

# No Second Chance at Making a Good First Impression: Peril and Possibility in the Campus Visit

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He was the first of three finalists to visit campus for an interview,<sup>1</sup> and we were excited. His CV was impressive, his recommendations were strong, and he was pleasant and poised on the phone. The faculty had assembled for his job talk, and we expected a winner. An hour later we couldn't wait to escape. The candidate had read us his paper—virtually word-for-word—while rarely looking up to meet our plaintive eyes. He took up almost the entire hour with his own presentation, leaving us no time for questions, but by then we had only one question in mind: How had this disaster occurred? How had such a promising candidate shot himself out of contention?

Over the last three years the two of us have had the opportunity to interview 31 faculty candidates on campus. Our department has been fortunate to add new programs and garner supplemental resources (at least when times were flush). To a 26-person department we have added 13 new colleagues. Doing so, though, has required 13 search committees and nearly three dozen campus visits.

The quality of our new colleagues, not to mention the scrutiny we gave them, has us wondering how we each managed to land positions here. Would we have survived the same standards we applied to our job candidates? We can only hope so. At the very least, as relative veterans of the hiring process we

have picked up a number of tips for success in the recruitment maze. We do not doubt that we could now write better cover letters and CVs than we did for our last academic positions, but most importantly, we have a stronger sense of what makes a successful campus visit and job talk, both for the candidate and the department.

A number of authors have offered advice on the faculty recruitment process. Published in *PS* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, these articles often address the application process as a whole or offer tips for improving one's chances of making it to the final three candidates (Anagnoson 1994; Cahn 2002; Carter and Scott 1998; Cullinan 2002; Deardorf, et al. 2001; Furlong and Furlong 1994; Greene 2002; Zahariadis 1994). Missing, we believe, are more detailed accounts and advice for one of the crucial and last stages of the hiring process, the campus visit. To be sure, many Ph.D. programs drill their graduate students on job talks, but there still remains the sense that the campus visit is a bit like entering the lottery. They either like you or they don't.

We would hardly suggest that faculty hiring is controlled by rational actors, but for all the serendipity in recruitment, we think applicants can do a better job of removing *some* of the randomness from the process. The same is true for the hiring departments, which can do more to prepare their finalists to succeed. Candidates, after all, want to maximize the odds of landing an offer. But perhaps forgotten in the process, departments want to see the best from their candidates and desire to bring their searches to a successful conclusion. Everyone has an interest in a good showing.

In this spirit, we offer the following five recommendations to improve the campus visit and raise the fortunes of both applicants and departments alike.

We present this advice not under any brazen notion that we have uncovered the secrets to faculty hiring, but rather as the lessons we have learned from a sizeable number of faculty searches. Now, with close to 20-20 hindsight, we wish that we had followed this advice ourselves.

## Full Information Benefits Everyone

Academics undoubtedly know the exhortation to "be prepared," but we are surprised by the number of applicants who come to campus expecting to complete all of their due diligence in a one- or two-day trip. Applicants should begin their research long before the campus visit, using a school's web site, Lexis-Nexis, and other professional sources. What are the department's academic strengths? How often and in what outlets do the faculty publish? What courses does the department regularly offer? What funding opportunities does a school provide? Many of these questions can be answered by a little legwork. In fact, some of the most impressive applicants we have encountered were able to ask us questions about university programs that even we did not know existed on our campus.

Some of the responsibility for providing information rests with the hiring department. We suspect that many professors believe their own programs are well-known, but the truth is that few of us know much about political science departments outside of our own. Hiring departments would do their candidates—and themselves—a favor by providing briefing materials for the finalists. The information can be as detailed as the department wants to share, including newsletters, enrollment data, or even strategic plans, but full information gives candidates a better opportunity to judge the fit of a program with their skills and interests. It also allows the

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department to raise the bar for its candidates, asking finalists more detailed questions about their anticipated contributions to a department's course offerings, advising, culture, or administration. A better informed candidate can provide a more thorough answer, which ultimately gives a search committee more data for evaluation.

In the course of the campus interview both sides are trying to assess the fit of the other. Does the candidate fit the job description and needs of the department? Does the department or school mesh with the candidate's career path? In truth, the issue of fit may be less important in practice than the issue of "fitness." The screening process leading to the on-campus interview will likely eliminate candidates who don't fit well with the position, but in our own case we ultimately invited a number of people to campus who were interesting, even if not precisely working in the field we initially wanted. Other candidates may find themselves in this position, and—despite having been brought to campus—need to be prepared to deal with the question: "We are really searching for someone who does  $-X-$ , but you do  $-Y-$ . Why should we hire you?" The question is not as antagonistic as it may sound. It permits the prepared candidate—one who is knowledgeable of the department and has a sense of how she might fit in—an opportunity to shine. We can think of at least one search where the offer went to a candidate with an interesting, if slightly "off topic," background who won over the search committee by showing us how her interests could help expand our program in a useful direction.

