduate schools prepare job seekers for an initial question about their dissertation, at a religious college, it is far

more likely that you will be grilled about your teaching experiences, strengths, weaknesses, and philosophy. I often open an interview by asking candidates how their specialized dissertation work is going to influence or affect their teaching, and I'm sorry to report that this

question has stumped many.

Other unexpected questions might concern the ways in which you anticipate bringing questions regarding faith, religion, ethics, or morality into the classroom and advising. Are you able or willing to draw

“Because religious colleges emphasize their communal identities, issues of collegiality may play more of a role here than at other kinds of institutions. Faculty, such colleges hope, will want to join the mission, become part of the community, pull for the greater good rather than solely achieve individual success.”

on some of the resources of the sponsoring religious tradition (Catholic social thought, Reformed culture-transformation, or Jewish ethics) in your lectures and course material? Will you engage your students in service learning and ethical reflection? Talk about your own struggles with faith? How would you deal with a student who came to you experiencing a crisis of faith?

These questions aren't reasons for you to pretend to be what you aren't — many religious colleges will not expect you to share the faith of the institution. So don't fake it, but do think through these issues in advance as they may be new to you in the context of college education. Research and refer to the campus resources on which you could draw in such situations, such as the college chaplain or the department of religion.

Questions about collegiality: Because religious colleges emphasize their communal identities, issues of collegiality may play more of a role here than at other kinds of institutions. Faculty, such colleges hope, will want to join the mission, become part of the community, pull for the greater good rather than solely achieve individual success.

While overt questions about collegiality may be few,

be aware that you will be constantly under scrutiny as a potential colleague. Obviously, you will be expected to do your share of academic advising and committee work, and you should indicate your willingness to do so. But a religiously affiliated institution will also want to know if you are willing to work with students in other extracurricular ways, such as advising a campus Amnesty International club, helping students organize a community garden, or leading a prayer group. Even at institutions that expect everyone to share the same faith, there are a variety of ways to become involved in holistic education; not every faculty member will be expected to speak in chapel or lead Bible studies.

Questions you should ask: During the interview process, you will, of course, be given opportunities to ask questions. Do some preparatory work so that your questions will go beyond basic information about the religious tradition and mission that can be obtained from the college website. Ask questions in such a way as to indicate that you are familiar with the college's religious affiliation but are curious to learn more.

For example, you could ask, how are faculty expected to contribute to the college's religious mission? To what degree should faith-related issues be addressed in the classroom? What are the expectations that

faculty be involved with extracurricular programs? Is faculty scholarship expected to be implicitly or explicitly informed by faith perspectives? Are there faculty development opportunities to learn about the college's tradition? How are trustees selected?

If you are interviewing at a “critical mass” institution, one where a segment of faculty are required to adhere to a specific religious tradition, and you would be one of the “outsiders,” ask to speak with a current “outside” faculty member. You need to identify the degree to which an in-group/out-group dynamic operates. Feelings of marginalization can occur on either side. Faculty outside the religious tradition may feel marginalized (“They always give the best teaching assignments to the Baptists!”) but faculty identifying with the tradition may feel exploited (“Why do I have to serve on every new committee — just because I’m a Lutheran?”).

Kinds of interviews: Expect a variety of groups to be asking mission-related questions; religious colleges will often have an all-campus interview committee discussing faith, teaching, and community involvement. Representatives from the School of Theology or Religion or an administrator in charge of the religious mission may also be involved. It’s highly likely you will speak with many people outside the department and its dean. Be honest, be open, and be curious. ■

Susan VanZanten is professor of English at Seattle Pacific University, a Christian institution with a statement of faith. Her new book is [Joining the Mission: A Guide for \(Mainly\) New College Faculty \(Wm. B. Eerdmans\)](#). Her previous essay explored the [reasons some academics may want to apply for jobs at religious colleges](#).

INTERVIEWS AT TEACHING COLLEGES

By John Fea

It’s time to set your research aside and to think about the undergraduate classroom, writes John Fea.

This piece is about interviewing at colleges and universities that stress teaching over research. This, I might add, is the overwhelming majority of colleges and universities. It is important to remember that the phrase “teaching college” can

be applied to a host of different kinds of institutions. Elite and not-so-elite liberal arts colleges, private comprehensive colleges, and non-flagship state universities, for example, would all find a comfortable home in the “teaching college” tent.

