

Ecology 101

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We are fortunate to have several stimulating articles for this issue. Let's start off with an uplifting and demoralizing accumulation of questions asked by both job interviewers and interviewees. Depending on your feedback, there may be enough good, bad, and ugly job interview scenarios to start a new ESA Bulletin column, "Interviewing 10." (I hope I'm just kidding.) Thanks to Brian D. Inouye and Nora Underwood (Florida State), Dan F. Doak (UC Santa Cruz), and Peter Kareiva (The Nature Conservancy, Seattle); sorry you had to endure some of these questions.

Interviewing for Academic Jobs

The interview process for academic jobs is a bit different than that for other kinds of jobs, and the types of questions that get asked of ecologists are not what one would find in the hundreds of books written on interview preparation. As part of our own process of interviewing for jobs, and later to help graduate students and postdoctoral fellows prepare for their interviews, we compiled a list of questions actually asked of candidates during interviews. Job candidates need to evaluate their fit with potential employers as well, so we have also compiled a list of questions that you may well want to ask of the faculty, students, and administrators with whom you meet. These questions may be especially useful for job candidates who aren't as familiar with cultural norms at colleges and universities in the United States. The questions on these lists are not given in any particular order, although they are grouped thematically. They are all, no matter how preposterous some of them seem, questions that were actually asked of multiple candidates as part of interviews for academic jobs in Ecology.

We suggest that job candidates consider both how they might answer questions asked of them, and how they can use questions to show themselves to best advantage. In order to keep this list concise (so that it can fit in a pocket while you're on an interview) we have pared the questions down to their essence. However, by embellishing on these questions, candidates should be able to use questions to explain (again!) why they are so wonderful. For example, if you want to ask the question, "What support is there for teaching courses?" you might phrase it as, "If I teach a special field ecology course, can I purchase modest pieces of equipment such as field balances, GPS units, etc., which could serve the course and student researchers for years?" Of course, the correct way to phrase a question depends on the kind of institution where you are interviewing (e.g., a major university, small liberal arts school, or a research foundation), and some of these questions may not be relevant for some jobs. Special job situations, such as the "two-body problem," are not covered here, but also entail certain questions that are likely to come up at every interview.

There is much that goes into a successful interview beyond thinking ahead of time about coherent answers to the questions you are likely to be asked, such as preparing a good job seminar. Nonetheless, a bit of time considering these questions may help candidates come to a clearer picture of their goals and avoid moments of flustered silence and awkward conversation stoppers.

Questions that a job candidate should be prepared to answer

Research and funding

So, what do you do? [Many faculty, and most students, will not have read your application.]
How does your work fit into the “big picture” -- what major questions does it address?
How do you differentiate your work from your Ph.D or postdoctoral advisors’ work?
What new research will you do when you get here / in the next 5 years?
What grants do you plan to write in the next year or two?
Which external funding agencies will support the kind of work you do?
What makes you think that you can get an NSF award?
Where do you think your work will be going over the next 15 years?
Where will you do your research—is your field work going to be local?
What space / equipment will you need?
How much start-up money do you need or expect?

Teaching and graduate training

What teaching experience do you have?
What courses would you want to teach right away?
What is your philosophy of graduate / undergraduate teaching?

How do you feel about doing research with undergraduates?
How do graduate / undergraduate students fit into your research plans for the next 5 years?
What is your philosophy of graduate student training?
What will your graduate students work on?
How do you feel about advising students who work on systems that are different from yours?
How many students do you want to have in your lab?
How will you support your graduate students?

Character of institution

Why do you want this job—why would you want to join this department?
What can you contribute to the department (what strengths do you complement)?
What do you see as the department weaknesses (and how do you fix them)?
What do you want to know about this college / university?
What do you want to know about the area / students / faculty?
How would your career be different at a small college vs. a research university?
How do you feel about public/community service?

Miscellaneous

What is the best idea you ever had? [A real question, verbatim]
What is the most important question in your subfield?
What are the most important questions in ecology or biology?
Why is your subfield worth studying when everything can really be explained by the work of the brilliant person asking you the question?
What do you see as your own weaknesses, as a scientist and teacher?
Are you married and do you have or plan to have children? [While these questions are illegal to ask during the interview process, two of the authors of this note were asked these questions on virtually every interview. You should be prepared to either answer or politely avoid them.]

Questions that a job candidate should ask of faculty, students, and administrators

Research

- What office and lab space could I expect to have—can I see it?
- How much startup money should I expect?
- When does the startup account expire and is its use restricted?
- Will lab renovations and office furniture be charged to my startup money?
- Is there office space for graduate students other than inside my lab?
- What are common local field sites? How long does it take to get to them?
- Where is the greenhouse space, and is there enough of it? Is there any greenhouse staff?
- What shared research facilities does the department have?
- Is there institutional research funding available for pilot projects?
- Is there money available to pay for trips to meetings?
- Is there any prejudice against funding that does not come from NSF or NIH?
- Is the library adequate? Is there good on-line journal access?
- What kind of computer facilities do you have?
- Is there money to buy new computers, and staff to help with computer problems?
- Do you have a list of software packages with institutional site-licenses?

Teaching and graduate training

- What is the teaching load for this position?
- Is the teaching flexible, so I can accommodate field seasons?
- Are there specific courses the department needs taught for this position?
- What is the usual class size? How much TA support is there?

- Are there opportunities to develop specialized / smaller classes?
- Do undergraduates get involved in research in most labs here?
- Are there small grants to help support undergraduate research projects?
- Is there funding for course “extras” like field trips, or outside speakers for a seminar?
- Is there teaching credit (or service credit) given for mentoring undergraduate / graduate students?
- What are the department philosophies about teaching vs. research, and graduate vs. undergraduate teaching?
- How are most graduate students supported—is this support adequate?
- What resources or opportunities are available for recruiting top-notch graduate students?
- Do new faculty get special help in recruiting students?
- What are graduate student teaching loads—do they have time for their research?
- How are TAs assigned?
- Is there any TA training?
- How are graduate students recruited? If I wanted to accept several students in one year, could I?
- Where do most of the graduate and undergraduate students come from?
- What is the mix of masters vs. doctoral students in most labs?

Character of institution

- How well do faculty get along? Is there much interaction among different disciplines?
- Is the department a participant, or are members of the department participants, in any large interdisciplinary grants?
- Is any new hiring planned in the next 5 years (will there be new colleagues)?
- What types of grants do most faculty have?
- What seminar series/discussion groups are there?
- What are main frustrations of faculty, and of graduate students?
- Are the health and retirement benefits good?
- What is the cost of living in this area?
- What are the local opportunities for recreation?

Departments

Tenure

What are the requirements for tenure, and what is the tenure rate in this department?

What is the normal schedule for promotions and raises?

What are sabbatical schedules like?

Is it possible to stop the tenure clock for family leave?

Is the chair a rotating position or permanent?

After reviewing these questions you may feel that interviewing is an insurmountable hurdle. Not so; preparation is mostly a matter of common sense. For most of the questions listed above, there is an obvious, implied “right” answer; for the rest the important thing is having *any* answer, rather than just fumbling when you are asked the question. Furthermore, doing well in the question game is only about increasing your odds—you can screw up many parts of an interview and still get the job. Maintaining a sense of fun is especially important, because looking as if you are enjoying yourself is a big part of “shining,” and it is hard to fake.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this article and a more thorough, less politically correct, and more entertaining “Mag-

ic Guide to Interviewing” have circulated for years among various lab groups. We thank many friends who have shared notes about their job interview experiences and encouraged us to share some of these experiences with a broader audience.

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