

Graduate Career Services

The Graduate School and Division of Student Affairs

Academic Interviews

While many aspects of interviewing are universal, such as what to wear, how to prepare, and how to structure the stories you share, interviews for teaching and research positions in academia have subtle differences when compared to their counterparts in business, government, industry, and non-profit.

Early Rounds:

Most first-round academic interviews will occur via telephone, video conference (e.g. Skype) or in person at an annual conference. They are typically 30 minutes long and focus primarily on your teaching, current and future research goals, and interest in the role and institution. Positions that are heavily research oriented will focus mainly on your research, while teaching positions will emphasize your teaching experience and methods. Because of the short time limit, it is essential that you convey your qualifications and experiences in a concise and interesting way for maximum efficiency.

Applicant pools during this early stage of the process can be quite large depending upon the position. Therefore, it's important for you to be as engaging as possible to sustain the search committee's interest and to showcase your academic performance. Consider how your scholarly work and experience are distinctive or could be impactful to the department you are interviewing, or an unusual skill such as a unique language fluency or research methodology that will help you stand out from other candidates.

Campus Visits:

The second round of interviews will take place on site at the University. Remember that the interview starts the moment you leave your house, and doesn't end until you get back. That chance encounter with a fellow traveler could be an individual on your search committee.

Campus visits typically are comprised of a series of interviews and meetings with various constituents from across the institution. Request a detailed itinerary prior to the interview so you can be prepared.

The visit may include some or all of the following activities:

- Presenting your research (sometimes called the "Job Talk")
- Teaching a class
- Sharing at least one meal with committee members, other faculty, and/or students
- Interviewing individually or in groups with the following people:
 - Search committee chair and search committee members
 - Department chair and College Dean(s)
 - Provost/Vice President of Academics
 - Directors or Deans of various additional campus departments with whom you may work closely on projects or committees
 - Students
 - Human Resources representative(s)
 - President of the University
 - NOTE: Each constituent may be interested in different aspects of your background, and some may simply be there to answer any questions you may have.



With such an extensive itinerary sometimes for the campus visit, it is essential that you carry a few items in your interview "survival kit." Take some high-energy snacks to pep you up during the day. Carry with you breath mints, personal hygiene items such as a toothbrush and floss, a small container of spot remover, and aspirin or other medications you may need. Also, consider eating light during lunch to avoid becoming overly sleepy.

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The “Job Talk” research presentation

During the campus visit you may have an opportunity to present your research in a seminar or workshop. This is one of the more important aspects of the interview process, and it may be attended by other members of the campus community such as faculty and/or students from other departments. Many features of your candidacy can be evaluated from the talk, including the strength of your research skills, your ability to speak and reason well while standing and talking in front of an audience, your potential for performing well in the classroom and when representing the department at conferences, and more. Your audience should leave with an understanding of the importance of your research and scholarly work, the validity of your methods, and the distinctive nature of your findings. Deliver a compelling narrative to keep everyone engaged, and demonstrate energy and enthusiasm for your research. Be prepared to respond to questions that challenge different aspects of your research and presentation, as the committee may want to see how well you handle yourself under stressful situations.

Teaching a sample class

Particularly when interviewing at a Small Liberal Arts College or for a teaching-intensive position, you may need to give a demonstration of your teaching skills. A common scenario for this would be as a guest lecture within an existing course. Request the course syllabus in advance to gauge the students' background knowledge of your chosen or assigned topic. Rather than lecturing for the entire class period, utilize a mix of instructional methods and discussion to create an engaging atmosphere for the students.

General Interview Considerations:

- When discussing your current research, your brief overview should quickly convey what you did, why it was important, and that you are enthusiastic about building upon it in the future. It should also be understood by experts and non-experts alike.
- Have a plan for the next steps of your research agenda beyond publishing your current work. Be detailed enough to demonstrate significant foresight, and express a contagious level of energy and excitement to generate interest from the committee.
- Teaching loads will vary based on the role and institution. Irrespective, the committee will have interest in your teaching methodologies. Offer examples of specific experiences where you fostered “aha moments” in your students. Be prepared to discuss courses you could teach that are currently offered at the institution as well as new ones you could also develop for them.
- Even if you have not incorporated technology into your previous classes, identify potential opportunities for future use.
- Always convey a genuine interest in working for the institution. Prior to the interview, research the school, department, faculty members, current research initiatives (opportunities for collaboration), awards received, funding sources, classes offered, student involvement in the community, local culture, amenities, and other items that might be of interest during the interview.
- During the interview, approach the conversation as if you are a colleague rather than a graduate student. You want the committee to envision themselves working together with you as academic professionals.
- Remember that you are an expert in your own sub-field of research. Use that knowledge to feel confident throughout the interview.
- Immediately following the interview, organize and submit your travel receipts if being reimbursed by the institution.
- Remember that the faculty you interact with may be peer reviewers or grant approvers in the future. Treat everyone you meet in every interview with respect and collegiality.

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Interview Questions:

Academic interviews focus mainly on your teaching, research, service involvement, interest in the institution, and your ability to be an enjoyable colleague. Here are some common questions to anticipate:

#1 What class are you looking forward to teaching?

Consider preparing a level of detail that includes what textbook you would use and what assignments you might give.

#2 How will you involve undergraduates in your research?

