Making The Leap, Pt. 2: Some Strategies for Interview Success

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"Eric, I'm going to ask you some hard questions now. Give your nobel prize speech, in 50 words or less. Go."
-Interviewer at an academic institution

This post is the second in a series relating to making the leap between postdoc to faculty. The goal is to relate some of my insights into the process based on my experience, both then and now, from the other end of the desk. In this post, we'll explore some strategies to master the main components of interviews: meetings, the seminar and the chalk talk.

Know who you're meeting with: If you've applied to an institution, then it's a fair bet that you've already identified potential collaborators or people of interest who you will want to speak to while you are interviewing. Often (though not always), institutions will ask you if you want to meet with specific people. If they don't ask you about specific meetings you'd like to have, it doesn't hurt for you to ask the faculty member or admin handling your visit about some individuals you have in mind. Once your itinerary is settled, it will be forwarded to you. Beyond looking carefully at the details about how you are to get from the airport to the hotel, and from hotel to the interview, note closely the people you are meeting with. Depending on the position and department/division to which you are applying, you may meet almost entirely with people whose work you are familiar with. It is also likely that you will meet with others who have either identified you as a potential collaborator, or who are stakeholders in your hiring (deans, department and division heads, CEOs or VPs). One interview itinerary for a biology department had me meeting with specialists in raptor behavior as well as inflammation. My industry interview put me in rooms with a physical chemist and a medicinal chemist. Regardless, I looked these people up, read their papers or websites beforehand, and expanded my horizons. Why? The raptor specialist and physical chemist had just as much voting power on my hire as the immunologist. I was probably not going to collaborate with him, but it would be worth knowing about his work, operationally out of respect and ability to have a two-way conversation, but in reality also as a way to learn something new. Where potential synergies exist with a particular faculty member, it's worth discussing these in your one-on-one meeting with them. In meetings with deans or department heads, I anticipated that I would be discussing my work with these busy people concisely, from the high-altitude viewpoint, and with emphasis how it would integrate with and enrich their organizational unit as a whole. They were not going to

be concerned with my HSC transplantation strategy either during or after the interview. Importantly, if you are interviewing for a position associated with a graduate program, do not underestimate the importance of lunches or meetings with students. They may seem like they're mostly eager to discuss their work or asking you mentorship-related questions, but keep in mind they are evaluating your potential in these areas and typically report their views to the faculty search committee. As a last point, it's okay to ask multiple people the same questions. You may think you sound like a broken record, but relating to the first post, it's a good idea to get multiple viewpoints on key issues relating to the environment and resources integral to your success. Have such key questions composed in advance of your interviews to ensure you aren't losing key opportunities by making it up as you go along.

A last point to make: academic one-on-one meetings tended to be somewhat freewheeling. They were often centered around potential collaborations or questions relating to the science I do and how it might fit into the department. The discussions largely (if indirectly) related to evaluating my potential as a collaborator, as a citizen of the department, and potential as an independent investigator and mentor. My industry interview on the other hand was highly structured. Individual team members had specific pre-determined sets of questions relating to my ability to sequence projects, problem-solve, identify priorities, deal constructively with superiors, provide leadership to direct reports, and work dynamically on multiple projects. Questions also related to whether I was able to drop a project and move on if required. These questions required me to provide specific examples relating to these topics as well. The interviewers took detailed notes as I talked with them. My discussion with the head of the unit was mostly related to my interest in an industry career.

Give your TED talk: Seminars are actually fun if you are prepared and confident. For the seminar, make sure you have a connection for your laptop and the projector, and your talk on a flash drive. I remember at least two institutions did not have their own adapters at the seminar room. I also bought my own laser pointer/PowerPoint remote for the same reason; not every institution had a laser pointer in place on the podium. In both cases, these preparations make life easier for you and win optics points for preparation and professionalism. Most institutions also did not have an AV person present to set up the computer. Learning the idiosyncrisies of your machine's relationship with projection equipment ahead of time could save you from turning your seminar into a second chalk talk, and the flash drive allows you to load your talk onto another computer. Keeping a PDF version on the drive also insulates you from Mac/PC image compatibility issues. Know how to speak into and position both lavalier (clip-on) and lectern microphones before your seminar. Ensure your shoes are broken in and comfortable and have water nearby (avoid

placing it where it can spill onto your laptop).

