

How to succeed at your academic job interview, Part I



ISEH Headquarters

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As scientists, we focus our early years trying to build a strong curriculum vitae (CV); papers are our top priority, then grants and meetings. We are advised to have teaching experience – especially if we want to go into Academia – and also to participate on committees; but we may never think about, or trained for, the job interview. After years of building a strong and solid CV, something as banal as whether you smile or not during your interview or if you dressed inappropriately can decrease your chances of being chosen. While doing great research is key to getting to your next position, there are also many other variables that you need to prepare for during your interview process.

At the ISEH we recognized that our mission of helping you to advance your career should also include the transition to your next position, so we asked our renowned members to share their experience with the new investigators. Here we summarize, in two posts, the insight and advice that they shared at the ISEH 44th Annual Scientific Meeting, held in Kyoto, Japan. In "Part I" we will focus on the PIs perspective and advice, and in the "Part II," Dr. Daniel Lucas will focus on the "other side of the desk," the applicant's perspective. Dr. Margaret Goodell's first piece of advice was to "make them want you". One of the first steps to accomplishing this is being sure yourself that you want it. You cannot project something you are not sure about, and your audience is going to read the indifference. Dr. Hartmut Geiger reiterated the importance of this aspect, and further suggested to delve into understanding your motivation for wanting this next position. Once you are able to define this, you will be able to present sincere enthusiasm and dedication required for the position to which you are applying. Don't forget during this process to be true to yourself. These positions, whether they are graduate, post-doc, or faculty level, are rarely short term. It is in the best interest of both you and the hiring department that you feel you could thrive at their institution. One step of knowing if the position you are applying for would be a good fit for you, is to perform research on the institution and position you are applying for. So where do you start?

Ideally, preparation for the job interview should start early in your career. As our panelists agreed, going to meetings such as ISEH, not only exposes you to current research in your field, but it also gives you an opportunity to practice presenting your research, discuss your ideas, and forge connections with colleagues outside of your department. These meeting interactions will not only open opportunities for collaborations, but also may lead to new directions in which to take your current research. Importantly, developing a network of colleagues who know you and your research is an important part of the pre-application process.

The application process

It can start by a job advertisement – some institutions use their own webposting, while others are listed online at science career websites. Job opportunities can also be posted at a society webpage ([ISEH has a career center](#)) or discussed at scientific meetings.

Furthermore, depending on the stage of your career, there is also an option to send an unsolicited request to a principal investigator (PI) conducting research you find particularly compelling.

Dr. Margaret Goodell shared with us the process of faculty recruitment at her institution. In response to the job posting, application packets are sent along with the recommendation letters (which can also be sent later on), to a special committee who then meet and rank the candidates. Their top candidates, are invited for a first round interview, consisting of a formal seminar that is open to the entire department. The candidates then meet with trainees of the department as well as faculty members to discuss their science and the institutional environment, and the day often ends with a dinner with the faculty. Depending on the institute, a chalk talk may also take place during this first round, or it may occur during a second round, slightly longer (one to three-day(s)) interview, where the spouse may also be invited. At the second interview, the details of the potential offer might be discussed including housing, spouse/partner opportunities, facilities, animal use, bioinformatics, salary, etc...). This second round interview is an important opportunity to find out the percentage of salary you are expected to bring in, if the institution has ancillary support services (secretarial, glass washing), and how your future students will be paid. Dr. Goodell also advises that you pay special interest in determining who will be your direct boss and your mentors within the department. If you forget to negotiate something, it will be very hard to bring it back up later in the hiring process, so this is the right –and maybe only- time to do it. This is the part of the process where you need another important skill that may be a little rusty or perhaps underdeveloped (especially if you came from a wealthy laboratory)-- you will need to learn what and how to negotiate to get what you need.

In order to negotiate you have to put in perspective what the institution wants and what you both want and need. In Dr. Goodell's experience you need to remember that the institution wants to offer you a package that will help you to succeed, but they need to also retain resources for other projects. They also try to keep packages for junior people fairly standardized to avoid issues. In order to negotiate, "be in the strongest possible position to start with," you need to show your potential for success, and again, "make them want you," Dr. Goodell stated.

Dr. Takashi Nagasawa addressed the importance of showing your potential and he shared his personal experience. He started with an interesting quote that sum up his advice "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" meaning that in order to show your potential you need to come up with an hypothesis, and then you have 10 years to prove it right. He guided us through his career, including how he stated at his job interview that he planned to find a chemokine that controls B-lymphopoiesis, and then he did that successfully. He also alluded to differences in the hiring process in Japan, compared to other locations, which again stresses the

importance of doing your research on potential positions in which you are interested to allow you to present the strongest application package you can.

Dr. Hartmut Geiger offered a perspective of both the hiring process in Germany as well as in the States. Although fundamental criteria including a strong CV, good letters of recommendation, and the fit of the candidate's research interest to the position were consistent across countries, the interview process itself has variations. In the German system, there is a single interview that is often done with several candidates present at the same time. There is also slightly less room for negotiations. However, Dr Geiger reiterated that the key to finding your next position is to find your passion. Armed with that, keep an open mind about positions where you can pursue this passion, as there may be unexpected opportunities in locations you had not previously considered.

Dr. Margaret Goodell's survival list

Avoid at any cost

- Misreading the audience
- Bad seminar or chalk talk
- Lack of etiquette "at all times"(during your seminar, dinner, talking to the students and faculty)
- Negative comments about anyone

Things to work on

- Show collegiality
- Polish your CV
- Network
- Apply for small grants and K awards while in your postdoc



Isabel E Beerman, PhD

ISEH New Investigator Committee Member

Instructor, Department of Pediatrics

Boston Children's Hospital, PCMM

Harvard Stem Cell Institute, Dept. of Stem Cell and Regenerative Biology

Harvard Medical School

200 Longwood Ave

Warren Alpert Building, Room #156

Boston, MA 02115



Eugenia (Kena) Flores-Figueroa, PhD

ISEH Publications Committee Member Oncological Research Unit at the
Mexican Institute of Social Health (IMSS)
Mexico City, Mexico

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