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## How to stand out in the interview

ADVANCE at Northeastern University, Northeastern University

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# Future Faculty Workshop

## How to **STAND OUT** in the Interview



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**March 2, 2012**



This presentation is adapted from NSF ADVANCE Rice University



# Overall goal of the interview process

Find a place where you can be successful and  
that is where you want to be

Get a job at that place



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# Outline

- **Before the interview**
  - Deciding what you want and getting prepared to get it!
- The interview day
  - Learning about the job and presenting yourself in the best possible light.
- After the interview
  - Turning a great interview into a great job offer.



# Before the interview: decide what kind of job you want

**Balance of research, teaching and service**

**Intensity of research expectations**

**Balance of undergraduates, graduate students and postdocs**



# Before the interview: learn about the place

- Department and University Web page
- Ask your advisor, friends, and other colleagues
- Check rankings information (grain of salt!)
- Ask for a copy of the department's strategic plan (not having one tells you something!), the school or college's plan, the institution's plan



## **Before the interview: find out what is expected**

- You will usually be asked to give a talk
- How long will the talk be?
- Who is your audience?
- What is the department looking for?
  - A research talk
  - A lecture
- Ask your host or the person arranging your interview



# Before the interview: use the agenda to get prepared!

- Ask for an agenda
- Prepare for those people on the agenda, but realize that agendas change, so know something about the entire department
- Make sure the agenda has prep time before your seminar – usually 15- 30 min
- Ask to meet with potential collaborators and graduate students and to see the facilities



# Before the interview: get prepared for typical questions

- What do you do?
- What courses do you plan to teach?
- What major instrumentation do you need?
- Who on campus can you collaborate with?
- What do you plan to propose for your first grant?
- What are your future research goals?



## **Before the interview: prepare questions of your own**

- Each interviewer can be asked about his or her own research
- Ask about the support for research and research funding
- Ask about expectations for tenure
- Ask about available resources
- Ask what the interviewer likes and does not like about the department/university



# Before the interview: decide what to wear

-Clothes should be comfortable for you  
(but not too informal)

- You will be wearing them for the entire day
  - Do NOT wear clothes that make you look like you are a graduate student or on a date.
  - A notch above what your professors usually wear is probably about right.
  - You want your audience to remember YOU and your science, not what you were wearing.
- Think about what you will carry with you
- You'll be lugging it with you for the entire visit



# Before the interview: prepare a good talk

- You want people to:
  - Understand your work
  - Be INTERESTED in your work
  - Think you're great!
- What happens if you give a bad one?
  - Few pay attention
  - They may fall asleep
  - Might think your work is not important



## General Advice

- Make clean slides, no typos, readable font
- Reference work appropriately
- Provide an outline and follow it
- REHEARSE your talk!
  - Are you conveying what you wish?
  - Get your audience to ask questions!
  - Stay within time allowed!
- <http://www.ece.wisc.edu/~kati/PresentationGuide.ppt>



# Your Presentation

- Know who the audience will be!
  - Ask beforehand
  - Faculty in your area, faculty outside your area, graduate students, undergraduates
- In my field:
  - Make the first half of the talk tutorial
    - Show them you can teach
  - Wow them with science in the second half
- Don't give the same talk you would give to a conference in your field!



# Your Presentation: Key Points

- Set the ground rules:
  - If you want to be interrupted in the middle, say so at the start
- Introduction:
  - Convey excitement about what you are doing
  - Why is this area important?
- Tell your audience what your research means
- Be clear what your contribution is
  - Cite your work!
- Now is the time to brag about your accomplishments – don't be shy



# Your Presentation

- Conclusion and Future Research (last 10 min)
  - What does your work mean to the future of the field?
  - What direction are you taking the work next?
  - Target the whole audience
    - Leave the audience feeling a sense of excitement about the future of your area and your ability to contribute
  - Be sure to acknowledge colleagues/funders



# Presenting Your Research Plan

- Align the talk with your research write-up
  - Your vision, your future contribution to the field
  - Your competitive edge
- Clearly present your vision, future contribution, and competitive edge
- This is more important in an interview than in other talks



