

How Not to Blow the Interview

Robert Vallin

Okay graduate students, this one is for you. Let's talk about the job hunt. Of course, I have the secret to a successful job search, but I've been sworn to secrecy. So you'll just have to make do with some general comments and ideas to help you along the way.

To begin with, get ready to do some mailing. We've all heard stories about people who sent out five applications because those were the only schools they were interested in *and* they got the job they wanted. However, those are the exceptions, not the rule. Before I get hate mail from search committees, let me clarify that I am *not* suggesting that you should send off applications everywhere, even if you aren't what they're looking for or you don't want to be there. I am saying that you need to be prepared to send out a lot of packets to get a good result.

If you'd like some advice on your application materials, read the *FOCUS on Students* column from October 2007. (Back issues of *MAA FOCUS* are online at www.maa.org/pubs/pastissues.html) In this article I want to concentrate on what happens after your materials have been reviewed and you make it to the interview process. There are three interviews that I'll highlight: the phone interview, the Joint Mathematics Meetings interview, and the on-campus interview.

The Phone Interview

To begin with, the phone interview is scheduled in advance. It is not an ambush. You will most likely be contacted via email for times that will work for you (it will probably require about half an hour). The hiring committee will contact you with a day and time that they wish to talk to you.

What does this mean? It means they are interested in you and want to see how you handle yourself in conversation and get some preliminary questions answered. Relax about this, but remember it is a job interview, so be professional and be prepared. Acquaint yourself with the school (you don't have to memorize everything, but don't get caught unprepared). What type of school is it (research versus liberal arts versus small state school, etc.)? Where is it located (small town, inner city, sprawling suburban campus)? What type of research is done there? Mention someone at the school whom you are familiar

with (this does not mean know intimately, it means you can say, "I noticed Professor Smith is very involved with student research. I would like to be involved with that, too.").

Other questions you will be asked range from the wide open ("What do you know about our university?") to the very specific ("Do you have much experience dealing with non-traditional students?"). The search committee is hoping you might be the person they want, and they're likely to ask questions that reflect what they think will fit their needs.

You are, of course, expected to ask questions, too. You are also "interviewing" them, deciding if this is a place where you could be happy. Now is not the time to bring up money, or insist that you will not teach in the morning, but you can ask what type of classes you are likely to have, or if they are interested in your teaching style (you might use writing more heavily than most people, for example). You'll want to know how many students are typically in a class and how much service work (committees, student recruitment, etc.) you would be expected to do.

Remember, the committee is calling you because they are interested in you, so don't get too stressed out. On the other hand, they are interviewing you, so be friendly, but don't forget this is business. The story is still told about the phone interviewee who, when asked if he had been to the campus calling him, said, "Oh yeah, I've been there to a weekend party. It's a lot of fun." Once said, the silly statement cannot be taken back and can have a big influence on your chances.

The Joint Mathematics Meetings Interview

The JMM interview is an altogether different creature. Here you are one of many candidates the committee will be interviewing, and they are one of many schools you will be meeting with. It can be exhausting on both ends. There are no sage words of advice for how to make the top of everyone's list. That said, there are some things you can do to avoid being taken off anyone's list.

Let's begin with the obvious but overlooked part: meeting your interviewers. Give a firm and confident handshake, look the person you are meeting in the eye, and smile. I know you're exhausted, I know you're under pressure, but these niceties are part of normal social interaction. It's better to be safe than sorry, so when addressing someone use their title until they say otherwise ("Please, call me Dave.").

You should have something to say about their department. Use *Google* or the guides to colleges that are placed in the waiting area to look up the school if you have to. You want to show them that you are interested. I'm not saying you have to know everything, but know something ("I'm really intrigued by your Undergraduate Seminar," or "I see you take students to the Section Meeting every year," means a lot). Be prepared to talk about yourself and your thesis, but be able to do it in a succinct manner. The people you are talking to will probably not be specialists in your field. If you cannot give a short description, talk to your thesis advisor and brainstorm a way to do so. Be cautious that jargon and buzzwords that don't mean anything will be sniffed out right away.

Finally, let's talk about teaching, because they will expect you to talk about it. Most of your interviews will not be with "Research I" schools, so teaching will be a big concern. Make sure you talk about more than how you are so excited to teach all their upper-level classes. You will be expected to teach a wide variety of courses. Usually that will include calculus or other first-year courses. Be prepared to talk about these lower-level courses. You should have some idea about what you want to say when the subject comes up. You need to think about what you would do to keep the class engaged when you know they wish to be elsewhere.

The On-Campus Interview

Congratulations, you've made it on to the really short list! Now what? Typically, you receive a phone call asking if you can come for an on-campus interview. You will meet the entire faculty, the Dean, perhaps someone in Human Resources, and quite probably some students. Also, some combination of research talk, student talk, and classroom lesson will be expected of you. The first two should be prepared well ahead of time since they are standard during interviews. The last you will have time to prepare, but cannot work on it until they tell you the subject. For more information on giving your best talk, see the article by Michael A. Jones and Karen Saxe in the November 2007 issue of *MAA FOCUS*.

As before, do some research on the school. Find out who is there, what their interests are, and how they intersect with yours. Look at the catalogue and see what classes they offer. Be prepared to answer questions such as, "We teach a lot of courses for elementary education majors. What do you know about such courses?" It's okay to say, "I've never taught one, but I looked at the description on the web site and know I could do it." It's not okay to say, "Eeeuw, I don't

think I would like that." (As far-fetched as that sounds, such statements do get made.) If this school is not a place where you would like to teach, then you're wasting everyone's time.

Knowing about the school will also help with some of the toughest questions you'll face from the students. Many departments, especially the smaller ones, will have a group of students meet with you privately or take you to lunch. Students don't always get a vote, but attention is paid to their impressions. After all, a lot of your career is spent working with them. Try to find out what the departmental culture is like in this respect. In some departments, students will try to find out whether you are friendly and approachable. In others, they will want to know whether you can excite them mathematically. And at some places, the question will simply be whether you care about teaching or will just focus on your research.

On to the details: Who pays for your trip? They do, but usually it's as reimbursement, so you'll have to pay for your flight and parking at the airport and then submit the paperwork. Yes, this creates a cash flow problem, so be prepared. It may be possible to drive to an interview. Then you'll be reimbursed at the standard rate. If they ask you to book your own travel, be careful: If you live 200 miles away and decide to fly for \$500, it can look like you're not really paying attention and are being wasteful. They will pay for a hotel room or put you up in a private room in a residence hall. Also, meals are on them (but keep in mind that you are still being interviewed during the meals).

There is debate about thank you notes. You don't really have to send one, but a nice email to the chair of the committee giving thanks for making you feel welcome is a nice thought and keeps you on their minds.

One last thing, which may at first reading seem impossible: Relax and try to enjoy the process. They are interviewing you, but everyone wants you to be the person they will hire, and so they want you to do well. 🌟

Robert Vallin is Professor of Mathematics at Slippery Rock University and MAA Associate Director for Student Programs.