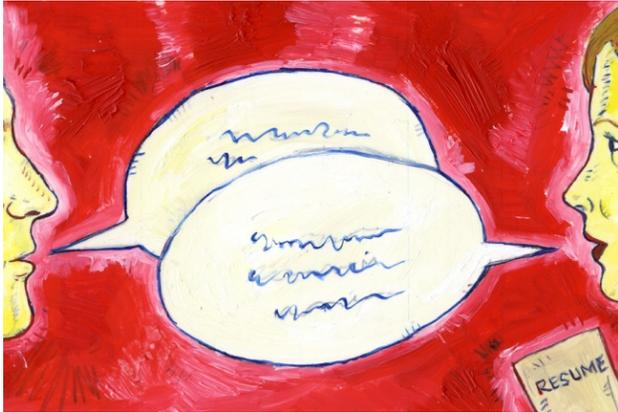


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

Preparing for Your Interview



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By Rob Jenkins | JANUARY 13, 2011

If you were fortunate enough to score an interview at a community college in the coming months, you're no doubt looking forward to the big day with a great deal of anticipation and perhaps no small amount of anxiety.

But what you do during the interview itself probably isn't as important as what you're doing right now to prepare. Or, to put it another way, if you don't spend your time profitably over the next few weeks, no amount of eye contact or glib posturing in front of the committee is likely to compensate.

The good news for all of you overachievers is that you don't have to sit around in the interim contemplating the meaning of life. Here are some specific preparations you ought to be making right now:

Nail down the logistics. I haven't known many people who missed an interview because they wrote down the time or date incorrectly, or because they couldn't find the campus. But I have known a few. You don't want to be one of those few. Make sure you know exactly when and where your interview is scheduled to take place.

Ideally, you should scope out the site a few days in advance, especially if your interview is on a large campus. If that's not possible, at least make sure you are able to find the location on the campus map, which should be available on the Internet. Arrive on the campus at least an hour early, and show up at the interview room 15 to 20 minutes before the scheduled start.

Speaking of the campus, do you know how to find it if you're traveling from out of town? Do you know how you're going to get there? Are you driving? Flying and renting a car? Will someone be picking you up at the airport? Will the host institution pay all or part of your travel expenses? Those are details that you should have nailed down weeks, if not a couple months, in advance.

Most of those points should be covered in a letter from the search committee chair confirming your interview. But if you don't receive such a letter, or if you still have questions, don't hesitate to call or e-mail the chair and ask. (I'm a big fan of e-mail, but in this case, I would probably call.) Be polite and deferential but not apologetic. No one can reasonably expect you to come for an interview if you don't know where you're going, when you're expected, or how you're supposed to get there.

In particular, don't be shy about broaching the subject of travel expenses—an item that might not be covered in the letter. Many two-year colleges don't pay for candidates to travel to a job interview, but some do. At the very least, before you agree to an interview, you need to know if you're going to be spending several hundred dollars out of pocket.

Determine what to expect. The letter confirming your interview should also offer a brief outline of the process, answering questions like: How long will the interview last? Will you meet just with members of the committee, or will you also "interview" before a larger gathering of faculty members? Will students be involved? A department chair or dean? That information is good to have going in.

It also helps to know how the interview will be conducted. Will it consist primarily of questions and answers, or will you also be expected to give a teaching demonstration? That second point is especially important, because preparing a teaching demo is a major undertaking (and one that I covered last year in a column titled "Demonstration or Demolition?").

If the letter doesn't reveal such details, e-mail the committee chair to ask. I know many job seekers are afraid that asking for such information will make them seem needy or high-maintenance. I say, better that than show up for an interview unprepared. I would also add, as someone who has chaired numerous search committees, I wouldn't think

badly of a candidate who cared that much about doing well in the interview. I might also revise my letter next time.

Do your homework. That's standard advice for a job seeker. Yet I'm constantly amazed at the number of candidates we interview who seem to know nothing about our college, despite a wealth of information available online.

If you want to set yourself apart from other candidates, plan to spend several hours on the institution's Web site—and not just on the home page or looking at featured items. Go several layers deep. Look up the college's mission statement and strategic plan. Find information on academic programs, demographics, and on graduation, retention, and transfer rates. Read—or at least skim—the faculty handbook. Click on some Web sites of faculty members to get a feel for your potential colleagues and for the institutional culture.

