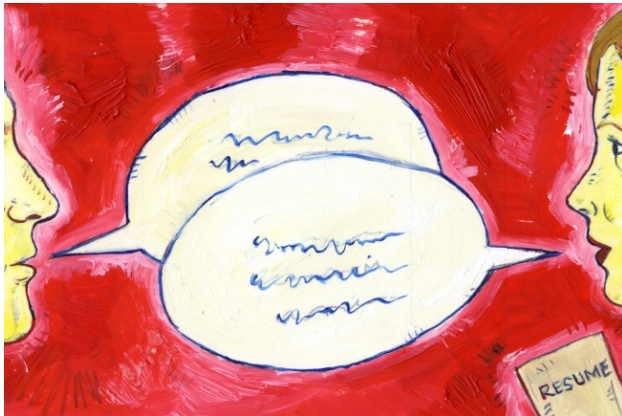


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ADVICE

What to Ask—and Not to Ask—in Your Interview



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By Rob Jenkins | FEBRUARY 20, 2012

As both a serial search-committee member and an occasional job seeker, I have observed that one of the most awkward parts of a standard academic interview often comes at the end, when the committee chair asks the candidate if he or she has any questions.

Over the years, I've heard some pretty good questions. I've also heard a lot of truly awful ones, questions that made those of us on the committee roll our eyes and/or cringe with embarrassment on behalf of some poor, benighted soul who apparently didn't know any better. ("I'm planning on commuting from a city 300 miles away. Is it possible for me to arrange my teaching schedule so that I don't have classes on either Monday or Friday?")

Almost as bad were the candidates who responded to our polite invitation, "Do you have any questions for us?" with "No, not really." As an interviewer, it's hard not to feel a little uncomfortable in that situation. You wonder to yourself, "Didn't anyone coach this person on what to do in an interview?"

On the other side of the table, I've spent hours preparing for job interviews, racking my brain for questions that will make it appear as though: (a) I'm really, truly interested in the job; (b) I already know a great deal about the college; and (c) I'm not an idiot. This is more difficult than it sounds.

My experiences have given me a pretty good feel for which questions work in an

interview and which ones should probably be avoided. I can't tell you exactly what to ask (although I might be able to provide some examples), but I can give you some idea of what types of questions you might want to prepare.

First, some general advice: There are certain questions you may need to ask, but not during the interview. For example, if you're invited to the campus, you should know before you accept whether or not the college is planning to cover all or part of your travel expenses. Of course, the committee ought to make that clear when extending the invitation, but that doesn't always happen. If you're not sure, don't be afraid to ask. Otherwise you might be in for a rather unpleasant surprise when you go to present your receipts.

Other questions should be asked beforehand only if they are deal-breakers—that is, if your level of interest in the job depends largely on the answers. For example, if the advertisement for the position does not mention salary, you might be able to find out that information by surfing around on the institution's Web site. But if not, you have to decide whether you want to make it an issue. Questions about money are always awkward, for both sides.

If you absolutely would not take the job if the salary did not meet your requirements, then ask about it up front. But if you probably would take the job even if the pay was a little low, then save that discussion for later, if you receive an actual offer. In any case, do not ask about salary during the interview itself.

Don't ask questions during the interview that indicate a complete ignorance of the college to which you are applying. For instance, those of us who work in community colleges often field queries from candidates regarding support for research, lab space, and graduate assistants. Such questions suggest that the candidates have no idea how community colleges work or what faculty members do there. Clearly they have not done their homework, and there are few bigger turnoffs for a search committee.

Likewise, don't ask a question if the answer is relatively easy to find. That category includes: "So, how many students do you have?" and "Do I understand that you have more than one campus?" and "How many weeks off do we get for the winter holidays?"

and "Faculty members teach *how many* classes each semester?" Handbooks, policy manuals, calendars, course schedules—all are treasure troves of information, and all are readily available on almost every college's Web site. Begin by clicking the "about" button on the main menu. You might be surprised at how much you can glean from that one page.

Instead of neglecting such resources, spend a considerable amount of time doing research about the college, both online and, if possible, by talking with friends or acquaintances (or friends of acquaintances) who work there.

Then formulate two or three possible questions that will: (a) demonstrate your knowledge of the institution; (b) satisfy your genuine curiosity on some issue; or (c) convey to the committee some positive aspect of your background.

Here's an example: "I see that you have an extensive ESL program here at Typical Community College. Can you give me an idea what languages and ethnicities you mostly work with? I taught English in Japan for two years, and I also worked with a lot of Hispanic students in my last position."

Whatever you do, don't ask questions that convey feelings of superiority or betray a sense of entitlement. As a community-college lifer, I find that to be one of my pet peeves, and one that I think is shared by most of my colleagues. We don't appreciate it when candidates act as though—because they have a Ph.D. (so do a lot of community-college faculty members these days) or attended a prestigious institution—they are too good for us.

The ignorance behind a question about teaching load or research assistants is appalling enough, but when it's asked in such a way as to make it clear that the candidate expects certain considerations as his or her due, then frankly we're not interested.

Do ask questions that demonstrate not only a knowledge of the college where you're applying but also an enthusiasm for its mission and an earnest desire to be there. When I'm reading through applications and listening to candidates answer questions during an interview, I'm always looking for indications that people really want to work where I work, doing what I do every day. That admitted bias on my part—one that I believe is

widely shared at two-year colleges—carries over to the end of the interview, when the candidates pose questions for us. Here are some questions that would get high marks from me:

- "At my last institution, about 35 percent of our students began in developmental courses. Do you have a similar percentage here, and would I have the opportunity to teach some of those courses?"
- "I see from your class schedule that you offer a large number of online sections. I've taught online in the past and really enjoyed it. Is that something I might have the opportunity to do here as well, at some point?"
- "I read in your catalog that you have a number of student organizations on campus. That's something I've always been interested in. Are there opportunities for faculty members to be involved in sponsoring those organizations?"

Please note, I'm not suggesting that you ask those exact questions. They're just examples of the types of questions that might indicate a high level of interest. Nor am I encouraging you to cynically feign interest, Eddie Haskell-like (Google him), just to get the job. I'm merely encouraging you to ask questions that show you know something about the institution (because you've done your homework), and that you are genuinely enthusiastic about the kind of work that goes on there.

Finally, there are some questions that may or may not be OK to ask, depending on how you phrase them. For example, don't ask, "How much extra money can I make by teaching in the summer?" You might, however, ask, "Are there opportunities for new faculty members to teach in the summer?" The first version is tacky and presumptuous, while the second poses a reasonable question, couched in appropriate humility.

The overriding principles here are that, first, you should go into your campus interview prepared to ask at least one or two relevant questions, and second, those questions should help your candidacy, not hurt it. In the end, what you ask the committee may be nearly as important as what they ask you.

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views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily represent those of his employer.

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