Making the Leap, Part 3: Second Interviews

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For academic research institutions in the United States and Europe, it is common (though not an absolute rule) for faculty interviews to feature two separate visits. The first interview, covered in part 1 and part 2 of this series is typically offered to multiple candidates for a position. It offers students, faculty, division and department heads and other stakeholders at the institution an opportunity to get to know each candidate and evaluate strengths and weaknesses, as well as their "fit" within the particular program, based on individual discussions, a seminar, chalk talk (usually), lunches, dinners and other interactions. Depending on how many candidates are invited, the initial interview process can take weeks to months to resolve from broad public searches geared toward interdisciplinary positions or simply premised on casting a wide 'net' to see what sort of talent emerges. In other cases, positions are created and tailored to attract specific individuals. If a single top candidate has been identified from the first interview, then the second visit is most often geared toward recruitment with the intention of making an offer. Where multiple candidates have been identified from the first round, the second visit may be geared toward further evaluation of each of the finalists. The latter format is very common for European institutions. During my faculty search, I was invited back to three of the seven institutions at which I'd interviewed, and all three institutions presented draft offers either at the interview or shortly thereafter. This is not always the case (such as when the institution is still deciding among more than one finalist) and you should feel free to ask about where the institution is in their decision process. Later in the series, we'll discuss issues related to evaluating offers and negotiating startup packages. Here, we'll go over some key points on how to maximize the amount of information you obtain in your second visit. **Wining and Dining (and A Lot of Work)**
By their very nature, second visits for faculty positions can have a distinctive feel about them. Since the weeding out has essentially already happened, if you are offered a second interview is a very strong indicator that an institution has zeroed in on you as being one of their top choices for a position, if not the top choice. There is less emphasis on you proving yourself to the institution, and more on evaluating how you and your program would fit with that of the rest of the program faculty and the institution demonstrating why you should accept an offer there. This doesn't mean the interview visit is trivial or easy in any respect; you have much more homework to do beforehand, because it goes without saying that beyond the wining and dining and liberal use of the word 'collegial,' by your potential future

colleagues, you each need to begin the process of coming to an informed decision on whether that institution is a correct fit for your needs and research goals. **Make a Wish (List)**

If you have not already done so beforehand, make a 'wish list' that contains both the essential equipment and resources you need to conduct your current line of research, as well as those you may need based on any new direction(s) your research program may go. The goal is to have a set list of equipment and resources that you need to successfully carry out your research program, including microcentrifuges, freezers, tissue culture hoods, flow cytometers with specific capabilities, 96- or 384-well qRT-PCR machines, microscopes and the like. It should also include more run-of-the-mill common items including cold rooms, fume hoods, ice machines, ultracentrifuges, and bacterial shaker incubators. The purpose of the list is to identify your needs to the faculty handling your recruitment; they in turn can (if they're doing their homework) tell you if someone else already has these items nearby, where those equipment items are, and whether other labs can use them. This could save you from spending startup money on redundant capital resources. This 'shopping list' can help you to look for items near your lab space during the visit itself (and can utilize when you actually start your lab), and provides both you and the institution a detailed picture of what your startup needs are, which in turn will form the basis for future negotiations that determine the size and shape of the proposed startup package. I also put together a spreadsheet that contained my projected needs in terms of personnel and core facility usage. Once again, the goal is to provide the institution with as clear a picture as possible of what you need to be successful. I sent these lists to each institution, by their request, prior to the second meeting. Their responsiveness to the list in terms of crafting the startup package varied, which is something that I will touch upon in future posts. **Maximize your meetings**

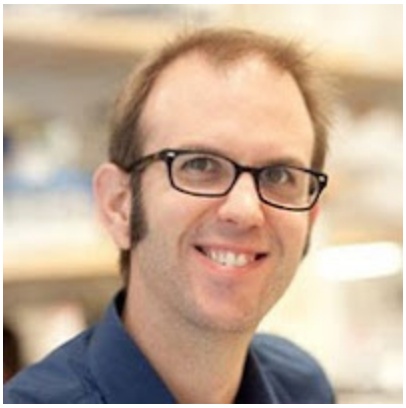
At this point you need to be thinking seriously about what a career at the institution will be like, so you can make an educated decision. Consider your second visit a fact-finding mission. Do you use animal models? Ask to meet with the head of the vivarium facility and get a tour. Find out about per diem costs and space for the number of animals you expect to require in your first five years. Ask questions to evaluate how compatible your current experimental approaches are with institutional animal care policies and resources. Ask about what pathogens are excluded or included in SPF facilities. Find out how well the IACUC works with researchers and how protocols are evaluated. Do you use flow cytometry? Ask to meet with the director(s) of the facility. Find out more about the analytical and sorting instruments available, how much they cost to use, whether professional operators are provided (or required), and ask to see recent schedules to find out how open instruments are. Same strategy goes for genomics and sequencing, microscopy, pathology, transgenic animals or any other specialized facility you absolutely require for your work. These meetings were crucial for me to identify areas where I may need to enter negotiations to ensure my work would be successful. In one institution, the only user-friendly sorter available was tucked away in a BSL3 facility, where it was never used. My conversation laid the groundwork for a decision to relocate the sorter outside of the facility if I accepted the position. In another case, the per diem charge for animal housing at one institution was over

