QUALMS AND QUESTIONS FOR AN ACADEMIC JOB INTERVIEW

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Introduction

Thousands of Ph.D's are abruptly thrust into the academic marketplace each year. Most are ill prepared for the experience: they have never written a curriculum vitae or resume; they do not know how to give a seminar; they are not prepared to ask intelligent questions during an interview; and they do not know what to look for in a job. They have spent perhaps five years in graduate school and another couple in postdoctoral training aiming for this moment -- learning research and teaching skills -- yet they have no earthly idea how to get employed. The faculty have not prepared them for this critical step; this benign neglect is a holdover from the days when academic appointments were plentiful or from a time when job-grubbing details were considered beneath the dignity of professionals. The time is past for such ennui.

To offset some of the uncertainty and pain of the job interview ? a process which usually involves one or two days and offers innumerable occasions to say and do regrettable things -- we offer a checklist of questions to ask. Some queries are more appropriate for the chairperson and other administrators (if you get an opportunity to see them), others are better asked of faculty or students. Of course, many questions will be answered without you openly posing them at all; information will naturally flow as you linger over a coffee or beer. Other information can be gathered before going on the interview as you browse through a catalogue of the prospective school, or ask your acquaintances about the place, or look up the publications of your potential colleagues. However, let us emphasize this point, many questions should be asked of more than one person. People do not always have the same perspective. A chairperson may think everything is fine (or he will not elaborate on a problem, especially if he wants to sell you on the department). A faculty member, on the other hand, may think the place is in a turmoil, and a student may think the department is the pits. Consequently, talk to as many people as possible even though this is an exhausting process.

With this checklist in hand or tucked away in a folder, you should get most of the major information you need to make an intelligent decision. You should be able to give the impression that you are an informed, bright candidate, rather than a naive neophyte -- and you can always keep the conversation flowing, even in the most tension laden situation by just throwing out another question. As the questions are answered, check them off, so as not to omit any vital concerns. Do not hesitate to make copious notes during the interview; with the barrage of facts and figures, notes will prove invaluable during later reflection.

We have divided the checklist under three headings that seem reasonable: General Information, Teaching, and Research. The purpose of most questions is evident, but not all are of equal importance: some are vital to a decision, others are merely for information. Before turning to the checklist, some general comments are useful.

Questions on department organization are vital, although most young job candidates tend to ignore this area entirely. The basic thrust of your discrete inquiries should be to see if the faculty trusts the chairperson and upper administration. Find out if she is a tyrant. Is she honest? Weak? Even-handed? Is the department stable or chaotic with warring factions? The answers to such questions will usually determine the psychological health of the department and your chance for development. Do not underestimate the power of a chaotic department or a despotic chairperson to thwart your career.

Questions on retirement and health seem a nuisance to individuals seeking their first job. These topics should not be neglected as a couple of illustrations should make clear. If you plan to start a family, most health plans will take care of the maternity costs, but only if you are a member of the plan some months before the pregnancy begins. Check on this timing or it can cost you thousands of dollars. Also be aware of the fact that most schools remove part of each pay check and set that aside for your retirement program. Hence, your annual take home pay will be several hundred dollars less than you might expect based upon the salary you will be quoted. Moreover, different schools vary greatly in their contribution to the benefits package. Some institutions chip in benefit funds to social security, health and retirement which is the equivalent to many thousands of extra dollars above their quoted salary. This should be enough to prompt you to check out them benefits package.

On the question of salary: before your interview you should get a good idea about the salaries of academicians nationally. Such information is available from the back issues of the Chronicle of Higher Education. Also ask people at your home institution about starting salaries. If you have this information, you will be better able to respond to a possible salary offer and appreciate what it means compared to the cost of living in the town. Some schools have excellent salaries but the cost of living is terrifically high. Try to talk to other newly hired people at the interview site and find out in general terms if they are happy with the salary. Inquire if the school publishes a list of the salaries of their faculty -- most state schools must do so. Also find out if summer school teaching would be available for additional money and find out if you can supplement your salary from summer grant funds.