## Bring Interesting Questions

Part of being prepared means bringing good questions. Certainly, it is acceptable for a candidate to ask about a department's teaching load, but the memorable applicant is the one who has examined the curriculum and wants to know about developing new courses. The ideal candidate also knows something about the academic interests of his potential colleagues and engages them in conversation about their ongoing research. This does not mean that applicants should memorize the bios of a department's faculty. Obsequiousness is rarely attractive. But a finalist should know who teaches in which areas, who has published recent, well-received books, and most importantly, who, if anyone, shares the applicant's field.

Candidates who demonstrate intellectual curiosity in their future colleagues' work, who can show how they might be a potential resource to talk through ideas, and who are lively, stand a better chance than the applicants who simply sit through an interview waiting to be asked about *their* work.

Most interviews also entail a visit with the dean or other administrator above the departmental level. This individual almost certainly will not be a political scientist. He or she may have a significant role to play in the selection process, or, at the least, a veto over the department's choice. (We have been blessed with an astute and supportive dean for the past few years, and have greatly valued his judgment about candidates. But even bad deans have opinions.) Consequently, candidates need to be able to explain their work to a mathematician, linguist, or biologist. And there are good questions candidates can ask of deans: What are the dean's hopes for the department in the next few years? How does the department fit into the dean's plan for the college or school? If the candidate has cross-disciplinary interests, what are the prospects for connections outside of the department? Just as departments seek interesting and engaging scholars, deans want faculty who will represent the school well. Candidates get just one interview with the dean. Make the most of it.

## Tell A Good Story

If there is one part of the campus visit on which candidates should be most schooled, it is the job talk. We have seen many fine presentations. We have also witnessed some problematic ones: Candidates who could not make eye contact, topics that went unexplained, talks that seemed to go on forever.

Some of the advice is straightforward: Stay calm, remain respectful, leave time for questions, be prepared. Even if it's obvious, this advice is crucial: Rehearse the talk—many times—so you can present it without relying too heavily on notes. Practice in front of a mirror, give the talk to family, friends, or colleagues, or try it out at a workshop beforehand and encourage the audience to ask tough questions. By no means should the campus visit be the inaugural run for your presentation.

Think of the job talk as a story, a tale not only about your subject matter but also about your skills as a

researcher and teacher. Remember, the vast majority of the audience has little familiarity with your sub-field, let alone the intra-disciplinary debates taking place therein. So, you need to pitch your talk to a crowd of generalists, explaining to the entire audience why your topic is interesting and important. What should this research tell us about politics and government? Why is it important to consider the issue now? How did you investigate the question?

Ironically, the dangers of the presentation can be greater for the candidate who has employed intricate quantitative methods but who fails to heed the Perestroika-like call to explain the relevance of his findings. We have seen too many applicants done in by the inevitable "so what" question. The candidate presents his research—a complex recitation complete with charts and diagrams—and, smiling confidently, he is unexpectedly laid low by the first questioner who says, "Yes, your approach is interesting, but why do your findings matter?" Lest others think this query is a call for a policy recommendation, it is instead a request to stand back from the individual project and ground the topic in larger questions and themes about political science that non-specialists can appreciate. Among other things, this is the mark of an adaptable, well-rounded mind—the ability not only to grapple with technical issues in one's sub-field but also to explain their significance to generalists or lay audiences.

At the same time, even the well-prepared applicant sometimes stumbles. A questioner may pose a novel issue, or another may raise a serious critique. Again, the key is to stay calm. Don't fake an answer. When you lack a good response it's ok to say you don't know. Tell the questioner, "That's a good question. I would have to think about it a bit and get back to you." Then do so, even after you return home. Or, explain how you would go about answering the query. Do not be afraid to give ground to a solid criticism, but don't allow a belligerent clod to intimidate you into retracting your thesis. The key to a job talk is to showcase an active and interesting mind. Treat the questions as the beginning of scholarly dialogue with your future colleagues, not as the conclusive measure of your ultimate knowledge.