35% more than that of any of the others. My startup offer was eventually enlarged to compensate. Lastly, you may wish to ask what personnel costs are at the institution, with benefits included. Institutions vary somewhat widely in how much technicians, graduate students, and postdocs cost and their associated fringe rates. Indeed, simply because a postdoc salary is pegged to NIH rates doesn't mean benefits packages are entirely the same. Based on the information I obtained, I made a spreadsheet detailing projected personnel and core facility resource costs for the first five years (typically referred to as the 'startup' period) of my position at each candidate institution. This allowed me to directly compare between them, and was useful for downstream negotiations. You can also ask to meet with faculty with whom you may be interested in collaborating. Such meetings can be worthwhile to gauge their interest and perhaps lay general groundwork for such interactions. You may also want to meet or begin identifying potential mentors, as well as obtaining more detailed information from department heads about the tenure process, including requirements for tenure and promotion, the standard timeline for progression and how you will be evaluated during the process. The mentorship issue is particularly important if you have a career transition award that requires a mentoring committee with a certain mix of expertise, but is also relevant regardless - setting up a lab is challenging, and you will need dedicated mentors who provide you with the assistance and insight required to do the job well. The ultimate goal is to leave your second visit with a reasonably solid idea of who your potential mentors and collaborators will be, and importantly, how well set up the institution is (in terms of resources and expertise) to serve as a platform for your research program. Being the first experimental hematologist to set foot in an institution could mean more time is needed to establish protocols that may be second nature somewhere else. The reverse (and equally important) side of the argument is that if you are the fourth or fifth faculty member with the same expertise, you may find your lab is quicker to be up and running, but the internal pool of collaborators who could make use of your expertise (e.g., your 'uniqueness') may be less robust. **See Your Space**

During a second interview visit, I also made sure that I was given a tour of my potential lab space. It may sound silly, but I wanted to be certain it was actually there, and available for me to move in. Beware of "this space is similar to yours" or "I'm sure Dr. X will be moving from his/her space in time for you to start." Such phrases may indicate that lab space is not currently set aside for you, and this may require some additional negotiation and work later on to ensure you aren't thrown into a dark basement corner upon signing your letter. On those same grounds, be absolutely certain there is office space near your lab space that has already been identified and allocated for the position. It should be no trouble for the faculty member spearheading your visit to show you these locations and to be forthright about their status. Keep in mind that ultimately, verbal promises (and sometimes even offer letters) from individuals at the institution are not necessarily binding. Do not take a verbal promise as a definitive 'yes' on anything, as you may find such promises have no weight once you've signed a formal offer letter, particularly if that information was not included in writing. **A Key Opportunity**

Altogether, second visits such as these are really your golden opportunity to educate yourself

as much as possible on whether the institution really is the great fit you thought it was after your initial visit. You will have met more faculty, core facility directors, and you will undoubtedly have follow-up meetings with the department, center or division head(s) managing your recruitment where they might well show you the draft of your startup package, which you will subsequently receive as a written document. Through it all, stay engaged, listen and ask questions, particularly if you are being shown a draft offer. Do not make commitments you can't (or eventually won't) want to keep. It may seem awkward, but you can comment positively and feel enthusiasm about an institution without making a commitment to start your lab there. I was also open about what other institutions I was considering, and if I had a concern about a resource or core facility, I was equally open about it; expressing concern and/or being affirmative about an issue of importance to the success of your research program and career, and being polite and respectful are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I personally found (and still find) that being genuine, rather than cagey or insincere, was the best strategy to approach these discussions, both in the second visit and in the negotiations that followed. In the next post, we'll discuss issues relating to family, including addressing the 'two-body problem' for dual-career couples.



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