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# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

## What to Expect in a Second-Round Interview



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By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong | FEBRUARY 01, 2012

*Editor's Note: Have a question for our Career Talk columnists? Send in your queries to [careertalk@chronicle.com](mailto:careertalk@chronicle.com), or post your question in the comments section below. It will be considered for future columns.*

**Jenny:** Last fall we wrote a column about what to expect in first-round job interviews, from the perspective of both an academic and a nonacademic job search. Because we had such an enthusiastic response, it seemed only natural to write a sequel on second-round interviews.

**Julie:** We spoke with two people who have a good deal of experience observing candidates. Carlos Alonso, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and a professor in the humanities at Columbia University, shared his thoughts on what makes for a solid campus interview with us. We also spoke with a recruiter for an international consulting firm about second-round corporate interviews. Her company hires many graduate students, and she asked us to keep her identity confidential.

Both urged us to remind readers: If you've made it to the second-round interview or to a campus visit, you've already beaten the odds. You can feel confident that someone at the institution or the company is excited about you as a candidate. Your task now is to make them see you as a future colleague.

**Jenny:** When we spoke with Dean Alonso, he stressed that candidates need to handle their on-campus interviews very differently from conference interviews. "Now, rather than just asking you questions about your work," he said, "departmental faculty are trying to see you as a potential colleague. They are trying to figure out whether they can imagine you on campus, among them, as a representative of your field."

**Julie:** On-campus interviews are fairly ritualistic, he told us. They differ depending on the type of institution, but are fairly predictable within that type (for example, you will be asked far more about your teaching at a teaching-focused college than at a research university). You will have one-on-one interviews with several faculty members, particularly those who did not have a chance to talk with you at a conference interview or on the phone. You will also meet with a member of the administration. You will talk with members of the student body—they may be undergraduates or graduate students, depending on the type of institution where you are interviewing. You will probably teach a class. You will give a presentation about your research. And it is likely that you will have an exit interview with the chair before you leave the campus. And you will have to convince the various constituencies that you are someone they should want to have around.

**Jenny:** Sometimes, during the course of a campus visit, job candidates relax too much—for example, during their interview with students—and don't put as much thought and effort into those conversations as they do the ones with faculty members. That can be a big mistake, especially at a small liberal-arts college.

Never underestimate the importance of those you're speaking with. To think, for example, that you only need to impress faculty members, not students or administrators, is an error in judgment. The dean stressed that, in meeting with various groups, it is absolutely necessary to "do your homework. Have questions for each of these groups. Show that you want to find out about the institution. Make sure these are not questions that can easily be answered on the Web site." A few years ago, we wrote a column on "Asking the Right Questions," and the advice in that column still stands.

**Julie:** Being too relaxed is one of the mistakes that Dean Alonso has seen in many candidates. For example, he said, don't be confused by the invitation to give an

"informal" talk about your research. "Even if the members of the department tell you to give an 'informal' talk," he said, "there will always be someone in the room who will wonder why you didn't prepare, and later on, you won't be around to say, 'They told me to give an informal talk.' Always prepare."

**Jenny:** Another mistake that candidates make, the dean said, is being too passive in the weeks leading up to an interview. It often happens that a department invites you to a campus interview, sets a date, and then you don't hear anything about your schedule for several weeks. Sometimes candidates worry that asking for information will reflect badly on them. That is not the case. Don't be afraid to secure the information you need. Find out who is supposed to send it to you, and get in touch with that person. You need to know who you will be seeing, and in what order, so you can prepare.

**Julie:** By far the biggest mistake Dean Alonso sees in candidates is an inability to talk about their research in a clear and engaging way. "This is something I see people screw up at Modern Language Association interviews, and they still don't have it down when they get to campus visits," he said. Candidates lose themselves in details as they try to describe their project. His No. 1 piece of advice for interviewees: "Learn to talk about your research with distance and coherence."

**Jenny:** He also warned against candidates' lowering their intellectual guard. In going from formal meetings to a lunch or dinner, he said, "It is easy to assume that you need to perform while on campus, but that the performance can be let go of during dinner. Then, all of a sudden, someone asks you about your dissertation or your talk, and all of a sudden you are in a different register. Department members can't ask you about your personal life, and they don't know you well enough to make a lot of casual conversation. This is why they will keep coming back to your research, your future research, the talk you just gave." Even if it seems like you can relax, you are still "on," he said. That need to be "on" is what makes the campus-interview experience so grueling.

**Julie:** As with a campus visit, a second-round corporate interview is often composed of back-to-back meetings with both potential colleagues and higher-level management. In the consulting industry, the format of the interview stays the same: Your interview is composed of a "case" component and a "fit" component. During the "case" component,

candidates are asked to solve a business-based case. In the "fit" section, candidates will need to talk about themselves and their experience as that relates to the organization and the position.

**Jenny:** We asked the consulting-firm recruiter what qualities her company needs to see before inviting a candidate for a second-round interview. "We need to see that they have an inherent interest in business," she said. "This can range from past internships to reading *The Economist*." Business experience is desirable, but other entries on the résumé can signal a real interest in the field: for example, if you've taken some business courses or been involved in a project or a club that focuses on some aspect of business such as consulting or the biotech industry.

**Julie:** Our recruiter pointed out that with a second-round interview, the interviewer is looking to make sure that candidates move beyond simply completing the case. Strong candidates also possess the traits that will make them successful at the company. At her consulting firm, those traits would include an ability to take the initiative and a speaking style that is both articulate and concise. Especially during the case exercise, she said, a company's senior managers "want to see the candidate looking past the obvious. ... It is not always simply enough to give the right answer (if there is a right answer)—they want to hear the reasoning and implications."

**Jenny:** We asked the recruiter what questions she tends to ask candidates, and she immediately replied, "Why are you making the transition from academia to consulting (or other industries)?"

It is so important to be able to talk about this honestly but in a way that makes sense to the recruiter and communicates your true interest in the job. For instance, some wrong answers would be "I couldn't get an academic job" or "I decided I didn't want to be a professor and I heard that consulting firms were interested in hiring Ph.D.'s." A better answer would be something like this, "Two years before I finished my degree I had the chance to do a short-term consulting project through the Ph.D. Consulting Club. As I worked with my team and then the client, I found that I liked cooperative work, as well as the challenges of managing expectations and handling client communication. I started attending presentations by consulting firms, and while I learned that there are

many differences, I also saw that one aspect of the work is being able to identify a problem, come up with a strategy to solve and manage it, and be able to explain complex ideas to people with a variety of levels of understanding. That's what I've been doing in my dissertation research, presentation, and writing."

**Julie:** We also asked the recruiter for common mistakes made by candidates. "When it comes to the case portion," she said, "it is very important to have structure. Even if the candidate is able to answer the question, the interviewer is focusing more on the candidate's thought process. This is crucial in consulting since they will have to explain their logic to clients." As career counselors, we would argue that this advice also can be applied to many types of interview questions: Prepare enough so that you don't lose track of what you're saying.

**Jenny:** Our recruiter's final piece of advice for candidates: Practice! "We have found that when candidates practice cases with their friends or classmates, they typically yield better results than just practicing on their own," she said.

**Julie:** We'd like to close with a bit of advice that both the dean and the consultant mentioned: Be able to talk about your research to a nonspecialist. That is clearly true for nonacademic interviews, but it's also the case for academic ones. Not everyone you meet will have in-depth knowledge of what you've studied. Being able to take a step back from your work and explain it clearly and concisely will go a long way toward enhancing your performance in interviews.

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