## Skip The Teaching Demonstration

Besides the job talk, some schools ask their finalists to prepare a sample

lecture or class session and to teach an undergraduate class for a day. Apart from being disruptive to the classes in which the applicants appear, we think this request unnecessary, for the job talk should evidence the same skills. A talented teacher is not limited to the college classroom; in some sense she should be able to teach anything she knows. The process is the same: to impart knowledge, to spur interest, to encourage and lead critical thought, and to answer questions about the material. We think that hiring departments often fool themselves into believing that the job talk is solely their opportunity to evaluate and pick apart the finalists' research. It is also a chance for the candidates to teach the audience something about their research, and a capable instructor should be able to engender much of the same enthusiasm for the subject that she accomplishes in the classroom. To be sure, neither of us would want to regularly teach a seminar full of political science professors—it almost makes the task of teaching junior high seem preferable—but a well-presented job talk gives a search committee ample bases to evaluate the substance of a candidate's research as well as the quality of her presentation and teaching ability.

This said, we recognize that teaching ability is more important at some schools (liberal arts colleges) than at others (larger research universities). If a department believes it essential for candidates to perform a teaching demonstration, we recommend that they think of the candidates as guest lecturers for the day rather than substitute teachers. It is unfair to expect a candidate to fit her lecture into an ongoing course. Not only must the candidate compete with the existing professor for command of his syllabus and class, but also with students who may be confused by different approaches or expectations in the same course. The better strategy, we think, is to ask the candidate to lead a class on the central theme(s) she believes students should know before leaving the course: "Three great ideas about elections in America." "Sense and nonsense in presidential decision making." "The big debates in the field of international relations." This way departments can

truly see candidates at their best, and students get a useful, alternative perspective on the course as a whole.

## The Process Does Not End with The Interviews

Many schools typically bring candidates in for a day or two of interviews. There is the opening meeting with the chair of the search committee to discuss the interview schedule, several back-to-back meetings with future colleagues, the job talk, lunch, and a concluding interview with the department chair or dean. Somewhere in here, though, the department often tries to schedule a social event, whether dinner the night before or the evening of the interview, or sometimes even an informal reception. These events are designed to reduce the pressure on candidates and to give them a chance to socialize with members of the department.

What departments do not say, however, is that these sessions are as important to the hiring decision as are the formal interviews and share much in common with the pre-school admission process where children are observed at play. What the department wants to know is whether the applicant will fit in, whether he "plays well with other children." We have been surprised by some of the errors that applicants have made—talking to senior faculty and ignoring junior professors, socializing with one gender but not the other, talking too much or not at all. Miss Manners would have a field day. Everyone the applicant encounters is a potential evaluator, from the department chair to the support staff, who—if the search committee is on the ball—will be asked to share their impressions of applicants. Having dealt with the candidates during the process of setting up the interview and working with them during their stay, support staff often have a good sense of who will be "high maintenance" and who will be a good citizen.

With this in mind, it is often a useful courtesy to follow-up the campus visit with a thank you note to search committee members expressing whatever genuine positive sentiments you have about the department. If you felt that

you really "clicked" with a particular faculty member during the interview, it's not inappropriate to send an email to that person saying you enjoyed the conversation and reiterating your interest in the position. In effect, your parent's prodding was correct: Consideration is essential not only for one's personal life but for professional success as well. Junior professors especially must get along with their senior colleagues—the latter figure in their tenure decisions—and there is no better time than the recruitment process to impress future colleagues as being poised, congenial, and approachable. First impressions go a long way.

## Parting Thoughts

If you are a candidate fortunate to be invited for a campus interview, your chances of getting the position are pretty good—typically 1-in-4 to 1-in-3. Our experience, though, is that at least one of the three or four candidates invited to campus will arrive unprepared for what lies ahead, and will fall short. This means that the odds are even better for a candidate who knows the department and its faculty, has a well-rehearsed talk, and is comfortable with what he or she has to offer as a colleague.

Similarly, the department that has done all it can to prepare candidates about the institution, the department, and the job, helps ensure that its candidates arrive with the best chance to demonstrate what they are capable of, and thus, to make a good choice in hiring a future colleague. Departments whose faculty have taken their responsibilities seriously—familiarizing themselves with the candidates and their work, not subjecting them to unreasonable expectations, even remembering to hand them a bottle of water as they make their way through a grueling day—stand a better chance of landing the candidates they really want. Even in a tough job market, the best candidates usually have choices, which means that departments that show the courtesy and good sense to help candidates shine will have made a good impression, too.

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## Notes

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1. To protect the identity of past candidates, we have changed some of the details in our examples.

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