The teaching questions are designed to help you avoid ending up with a monstrous teaching load. Find out what a normal load is: don't only listen to what the administrators and faculty say, but find out what actually happens. Simply ask faculty what they are teaching each semester: find out if they keep up a research program with this load. (Again, don't take their word for it. Look at past and present course schedules. Ask about their research and facilities. Look and see whether their lab is active. Ask for reprints of their latest papers. This should give you the answer.) Check with the other assistant professors in the department and see what their teaching loads are. Answers to such questions will allow you to avoid being overloaded. It is not uncommon to assign new faculty the heaviest teaching schedules. This can be highly detrimental to any research plans and can virtually wipe out your chances for promotion. Similarly, beware of heavy committee assignments, they can kill you. In a university setting with an emphasis on research
no one, and we repeat, no one will ever take your heavy teaching or committee commitments into account when promotion time comes around and you have an inadequate publication record to show.

In many schools, especially those that call themselves universities, research is the name of the game. Here, your entire survival in the promotion and tenure race is dependent upon your skill in getting grants, conducting research and publicizing your findings in journals and meetings. If you are going to play in these leagues, you had better know about the written and unwritten rules at your school. The checklist should help you get the answers. You must pay particular attention to recent tenure and promotions decisions and learn why people managed or failed to make it. When you are interviewed be sure and find out if the school can provide you with the time, space and set-up money to run your operation immediately. Extract firm commitments from the chairperson or dean. Do not be misled by vague promises. You must find out how serious your prospective school is about helping you develop a research program.

Establish if faculty with active research programs have lower teaching loads than those without such programs. If such differential teaching loads do not exist as a department policy, you can be fairly sure that the institution is not dedicated to promoting research. They consider it an extra. Find out if there
are productive young research investigators surviving on the faculty. If not, again this is a sign the institution is not serious about research. Finally, if the department asks you to teach two or more lecture courses per semester, they are not an institution with research as a major goal, regardless of what they say. So if research is important to you, take a hard look at the evidence.

Throughout the interview process, you and interviewers, especially the chairperson and search committee, will be stepping through a delicate ballet of negotiations. They will be sizing you up and asking about your needs and you will be checking them out. Do not be over eager but be prepared. Bring to the interview a list of major research equipment that you need and the approximate costs. Any chairperson interested in research will get around to asking you about your requirements and it is at this moment you bring out your list. Also, have your space requirements in mind with an estimate of square footage for lab space. Be sure and ask to see the lab space set aside for the new person. It may not really exist as they describe it. During the interview process, perhaps at the end of your visit, the chairperson will probably mention a salary range for new faculty. Realize there is not a great deal of room for negotiation on assistant professor salaries, perhaps $1,000 to 2,000. Where you stand will depend upon your experience and your skill at making them want you. The optimum position from which to negotiate is a situation where you do not need the job or when you are being seriously courted by another institution. If the latter situation exists, be certain and casually mention that you have just returned from another interview. If you have heard a better salary quoted for other schools casually mention this to the chairperson. By all means always indicate if you are involved in negotiations with another school if such is the case.

Be honest in your statements at all times. Be honest about your requirements; be sure you do not underestimate them. Remember this vital point about negotiations: you will never be in a better position to negotiate for time, space and money than before you are hired (assuming the school wants you).
You will not have the same leverage once they have you signed. Also, once they have offered you a position, get everything down in writing. Ask for written clarification of points. If you have trouble getting certain points clears write a letter to the chairperson or dean (depending on whom you are dealing with) writing down your understanding of the offer and ask them if is correct. Remember, keep all correspondence for future reference. Do not reject any other job offer until you have clarified matters with your first choice. Things may not look as good as they seem at first glance.

Finally, if you are so unfortunate as to not get the job you want, remember this, sometime virtually everyone gets rejected. Although it bruises the ego, one should not consider such apparent failure a serious blemish; we know of one excellent individual who last year was rejected by perhaps 30 schools before being suddenly hired without serious competition at an outstanding school exactly suited for his talents. From the candidate's viewpoint, the most frustrating thing about most such rejections is that one seldom knows the reason for failure. Search committees often have unstated, unvoiced, and even unrealized objectives as they screen candidates' credentials. Their choices, though not capricious, can be erratic and frequently unpredictable depending upon subjective likes and dislikes. Having served on many search committees, we can only say that the faculty often do not know why they make certain choices either.