In short, learn everything you can. Most of what you discover won't be relevant to your interview, but a thorough knowledge of the institution, like a good backstory in a well-written novel, will suffuse your answers with an authenticity that is bound to impress the committee, even if only subconsciously. In addition, your study may enable you to ask some intelligent questions, if you get the opportunity. I've always thought that makes a candidate seem more appealing.

A few words for experienced faculty members going back on the job market: Just because you know community colleges, don't assume that you know everything about the particular college where you will be interviewing. I made that mistake once, a few years ago. Having already spent half a career at two-year colleges, I gave the institution's Web site a cursory once-over and thought it all looked pretty familiar. Turned out the college had some very different ways of doing things that I would have known about had I bothered to delve any deeper than the home page. As a result, I was embarrassed during the interview and, needless to say, didn't get the job.

Do more homework. For inexperienced candidates, it's important that you do research not just on the particular institution where you will be interviewed but also on community colleges in general.

One of the biggest problems we see during faculty searches is that many candidates have no idea what faculty members do at community colleges or how they differ from four-year institutions. Often such candidates appear visibly taken aback during the interview, as the differences become clear. You can spare yourself that shock just by doing a little reading—OK, maybe a lot of reading—before you go into the interview room.

Resources abound, both in print and on the Internet, but let me mention just a few. A new book by Chad Hanson, *The Community College and the Good Society*, examines the role of the liberal arts on two-year campuses—a particularly timely topic given the current emphasis on "work force development." *Community College: Is It Right for You?*, by Susan Stafford, offers numerous insights into two-year colleges from a prospective student's viewpoint. The American Association of Community Colleges publishes *Community College Times* and *Community College Journal*; the group's Web site is also a treasure trove, especially the "About Community Colleges" section. And, of course, *The Chronicle's* archives contain a wealth of information, including eight years' worth of free columns in the "The Two-Year Track" series.

Spending time with those books, Web sites, and other sources will give you a good understanding of what community colleges value and how they communicate those values. It will also provide a crash course in community-college jargon, so that when you sit across from the search committee, you will sound like someone who is intimately familiar with community colleges—and not like someone who is applying only as a "fallback" position, in case that big job at the R-1 doesn't come through.

Craft your narrative. What search committees value most—or at least what they claim to value most, and it's usually true—is good teachers. Community colleges are teaching institutions, after all, where you will probably be expected to teach five or more sections each semester.

Before your interview, then, you need to craft a convincing narrative featuring yourself as an excellent teacher, or at least as someone intent on becoming an excellent teacher. That narrative—again, like a good backstory—will inform all of your answers and enable you to present yourself as someone committed to the community-college teaching

mission.

When I say "craft" your narrative, I don't mean make it up. I trust that, if you're applying to community colleges, you really are committed to teaching. If you're faking it, the committee members will almost certainly sniff that out. And even if they don't, even if you sell your act and manage to get yourself hired, you're going to be pretty miserable teaching five courses a semester.

What I'm suggesting, assuming you really do consider yourself a good teacher, is that you keep that role foremost in your mind. Think about the experiences you've had in the classroom that led you to enjoy teaching and convinced you it was something you wanted to do. Then weave those stories into your interview answers.

For instance, you may be asked about your experience with diverse student populations. Don't answer by spouting numbers: "My last campus was 43 percent African-American and 17 percent Asian." Instead, tell a brief story about the time a student's cultural differences enlightened your class discussion, or the time you went out of your way to help a student who was struggling with the language. If you're asked about using classroom technology, don't just recite the various types of hardware and software with which you're familiar. Tell about the time you tried something new and how the students responded. That's what I mean by weaving your personal narrative into your answers.

I hope you will come to see the interview not as an oral exam but rather as a collegial interaction. Then you can approach it with confidence, as a professional among professionals, rather than as a supplicant. While there are certainly no guarantees—not in this job market—I believe you're more likely to have success that way. Good luck.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Georgia Perimeter College. He blogs at www.nccforum.org and writes monthly for our community-college column. His book, "Building a Career in America's Community Colleges," has just been published by the American Association of Community Colleges and the Community College Press.

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