## General Advice

- Check out the projector before talk
  - Hard to recover if you don't have slides
- Bring a laser pointer
- Have a well-practiced (and therefore familiar) beginning
- Say “Thank you, I'd be happy to answer any questions” at the end
  - I like having a slide for this with my name and email address on it



# Answering Questions

- Make sure you understand what is being asked
  - Don't assume!
- If someone challenges you...stay calm
  - Acknowledge the question
    - Validate it as appropriate or even, if not, say how you have thought about its relevance
  - **DO NOT BE DEFENSIVE**
    - Easier said than done!
  - If you don't know what the person is talking about, suggest that you talk with the person individually after your presentation



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# Interviews Are a Grueling Process

- Hard for both interviewee and interviewers
  - Lasts all day!
  - Reputation of institution and individuals on the line
  - Interaction, evaluation on both sides
- Bottom line
  - Department wants to know if you are right for them
  - You want to know if department is right for you!



# The Campus Visit

- Most important part of the application process!
- Allows you to interact with those who will make the offer decision
- Allows you to determine whether the department/university can offer what it takes for you to succeed.
- Use the agenda as your guide for preparation.



# What Happens on the Visit?

- Formal presentations
  - Research seminar(s)
  - Mock lecture
  - May vary among fields
- Visits one-on-one with faculty, chair, sometimes dean or provost, and students
- Lab and facility tours



# Making a good first impression

- Handshake

- Firm, but real (really shake the hand!)

- Not too firm– squeeze about the same as the person shaking your hand!



- Body language

- Confident (good posture)

- Engaged (lean forward a bit, don't cross your arms over your chest)

- Interested (focus on the person talking)

# Making a good impression – you are always being evaluated

- You will interact with a diverse group of people – be flexible
- Try to show energy and reasonable interest/enthusiasm all the time
- Even in casual meal sessions, you are being evaluated and judged (Limit alcohol! None at lunch or breakfast 😊!)



# Interviewing dos and donts

- Show you have good understanding of the academic world
  - promotion and tenure process and criteria, expectation for funding and student support, teaching load.
- Show you know what it takes to succeed
  - grad student recruiting, research priority of the department/school, shared equipment, equipment funds, computational resources, mentoring programs



# Taking control of the interview

- Prepare a brief (2 minute) “elevator speech” (one for someone close to your field, one for someone outside your field)
- Have in mind your answers to common questions (slide 8)
- Be prepared to deflect “tests” – suggest an experimental strategy or ask a question about a related topic.
- Show interest in the other person, their research and their viewpoints – be respectful, even if you don’t agree!



## If the situation gets awkward...

- Take control and change the dynamic
- It is best to deflect awkward questions by answering a related, but more comfortable question (think like a politician!) Then, quickly, follow up with a question of your own!
- Pull someone else into the conversation
- Excuse yourself to go to the restroom



# If the situation gets awkward...because someone asks a question forbidden by law

- Someone asks a question forbidden by law (e.g., Are you married? Do you have children? Are you pregnant?)
  - Use the “answer a different (related) question” tactic.
  - Deflect by asking a question “what child care facilities does your university have?”
  - Indicate that you would prefer not to answer



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## After the interview



- Thank the Chair (or person with whom you speak last) for their time, the information, and their input
- We think brief thank you notes are good, especially if they are personalized

## Negotiating the offer

- If the search committee is interested in pursuing your candidacy, they will ask you for what start up funds you will need (equipment, funds to hire people, supplies).
- Ask other recently hired junior professors what is reasonable in your field.



# What happens if you don't hear anything?



- Wait ! Search committees often take forever to decide. No news might be good news.
- It is ok to email occasionally to express continued interest, but do not be a pest!
- Do let the search chair know if you have another offer.
- Continue pursuing other opportunities.

# Final words

- You will get to talk about your science, meet cool people, see new places and eat tasty food! Try to enjoy it!
- Even if you don't get the offer, your science, your interview skills and your reputation will (ideally) be improved by the interview process.
- Keep your hopes up! Very few PhDs remain unemployed.