This might be easy to answer if you'll be running a lab, but if your research utilizes archives in international locations, then you'll want to think of how you could support other research projects for these students as an alternative.

#3 Tell me about your funding.

External funding sources are especially important in the Science and Engineering fields. Make sure you can demonstrate prior successful grants and that you have leads on other sources to support your future research initiatives.

#4 What is the biggest challenge facing higher education today?

Keep the bigger context in mind, remembering that the "industry" for a university is higher education.



Additional Possible Questions:

Your Background

1. Tell us about yourself. (NOTE: provide a one or two-minute summary).
2. What are your strengths and weaknesses? (NOTE: be honest, but don't offer anything that would negatively affect your job performance).
3. Why did you choose to get a Ph.D.? What got you interested in this field?
4. How would moving to this university affect you personally (and your family)?

Research

1. Describe your current research and dissertation. What contribution does it make to the field?
2. Tell me about the broader implications of your research outside of your field.
3. What motivated you to choose your dissertation topic?
4. If you had to start over, what changes would you make to your topic?
5. How will you be able to bring external funding to the department?
6. What are the next steps for your future research plans?
7. What do you know about the research of the current faculty in our department?
8. What influence has your advisor had on your research?
9. Tell us about a time where your research was stuck. How did you move forward?
10. With the teaching load for this position, how many papers do you anticipate publishing per year?
11. Why should we believe you can earn tenure here?

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Teaching

1. Tell us about your teaching experience and philosophy.
2. What classes have you taught, and what others can you teach?
3. Describe an original course that you want to develop and teach.
4. How would you structure your first semester classes?
5. What would you do to encourage new students to major in our field?
6. What makes a good teacher? Are you good at teaching? Why?
7. How would you teach a basic intro course in our field? What three goals would the students have accomplished in the course?
8. Some students can be difficult. How do you reach the unmotivated students?
9. In what ways do you incorporate your research into your teaching?
10. Tell us about a time when you were challenged by a student.

University involvement

1. What can you contribute to our faculty team that is unique?
2. Tell us about your engagement with university committees and activities outside of teaching and research. How do you plan to continue that with our department?
3. What are the primary professional contributions you will make in the next five years?

Other

1. What does an optimal balance of teaching and research look like?
2. What could an undergrad learn from working with you in your lab or in the field?
3. There were a hundred applicants for this position. Why should we hire you?
4. What motivates you to work for our type of university (i.e. liberal arts, research)?
5. If you receive more than one employment offer, how will you choose which to accept?

How you will be evaluated by the search committee:

As you enter the interview process, it can be helpful to know how the committee members you meet with will be evaluating you. Here are some thoughts/questions they might ask themselves:

- Is your background a good fit for the department and college?
- Is your research plan well thought out, and does it add value to the department's current research agenda?
- If you taught a sample class or gave a presentation of your research, was it delivered effectively and passionately?
- Would you contribute to the growth and leadership of the department as a colleague?
- Did you show genuine interest by conducting effective research into the department and institution prior to the interview?

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Questions to ask:

You should be asking questions during your interview, especially during those moments when an interviewer asks the inevitable, "Do you have any questions for us?" Prepare a few questions in advance. Take advantage of your opportunity to learn more about the position, and ask questions that will help you determine if it will be a good "fit" for you should you receive an offer. Be sure to ask questions that are relevant to the individual you're speaking with, as a Dean will be able to answer different questions than a panel of junior faculty. It is also important to gain clarity on what to expect during the tenure process.

Here are some of the more "natural" questions for a new academic hire:

- Can you describe the timeline and process of renewal and then promotion/tenure? What are the procedures by which I will be assessed? How will my teaching and scholarship be evaluated? Can you give me an example of what a "typical" successful promotion case looks like in your department?
- What is the teaching load in this department?
 - Is there a different teaching load for untenured versus tenured faculty?
 - Is there a different teaching load for "research active" versus "non-research active" faculty? How is that determination made?
- How are teaching assignments made?
- Tell me about the undergraduates in your department. Tell me about the graduate students in your department (for departments with grad programs).
 - *NOTE:* consider adding a level of specificity relating to their backgrounds, motivations, nuanced career interests, and involvement both in and out of the classroom or department.
- What resources does the university provide to support faculty research? (Especially in science & engineering, some universities provide "startup packages" that enable the new hire to buy equipment, support grad students, etc. However, even in departments where such packages are not the norm, there may be additional sources of funding for travel, supplies, or other items).
- Looking back over the last five or six faculty members you have hired who would normally be tenured in your department by now: How many of them were in fact tenured in your department?
- Is there a formal mentoring program in the department or college?
- To be asked of potential peers - i.e., not department chair or other administrator:
 - What is the best thing about working in this department?
 - What is the most difficult thing about working in this department?
 - What is the department culture like?
- What kind of service activities are expected of untenured faculty?
- What is one challenge the department is currently trying to overcome?
- Where are you in your selection process? What comes next? (Typically asked at the end of the day.)

Practice, Practice, Practice!

The more prepared you are, the better. Your advisor and other department members can help you develop your talks and materials or discuss potential interview responses.

You can also discuss your strategic approach or set up a one-on-one practice interview with your Graduate Career Consultant by contacting us at gradcareers@nd.edu.