This may be stating the obvious, but it is still worth mentioning that committees from these colleges are looking for an excellent teacher. Some may want to hire a “teacher-scholar,” or a person who sees their vocation in terms of blending traditional scholarship and teaching. Others may want someone who is a teacher first and a researcher/writer second. Still others may not give a lick about your research or how many books and articles you hope to churn out over the course of your career. Whatever the case, all of the colleges in this category want a person who not only works well with students, but actually has a desire to do so.

As you might imagine, your “research” is not going to be as important to the search committee at a teaching college as it might be if you were interviewing with a research university. This does not mean that the search committee will not care about your dissertation or book manuscript. In most cases committee members will ask you about your research and, in some cases, may find it quite interesting. You may even find that many of these colleges have incentives in place, such as summer research stipends or course reductions, to help you achieve your research and publication goals. But always remember that teaching comes first.

Do not expect that there will be someone sitting on the other side of the table who understands your subfield. When you explain your research, do it succinctly. Think about how you might explain your current project to a well-educated historian, but not necessarily one who works in your area of expertise.

Whatever you do, DO NOT ramble on about your research or your long-term scholarly agenda. Don’t talk about how you want to write a book every other year or win a Pulitzer Prize someday. This does not mean that you should abandon a scholarly agenda if you accept an offer from a teaching college. What it does mean is that you must be realistic about the kinds of things you can accomplish. Don’t present yourself as Superman or Wonder Woman -- a (potential) teaching college professor who hopes to pursue a scholarly

agenda fitting for a research university. Remember, at some of these colleges you may end up teaching four courses a semester!

Any blathering on about your research agenda will only draw chuckles (hopefully not to your face) from the seasoned professors who are interviewing you. If you wonder just how much research you can get done at such a college, it does not hurt to politely ask if scholarly work is possible in light of the teaching load and/or committee work. You will probably get an honest answer, and, hopefully, a sympathetic one.

There will be some interviews in which the members of a search committee do not even ask you about your research. Don’t be offended by this or assume that it means that you will not be able to do scholarly work at this place. The search committee members probably looked at the description of your research in your cover letter and thought it was fine. They just want to use the 45 minutes of interview time to hear about what you will do for them in the classroom.

If you have not figured it out by now, you will be asked a lot of questions about teaching. The search committee is going to be very interested in learning about how you will plug in to both the department’s AND the college’s curriculum. In history, you may be asked if you feel prepared to teach general education courses in subjects such as Western Civilization or World Civilization (even if you are an American historian). You may be asked if you would be interested in teaching interdisciplinary courses in something like a first-year core curriculum. Think in advance about how you might respond to these questions. To get a sense of what the teaching load might look like for the average member of the history department, go to the college’s website and see if you can access the course listings from recent semesters. See what each professor in the department is teaching. (You may want to surprise the committee and, at some point during the interview, say something like this: “Professor X, I see that you’re teaching two sections of HIS 242 this coming semester. Is this a usual course

“Whatever you do, DO NOT ramble on about your research or your long-term scholarly agenda. Don’t talk about how you want to write a book every other year or win a Pulitzer Prize someday. This does not mean that you should abandon a scholarly agenda if you accept an offer from a teaching college. What it does mean is that you must be realistic about the kinds of things you can accomplish.”

load?” Impressive!

When you suggest possible courses that you can teach, don’t get cute. In other words, don’t lead off with a proposal for a 400-level course on the subject of your dissertation. If the committee wants you to teach a course like this, they will present you with an opportunity to talk it about. (Perhaps they might ask you to think about a topic for a senior seminar or something similar).

What they really want to know is whether or not you can teach some of the courses that are already on the books. If you are in history and are an early Americanist, they want to know if you can teach a course in colonial America or the American Revolution. Be familiar with the department’s curriculum. Make it clear that you can plug in where you are needed, but also be ready with something unique you might be able to offer, such as a course in American religious history or global women’s history or Native American history or Ghandi’s India. Suggesting these kinds of “general” upper-division courses is different from suggesting courses such as “Sexuality in Colonial New England” or “Sub-Altern Themes in South East Asia” or “Exploring the Working Class Experience in the Great Depression Through Film.”

There is also a good chance that the committee will ask you about your teaching philosophy. (Do you have one?) More specifically, they may want to know how you handle a class. How often do you lecture? What about class discussions? Do you use primary sources? If so, which ones? What textbooks might you use for a survey course? Feel free to ask your own questions during this discussion. How large are

the classes? What are the students like?

Remember, the people who are interviewing you have done a lot of teaching. It is unlikely that you will completely blow them away with your innovative classroom strategies. They are more interested to see if you will be a competent teacher (or slightly better than competent) who takes the practice very seriously.

