Securing My First Job in Academia: Lessons Learned

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Last October I was asked to participate in a mock interview at The Graduate School’s workshop called “Securing Academic Positions at Two- and Four-Year Institutions”. Soon after completing the workshop, I received an email informing me that I had made the short list for a position as professor of vertebrate ecology at a four-year university. After a phone interview and a four-day on-campus interview, I was offered the job. Below I have highlighted the most important lessons I learned from the Graduate School’s workshop and how they applied to my actual interview experience. I have also included a list of additional lessons learned during the interview process that I hope will be helpful to fellow graduate students in their search for an academic job.

Important lessons from the workshop...

Have a “Cliffs Notes” summary of your research program memorized. Do not underestimate this sage piece of advice from the workshop presenters. I had responded to the question “So, what do you do?” so many times throughout grad school that I thought this question would be a piece of cake. And it was…until the question was asked of me again right before dinner was served on the second day of my on-campus interview. I started to speak, but I found that my brain had turned off. My blood sugar was low and I was mentally exhausted. I babbled nonsense for a minute or so before I could get my mind working clearly enough to give a proper answer. I discovered that an on-campus interview requires your complete concentration every minute of every day. There may come a point during the visit when you are so mentally exhausted that you cannot put two coherent sentences together. To avoid such embarrassing moments, have a pat answer memorized.

The academic job talk should not be overly technical. I was told in the workshop that if you get an on-campus interview, the search committee already thinks you do quality work. Otherwise, they would not waste precious time and money in bringing you to campus. Still, I felt uneasy about my research seminar because I perceived it to be too watered down compared to a typical conference presentation. Then, about halfway through my talk, I scanned the faces in front of me and realized that about 90% of my audience knew little to nothing about ecology. Most were there to see how well I could communicate and to hear what I had to offer the department. If I had given a technical talk, I would have quickly lost their interest in my research and me as a candidate.

Be yourself. Throughout the actual interview process, I was asked leading questions or put in situations that made me worry I was not a good fit for the position. For example, I spent half a day visiting with the local Audubon Society. I felt incredible pressure to sell myself as an ornithologist, but I continued to be honest about who I am – an ecologist who is interested in working with many different vertebrates, including birds. I realized that we would all be miserable if I was hired under the assumption that I was a dedicated ornithologist. I found the interview process to be a delicate balance between emphasizing how great a fit I was for the position and not compromising my research goals. As a struggling graduate student, it may be impossible to imagine giving up any chance to secure a decent academic job. However, you cannot impress your interviewers if you do not have a solid understanding of who you are and what you would bring to the department. But, if you are prepared and approach the interview process with confidence and pride in what you do, you will impress them. Then, if you do not get the job, you will know it was because they were looking for someone with a different set of research and teaching interests, not because you were unqualified. When you get a job offer, you will know they selected you for the right reasons.

Lessons learned along the way...

Do not trust the position description. Be prepared for almost anything. I was surprised when the courses described in the position description were not the courses I was asked about during the phone interview. Luckily, I was qualified to teach the “surprise” courses as well, but my answers were not as polished as they might have been. Before a phone interview, think carefully about all the courses you would feel comfortable teaching and outline how your combination of education and research experiences make you uniquely qualified to teach those courses.

Some interviewers prefer to let you ask all the questions. Although my phone interview was remarkably similar to the mock interview in the Graduate School workshop, my actual on-campus interview was completely different. Both the phone and mock interviews lasted 30 minutes and consisted of a series of questions about teaching, research, mentoring, and service. Once I arrived on campus, though, my interviewers were less interested in asking me questions and more interested in seeing what questions I had for them. Only one hour of the four-day visit at all resembled a panel interview. Most interview settings were informal and I was expected to either socialize or lead a discussion with my questions. This approach allowed my interviewers to get to know me as a person and to see what issues I thought were most important. In such situations, a long list of questions prepared ahead of time will come in handy. I found that it useful to have most of my questions memorized because I usually was not in a situation where I could casually access my briefcase.

The interview schedule will change so be prepared before you leave home. In some cases, you may not have a lot of time to peruse the itinerary, so get as much information from the search committee chair about who you will be meeting ahead of time so you can prepare thoroughly. Think about what you would like to say to each faculty
member, administrator, and student you anticipate meeting before you leave. Also, take advantage of the time you have with each person you meet. Otherwise, you may miss a golden opportunity to ask questions and sell yourself! Also, assume you will have no time at all to prepare for your talk because meetings will run over. Have your talk nailed before you even set foot on campus.

Learn how to properly accept an academic position and negotiate a startup package. Just two days after I returned from the on-campus interview I was offered the job! I did not expect that things would go as well or as quickly as they did and I was completely unprepared for the phone calls, paperwork, and negotiations that followed. Given that this aspect of the job search process varies among disciplines, I will not try to offer specific advice. But once you get your first on-campus interview, be sure to talk about what to do if you get the job with your advisor, department chair, and any newly hired professors you know in your specialty. The results of those negotiations may seriously affect your productivity and happiness during those first few years on the job.

I encourage anyone who hasn’t attended The Graduate School’s seminar on securing an academic position to do so before they begin applying for jobs. Best of luck!