Regarding content, your goal is to get your concepts across, not to describe in depth every supplemental figure from your last publication. Begin broadly, identify the scientific problem and its significance, and do not be afraid to have several introductory slides to get the conceptual framework across. Show key pieces of data, explain complex assays with cartoons, and do the same with the models. In your conclusion, re-address the scientific problem and how your data impact the problem and the field. Importantly, the seminar is not just about your past (or current) work under your mentor. You should spend at least 5-10 minutes discussing what you plan to do next as an independent investigator apart from your mentor, and identify how your work and resources or faculty at that particular institution can synergize. Leaving this part out raises questions as to what you plan to do and therefore your independence. Reiterating from Dan's blog post, do not assume that everyone at your seminar will be at your chalk talk. People should leave the seminar with a clear idea as to your scientific intent. Keep additional data slides after your acknowledgement slide as a resource. Do not go over time. For my industry talk, what I would do as an independent investigator was a moot point. I spent more time in background discussing the relevance of my work to specific indications where there are ongoing drug development efforts, and discussed at the end how my work and skill set could fit into the company's interests and lead to initiation of projects for new indications.

Put your ideas on the board: Chalk talks were probably my favorite part of the academic interviews. When else do you get to visit another institution to obtain free advice on your first R01 from experts in the field who are potentially interested in hiring you? For me, this was an exciting opportunity, and the conversations were great. I was challenged, in one case intensely by a faculty member from an institution that later offered me a position. The individual's critique was legitimate; I kept my cool, acknowledged that the questioner was correct, and offered my appreciation and ways to strengthen the approach. Many of the suggestions and critiques I received at chalk talks have since been extremely useful. Some other points: remember how I mentioned packing my own dry-erase markers in part 1 of the series? Fully half of the chalk talk rooms had no markers, off-colors (brown and orange in one room) or non-working markers. It was an easy optics point to score with faculty who were saved from having to scramble to find markers. Copies of your research prospectus and/or a one-page summary of your aims (preferably with a good conceptual cartoon) can also be of use; I brought copies of the former to my chalk talks and left them near the door for faculty who were filing in. Importantly, if your itinerary does not include 10-15 minutes to prep the chalk talk board beforehand, ask for it. This allows you to get your overall aims/subaims or themes, and maybe a conceptual diagram, up so that you can spend

more time talking and less writing. I kept a notepad with my chalk talk talking points mapped out as a sort of scratch pad for ideas, but rarely used this during the chalk talk itself. Make sure you also know how to write legibly on a dry-erase board. Chalk talks will also range in attendance. Attendees to mine ranged from two faculty to about twenty faculty, postdocs and graduate students. Chalk talks at industry interviews are largely atypical.

If you are generally nervous giving seminars or chalk talks, practice and build confidence beforehand. Since becoming faculty member, I have been in faculty meetings where excessive nervousness during a candidate's talk was mentioned as a potential issue by some of my colleagues. When you are comfortable, invite faculty at your current institution who are known to ask tough questions and not back down to these practice talks. Learn how it feels to be under pressure and you will gain confidence in dealing with it without becoming either defensive or downtrodden.

Taking questions: A key point for every component of the interview process—don't answer questions impulsively without understanding what is being asked. Paraphrase the question back to the questioner if needed. It gives you time to think it over, and ensures you have processed the question. If you aren't sure what is being asked of you, politely ask for clarification. Once you understand, then proceed to offer an answer, and keep it to the point. The question at the top of the post? It was less asking for something beginning with "Your Majesties and distinguished guests" and more about soliciting a succinct, 30,000-foot view of my research program and its importance. Taking the time to figure out the intent of the question is the antidote to stumbling over words in front of people making a decision about hiring you.

Plus, real Nobel speeches are always more than 50 words.

Coming up in the third part of the series, we'll discuss second interviews and starting the process of choosing an institution.

Eric Pietras, PhD

ISEH Member and Simply Blood Contributor

Assistant Professor

Division of Hematology at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

Aurora, CO, USA