Always remember that teaching college search committees will not only be listening to the content of your answers, but they will also be observing your personality, your style of speaking, and how you carry yourself. They will be imagining how you will come across to their students. If you are passionate and enthusiastic during the interview, they will probably conclude that you are also that way in the classroom. This is a good thing. If you are boring and dry during the interview, well....

Finally, in order to win over a search committee from a teaching college, you need to show them during the interview that you want to work at their institution. This is hard to fake. If they sense that you see this job as a stepping stone to a position at a research university, you can probably kiss the job goodbye. Also remember that the members of any search committee, but especially a committee at a small teaching college, are looking for a colleague. Have you considered that you just might spend the next 20 or 30 years working with some of these people? I guarantee that they have thought about it. ■

John Fea is chair and associate professor of history at Messiah College.

INTERVIEWS IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

By Sonja Ardoin

Sonja Ardoin tells you how to prepare and what to expect.

Let's pretend you have located an amazing job, decoded the description, and sent in all the required application materials. On the basis of your fantastic résumé and well-written cover letter that aligned your experiences and skills to the job description, you have now landed an interview. Congratulations! First things first in the interview stage: You will need to reflect and do your homework (those do not end with graduate school, sorry!).

Sell transferable skills. Reflecting on your transferable skills inside and outside of your formal job(s) is an important preparation method for interviews. This means getting out of your functional area box to consider how overarching skills can be sold to employers — experience in tasks such as supervising, advising, strategic planning, budget management, event planning and execution, crisis management, assessment and data interpretation, presenting and facilitating, collaboration and partnership, social justice and diversity, and so on. Theoretically, you use these skills in every functional area. The question is whether you can market your experiences and skills to an employer in a functional area different from the one(s) in which you have

worked in the past. Can you? If not, you need to think critically and holistically to consider how you may be able to assure a future employer that your transferable skills matter and will be useful in a new context.

This is particularly true if you are trying to switch functional areas. For example, if your current (and former) roles were within the area of residence life and you hope to find a new role in the student union or student center, it will be key to show the employer how your facility management role with managing a residence hall and supervising resident assistants translates into an ability to oversee union spaces and work with student and community organizations. Or, if you want to switch from fraternity and sorority life to accountability/ conduct/judicial, it would be important to showcase how your on-call rotation, crisis management, and conduct-hearing experiences in fraternity and sorority life have given you a foundation to work with the conduct/judicial area. In short, make it clear to the employer that even if you do not have direct experience in the functional area, you do have transferable skills that are precisely applicable to the new role.

Do your homework. Employers want to see

that you are interested more in their job rather than in just any job. To show attentiveness, you have to do your homework. Yes, this is what it sounds like. You need to spend quite a bit of time learning about the institution, the division, the functional area, and the location. You should read websites, the local newspaper, the student newspaper, and so on. Talk to people you know who attended or worked at the institution. Remember that you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you, and you need to assess if the campus and community culture will suit you. And, if nothing else, analyze any materials that the employers provide prior to the interview. If they give you a list of people with whom you will be interviewing, look them up. If they tell you where you will be dining during the interview, check out the venue and the menu. But please do not wait for them to provide you with materials. It is your responsibility to find information and use it in your interview responses and in your interview questions to the employer. Be prepared. Be informed. This “test” matters more than any you took in graduate school.

Do your homework on yourself. Although that may sound weird, what I am talking about is reflecting on your skills and experiences and considering how you would answer interview questions that you may face.

Prepare for phone and Skype interviews. When you obtain a phone or Skype interview, you know you have made it into the smaller pool of candidates who the employer believes have the qualifications to do the job, at least based on paper. The first interview is a chance for the employer to determine if there is validity behind the words on your résumé and cover letter. It is also an opportunity for the employer to gauge if your personality could fit into the office and institutional culture. In my opinion, this is the most difficult component of the job search process. I think this because if the choice is a phone interview, it

lacks key components of communication such as eye contact and body language, and if the employer goes with Skype, it creates potential issues with technology and the weird situation where you need to look at the camera on your computer to appear to be looking ahead or up, which means you really are not looking at any of the interviewers and, thus, still miss all the nonverbal communication aspects.

Regardless of the limitations, this first interview carries a lot of weight in the job search process. It is from this pool of candidates that employers will choose their final two to four candidates. So, you need to represent yourself well and make the best impression possible. Suggestions for enabling that include finding a quiet location to hold the call that has a strong phone or Internet connection, managing your time (do not spend more than five minutes on one question), and crafting insightful questions to ask the interview committee. After the call, follow up with a thank-you e-mail the same day to acknowledge your conversation and the time the interview committee took to learn more about you.

