Interview Presentations- "Chalk Talks"

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Typical Context:

- Cover letter, research and teaching narrative, publication record, teaching evaluations, letters of recommendation, and your reputation are used for initial screening to produce “long list” of candidates

- Search committee looks in depth at these long list candidates, to produce “short list”. These individuals are invited for an interview visit, perhaps after a phone interview first.

- Interview components include one-on-one meetings with faculty and administration, social occasions, and one or more “talks”, i.e. interview presentations:
    - research seminar or colloquium – describe research results
    - teach a class – demonstrate teaching proficiency
    - “chalk talk” – description of future research plans

So what's a "chalk talk" anyway?

A presentation that outlines your research vision, objectives, implementation plan, resource requirements…

Goal is to convey your vision, convince the institution you are likely to succeed, and that your goals are aligned with theirs.

Why does this matter?

Helps the institution understand your lab space needs, startup funding scale, and likely size of empire.

Helps the Department understand the research program that will determine tenure decisions. Feasible? Fundable? Likelihood of success?

Helps the Department assess your strengths as a PI, advisor, and research group manager.

Worksheet 1

Do you really have to use a blackboard, and chalk?

No.

The “chalk talk” information content might be conveyed in a specific presentation, or through a combination of one-on-one conversations and research seminar content.

2d. Differences in Interviewing by discipline:

- **Life Science:**
  - Webcam interviews
  - First in-person interview
  - One-on-one interviews with faculty
  - Meeting or lunch with grad students and or postdocs
  - Formal research seminar on first day
  - Dinner with SC members and other key faculty
  - Informal chalk talk on second day
  - Meeting with administrators (chairs and deans)
  - "Ride to the airport"
- **Engineering:**
  - First in-person interview
  - One-on-one interviews with chair and key faculty
  - Interactive meetings with small groups of faculty
  - Tour of relevant shared facilities
  - Meeting or lunch with grad students and/or postdocs
  - Formal research seminar
  - Breakfast(s) and dinner(s) with SC members and other key faculty
  - Meeting with administrators (Assoc. Deans and Dean)
  - "Ride to the airport"
- **Physics/Math:**
  - Webcam interviews
  - First in-person interview
  - One-on-one interviews with faculty
  - Meeting with grad students and or postdocs
  - Lunch with SC and key faculty
  - Formal research seminar on first day
  - Dinner with SC members and other key faculty
  - Meeting with administrators (chairs and deans)
  - "Ride to the airport"

What do you see as some of the challenges?

Some challenges I faced:

- Making the transition to self-image as PI, in charge of a group, successfully executing a plan.
- Understanding how to know what to ask for (startup funds, lab space) and calibrating that request.
- Intellectual risk tolerance. What's the risk/reward distribution of your proposed research portfolio?
- Being over-extended in too many projects, learning to say "no".
- Transition from being capable, experienced post-doc to an overworked faculty member; time management.

Top Ten Things to Do:

1. Prepare. Clearly identify your main points.
2. Practice. Ask colleagues to provide constructive critique.
3. Make sure you understand their expectations for your visit.
4. Make sure you understand their long term institutional expectations and aspirations.
5. Do your homework regarding existing facilities.
6. Clearly communicate metrics for research success.
7. Make the transition from thinking like a postdoc to thinking like a PI.
8. Understand the respective roles of search committee, Department Chair, and Dean.
9. Assess your competition. They won't be standing still as you try to initiate and execute a program.
10. Learn how to write a compelling research proposal.

Top Ten Things to NOT Do:

1. Don't "wing it". People will immediately detect BS answers.
2. Don't look inept due to laptop/projector failures.
3. Don't run over your allocated time. Ever.
4. Don't get flustered by aggressive questions. Learn how to deal with them.
5. Don't underestimate budgets. Make an estimate, then multiply it by π.
6. Don't neglect the educational aspect. What will be the dissertation titles of your first two graduate students?
7. Don't over-dress. No tuxedo, no formal gowns.
8. Don't under-dress. No cutoffs, no T-shirts, no halter tops.
9. Don't produce cluttered or illegible overheads.
10. Don't be out of synch with expectations for space and startup funds.

Worksheet 2

Summary

- Communicating a credible, thoughtful research vision and execution plan is an essential element of a faculty job interview.

- Some sub-fields designate an interactive “chalk talk” for this. Some don’t. Either way, this information is vital to the selection process.

- Be prepared, be effective.