ACADEMIC INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

General Topics

University and Department Organization

1. How is the university organized? What are the major units and administrators of the school and what are their responsibilities? (i.e., What does theorganizational flow chart look like?)

2. Is there a university handbook of procedures, policies, guidelines for faculty?

3. What is the size of the department and how is it organized? Is it a dictatorial or democratic system of government? How are decisions made?

4. How important are committees to the function of the department? When they make decisions, does the chairperson overrule them?

5. How often are departmental meetings held? Are decisions made in departmental meetings, i.e., votes taken?

6. Are there departmental bylaws or procedural guidelines?

7. Is there an annual report I may have? (Recent changes in departmental policy and trends are listed here.)

8. Are there recent reports conducted by outside reviewers evaluating the university and department? (If so, get them. They are relatively unbiased and loaded with information.)

Criteria for Promotion and Tenure

1. What are the printed and unspoken criteria for promotion and tenure? i.e., What is the relative importance of teaching, research and service?

2. What is the average time in each academic rank? i.e., How long is it before assistant professors are reviewed for promotion and tenure?

3. What is the nature of the review process?

4. Approximately what percentage of new faculty receive tenure?

Salary and Benefits

1. What is the proposed salary? How is it paid: Weekly? Biweekly? Is it paid over 10 or 12 months?

2. Can grants be used to supplement salary especially in summer?

3. What is the salary scale for assistant professors? Associate professors? Full professors?

4. Are individual salary figures published? Where?

5. What type of retirement program is there? What percentage of the salary goes to retirement? What does the school contribute?

6. What type of health program exists? What are the costs and benefits?

7. Is the school unionized? If so, what role does the union play in the university? Is there a union handbook? How strong is the union? What are the union dues?

8. Are moving costs to the school covered?

Living Accommodations

1. Is housing plentiful or is there a shortage in this area?

2. Where do faculty live? Can I see a typical faculty house?

3. How do faculty get to work? Walk? Car? Bicycle? Subway? Bus?

4. How much should I expect to pay to rent or buy a house? (Ads in local newspapers will help answer this question).

5. What is the cost of living? (Find out costs of standard items such as bread, milk, gas.)

6. How good are the elementary and secondary schools and daycare centers? Where are they? How much do they cost?

7. What is the crime rate? Where are the high crime rate areas?

8. What are the major cultural events inside and outside of the university? Is there Opera? Ballet? Orchestra? Theater?

9. What outdoor sports exist? Hunting? Tennis? Fishing? Skiing? Boating?

Teaching

General Questions

1. How many undergraduates are presently in the department? Are their numbers increasing, decreasing, or stable?

2. What are the university and departmental requirements for majors? Non-majors? (A university catalogue will help answer the questions.)

3. Is the school on a quarter or semester system?

4. What kind of undergraduates come to this school and department? i.e., What is their cultural and educational background?

5. Where do the undergraduate students go after graduation? Medical school? Graduate school? Jobs?

6. What are the teaching facilities like? Lecture halls? Laboratories?

7. Are slide projectors, movie projectors, and overhead projectors available? Is there a cost and a budget to cover this?

8. Is there a film library and a budget to rent film?

9. How good is the book library? Is it centralized or are there branches located around campus? Open or closed stacks? What is the policy for placing books on reserve? Interlibrary loans? Computer searches? Photocopying articles?

10. Who does the typing, duplicating and collating of exams? How much lead time is needed? How large is the office staff?

11. What is the importance of teaching in promotion and tenure cases?

12. Is summer school teaching available for additional income?

Specific Questions

1. Which courses do I teach each semester or quarter? Will I have a relatively free hand in organizing the courses?

2. How many lectures are involved and which days of the week are they scheduled?

3. What are the course descriptions for my courses? Are there course outlines from the past? Which books were used? Who taught the courses
previously? How soon must books be ordered?

4. What types of exams have been given? How many each semester? Who grades tests? What are the general grading guidelines?

5. What types of students will I teach? Majors? Non-majors? Premeds? Paraprofessionals?

6. How do my courses fit in the overall curriculum? Are my courses required? Are there prerequisites?

7. How many students will be in each class? Am I involved in a team taught course? If so, how are decisions about text books, lab manuals, exams and
course organization made?