Gear up for campus interviews. If you are one of the two to four people whom the institution has chosen to invite for an in-person, campus interview, you need to gear up for a one to three-day marathon interview and plan to answer similar questions for lots of different people. Schedules vary by position and institution, but here is a sample of what a campus interview schedule could include:

Student Activities Position

Candidate: ABC

Department of Student Activities, State University

Thursday, May 14–Saturday, May 16

Thursday, May 14

4:55 p.m. Flight arrives

5:00–6:00 p.m. Check in to hotel; free time

6:00–8:00 p.m. Dinner at local establishment

Friday, May 15

8:00–8:45 a.m. Breakfast at local establishment
8:45–9:00 a.m. Travel to Student Union
9:00–10 a.m. Search committee interview, Student Union Room A
10:00–11:00 a.m. Student panel interview, Student Union Room A
11:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m. Office and campus tour
12:00–12:30 p.m. Benefits information
12:30–1:45 p.m. Lunch at local establishment
1:45–2:00 p.m. Break
2:00–3:00 p.m. Presentation that is open to campus, Student Union Room C
3:00–4:00 p.m. Peer colleagues panel interview, Student Union Room B
4:00–5:00 p.m. Supervisors interview, Student Union Room B
5:00–6:00 p.m. Travel to dinner and brief city tour
6:00–7:30 p.m. Dinner at local establishment
7:30–7:45 p.m. Travel to hotel
Saturday, May 16
9:30 a.m. Check out of hotel
11:00 a.m. Flight departs

See? It is a marathon. The reason for the extensive nature of the on-campus interview is to allow the employers and the candidate (i.e., you) to determine fit. They already think you are qualified for the job because they invited you to campus and are spending a chunk of money to bring you there (and they should be paying for the entirety of your trip!). The purpose of this level of interview is to figure out if you are a solid fit with the office and campus culture. Similarly, the on-campus interview provides you with the chance to get a feel for the job, your colleagues, the campus culture,

and the community to decide if it would suit your needs and wants -- if it is a fit from your perspective!

Along with showcasing your skills and experiences to multiple parties in this interview, your other goal is to show who you are. Let your personality shine through! Laugh. Make (appropriate) jokes. Talk about books you have read recently or TV shows and movies that you enjoy. As I mentioned before, they already think you meet the qualifications, so now they are trying to determine who you are more so than what you can do. The critical aspect of this interview from your perspective is to pay attention to details and ask good, informed, and (sometimes) pointed questions. This is when you watch how colleagues interact with one another and with students. This is when you pay close attention to nonverbal communication when people answer your questions to determine if they are speaking freely or “spinning” their answers. This is when you inquire about salary and benefits if the employer has yet to inform you of those. This is when you, tactfully, bring up any recent media attention the institution received. Again, you are interviewing the employers as much as they are interviewing you! After the interview, follow up with a thank-you e-mail the same day to everyone you met (yes, this takes time and effort), and send an actual thank-you card to both your point of contact and your potential supervisor. ■

*Sonja Ardoin is director of student leadership and engagement at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She is the author of *The Strategic Guide to Shaping Your Student Affairs Career (Stylus)*, from which this essay is adapted.*

INTERVIEW DISASTERS

By Cheryl E. Ball

Even if you think you flubbed a question or two, don't give up on the job or the experience, writes Cheryl E. Ball.

It's the time of year when I start hearing horror stories from job-seekers about how badly they did in preliminary or on-campus interviews. Usually their stories detail how they knocked it out of the park until one particular question, and then everything went to hell.

I know from experience. For instance, during an on-campus interview, I met early in the day with the search committee. I felt pretty comfortable with the committee members (in part because I knew some of them and in part because I wasn't yet convinced it was the right job for me — admittedly, a laissez faire attitude only available to the already jobbed). Until, that is, someone asked me a question about teaching a particular course that I had no good answer for. Just blanked. It was a course I'd never taught before, hoped I would never have to teach, and my jumbled answer showed every bit of that digging-myself-out-of-a-hole feeling. The search committee handled my profound dumbness with aplomb, which I appreciated immensely. Suddenly, I really wanted that job, just as I had let it slip out of reach. The rest of the day, I just tried to be myself and had a blast doing it, knowing that they'd never call me with an offer. The day after I

got home from the visit, they called with an offer. Huh.

These “ruined it” moments don't always end up with job offers, of course. For nearly a decade, I've told scores of graduate students about That One preliminary interview with a Big Ten university and how I bombed it so badly that I nearly left in the middle of it. This particular university would have been a great score for me, but it also never felt like a fit. Still, I felt obligated to apply and try my luck. When I got the interview, I was shocked and chalked it up to the close ties one of my mentors had to the program and people on the interview committee. Maybe they were interviewing me out of obligation, I thought. (In retrospect, I realize now how coveted those preliminary interview slots are, and that a college would never waste time doing someone a favor. But as a graduate student, I didn't have that perspective.)

The interview was a longer one for my field, 45 minutes, which made me nervous, and it didn't help that I managed to spill coffee on myself as I was entering the hotel suite in which it took place. (Note to self: Don't carry coffee into an interview!) I sat and smiled and answered a series of questions about my still-drafty dissertation that included one I

wasn't expecting: Why don't you use X's work in your dissertation? I should have expected this question, and there are several ways to answer this through honesty, deflection, or -- as I did -- sticking one's foot in one's mouth. I didn't like X's work (mostly because I didn't yet recognize its importance for my field), and said it wasn't applicable to my area. Someone later told me that X was the interviewer's dissertation chair. D'oh!

That could have felt like enough of a ruinous moment for me in this interview, in which the dissertation and research "grilling" (as I began to call it in the retellings) continued for 40 minutes of the 45-minute interview. Teaching was not discussed at all, which raised a pit in my stomach.

But the turn for me was the moment the same interviewer asked me, point blank, to "Define Y," which was supposedly my field, as well as a giant,

octopus-like term in my field. I burst out laughing, not even knowing where to begin. Laughter is such an automated response for me that I could not contain it. At that moment, I wanted to vomit. And when I pulled myself together in the next second, I nearly excused myself to leave. I knew then that the job would never be mine, and that was O.K. because I obviously wasn't what they were looking for. Still, I kept it together enough to apologize for laughing and to tell them I wasn't sure how they wanted me to answer because I didn't understand what they were trying to get at. They graciously rephrased the question, asking me to position myself in the field (as if my laughter hadn't already done that) and I answered the question to the best of my ability. And then -- although it likely didn't occur this way because I've conflated the details over the years to tell a better story -- the interview was over. I thanked them and left.

“The search committee handled my profound dumbness with aplomb, which I appreciated immensely. Suddenly, I really wanted that job, just as I had let it slip out of reach. The rest of the day, I just tried to be myself and had a blast doing it, knowing that they'd never call me with an offer. The day after I got home from the visit, they called with an offer.”

They never called for an on-campus interview, which was of absolutely no surprise to me, and I was not sad in the least. I was more relieved to know that that interview gave me insight to myself as a scholar (and by its absence in the discussion, teacher), helped me understand fit factors even more, and gave me additional real-world practice that my mock interview had only touched upon. As I said, I've used this

story for a decade to teach graduate students these same notions of fit and practice and knowing when something's right and when it's not.

And, then, exactly an decade later, I was at the hotel bar late one night, having a drink with a friend and one of my grad students who had heard me tell this story, when one of the interview committee members showed up to have a drink with us. In all

honesty, the interview was so embarrassing for me that I'd forgotten this woman, who I'd since become Facebook friends with, had been on the search committee. The interview experience so haunted me (I mean, really, who LAUGHS at a serious interview question?!) that I was still embarrassed, and so I apologized to her right then. Then SHE laughed, and said she didn't remember the incident (of course: why would she? it had been 10 years! She probably hadn't even remembered it the next day, it was so inconsequential!.) And then she apologized to me.

Wha?!

Indeed, she explained, that they had liked my interview, but the hiring situation changed when they were all back on the ground at the university. Discussions about deans, and target hires in hot areas, and budgets, and the like. So it goes at a lot of colleges and universities. I had come to know her as an honest, sincere, likeable person, not at all the kind of scholar I'd imagined at that institution who walked through the halls quoting Derrida at you. So I was

surprised by this turn of events. And my grad student rightly laughed at me, knowing how this radically changed my story. (Mentor note: Make sure you train awesome grad students who Can Handle The Truth.)

In the intervening years, I had learned to be comfortable in my own skin in an interview and to apply to places I fit well (after the hard lesson of learning what kind of fit I want). I've also learned to cut myself some slack and to remind myself that my interpretation of how well or poorly an interview went may not at all be the impression the interview committee has. If you are the right fit, and you do an excellent job, small setbacks can't keep you down. Some things are out of your control, but in the end, search committees are made of human beings. They understand emotions and nerves and even illnesses and emergencies. They've all been there themselves. That little hiccup you made may not be as bad as you think. Instead, it may have proven that you're human, too. ■

Cheryl Ball teaches at West Virginia University.

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