8. Who teaches similar or complementary courses?

9. Can my course commitment change? Who determines this? By what procedure is a change made?

10. What is the teaching load of other faculty? How does mine compare?

Laboratories

1. Are there labs associated with my courses?

2. What is my role in these labs? Am I personally involved in teaching labs and organizing them, or is another staff member in charge?

3. How many labs occur per week and what is their duration?

4. Is there a lab manual or previous lab exercises in existence?

5. How many support staff are committed to the lab? Are there lab preparators? Graduate or undergraduate teaching assistants? (Talk to these people if at all possible.)

6. Who sets up the lab physically?

7. How much supply and equipment money is budgeted for the labs? How soon must the budget be prepared and supplies ordered?

8. How do I get new equipment or repair old?

9. What kind of laboratory teaching space, supply rooms, stockrooms, animal quarters and equipment already exist?

10. What are the computer facilities for teaching inside and outside of the department? What are the future plans for computer use expansion?

Research and Graduate Study

General Questions

1. What types of research are going on in the department?

2. What are the department's research strengths and weaknesses?

3. Is there a plan of research development in the department? What are hiring plans for the future?

4. Are there animal rooms? Greenhouse facilities? Instrument rooms? Stock rooms? Dark rooms? Environmental chambers?

5. What types of major equipment (e.g., centrifuges, spectrophotometers, refrigerators, etc.) already exist in the department? How extensive is theircurrent use? Are electron microscope facilities available? How busy is their staff?

6. How large is the office staff? Do they type grants and papers? What are their priorities in typing? (i.e., When they are overloaded with work, what gets typed first?) How much lead time is needed?

7. Are word processors used in the office and can faculty and students use them?

8. Is there a research office on campus to help faculty write and develop grants?

9. Who handles grant book keeping?

10. How rapidly are purchase orders handled and what is the general process?

11. Is there a departmental photocopy machine? What is the procedure for photocopying of books and journals? Is there a charge?

12. Is there a machinery and electrical shop on campus? A photo illustrator? How good are they? How long does it take to get work finished? Is there a charge?

13. What the library like? Are the key journals for your research present? If you want a new book or journal, will they order it? What is the library photocopy and interlibrary loan service like? What kind of abstract journals does the library carry? Are journals centralized or in different branch libraries? Does the library have computer search systems?

14. What type of computer facilities exist on campus for research use?

15. Are there different teaching loads for people doing research?

16. What is the research productivity of other members of the department? (Outside reviews of the department should have this information.)

17. How important is research in determining tenure and promotion?

18. Do interdisciplinary programs for research and graduate study exist?

19. Is outside grant support essential for promotion and tenure?

20. Is there a graduate program? Masters only? Ph.D.?

21. Can assistant professors have graduate students?

22. How many graduate students and postdoctoral fellows are in the department? What is their quality? What are their areas of interest?

23. Why do graduate students come to this school? Where do they come from?

24. What are the graduate program and requirements like?

25. How are graduate students supported?

26. How do graduate students select research advisors?

27. Are undergraduates used in the laboratories as research assistants? If so, are they paid or do they work for course credit?

Specific Questions

1. Am I expected to perform research?

2. Do I have a research lab? How large is it, and what does it look like?

3. Is the size of my lab set for all time, or is there a chance for expansion or construction? How and by whom is the space allocated?

4. If I need animals, who pays for animal care? Are there animal caretakers?

5. How much set-up money do I get? Will someone advise me what equipment is already available to avoid duplication and ensure that my money will go as far as possible?

6. Is there annual or occasional financial support for research and supplies?

7. Are there local institutional grant funds available? How large are these? What are the criteria for selection? Are new people more likely to get these? How often can these be obtained? When are the deadlines?

8. Is there department or university money for meetings and trips for faculty and students? How much can be awarded? How frequently? What are the criteria for selection?

9. Who is on campus or nearby with whom I might collaborate? What kind of equipment do they have that I might borrow? Is there a general willingness to share equipment, especially those items I need to borrow initially?

10. Will my teaching commitments give me time to do research?

11. If I do not get a grant immediately, can I supervise graduate students?

12. Is this a new position? If not, why did the previous incumbent leave? Will his/her equipment be left for my use in the lab or has it been promised to others? (i.e., is "What I see, what I'll get?"

Final Question

How soon can expect to hear a decision about my appointment?