

# WHAT QUESTIONS DO I ASK AT AN INTERVIEW FOR A FACULTY POSITION?

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## Introduction

As you prepare to interview for faculty positions at the ASIS&T conference, you need to take the time to consider both what you want in a position and what the school in question wants in a person. The conference interview is like a blind date. You want to make a good impression, and you are curious about what they are like; the interview committee is doing the same thing – or should be. The more prepared you are, the better the interview will go. The following includes a discussion of how to think about what it is you want in a faculty position, a compilation of questions to ask at the interview, and some thoughts on how to analyze and think about the job interview experience after the conference is over.

## Before the Conference

### *Know Thyself!*

If you're at the point where you're ready to look for a faculty position, you probably have a good idea of what it is you want. Or perhaps you don't. Now, several months before the conference, is when you need to take the time to reflect on who you are professionally and what your interests and needs are. Knowing these things, you will be in a better position to understand and evaluate which schools might be the best for you (and why you might be the best for them).

First, write a list of what your areas of interest are in research and in teaching. Your resume or vita, if you have one, can help you here (if you don't have one, save these notes; they will help you later when you make one). Then, take the time to reflect on what you need and want in a faculty position.

How to do this? Brainstorm, make lists, talk it over with people whose opinions you trust. It's important to take your time here ~ this is your future you're considering! Keep in mind that what's right for someone else may not be right for you. Know yourself before you begin!

Having a clear sense of who you are and what you want will allow you to evaluate job postings, schools, curricula and faculty from the perspective of how they fit with your goals and needs. Fit is important. It's the first thing you want to be looking for.

### *Know the Other*

Based on what you know about yourself, take some time to learn about schools that might be a good place for you. Don't worry if they're not hiring; at this point your purpose is exploratory. The kinds of questions you should be asking yourself are:

- Who's out there? What looks like a school I could be happy at or do good work at?
- What are schools looking for this year? Is what I do something they want? What do I have to offer any given school?

You can learn about schools in several ways. Check their web sites. Here are some of the questions you can answer by looking at a school's web site:

- Read the mission statement.
  - What is the school's focus?
  - What are the school's goals?
  - What are their aspirations?
- Study their academic programs.
  - What levels do they offer (bachelor's, master's, doctorate, continuing education)?
  - What do they emphasize? (I.e., do they have special degree programs such as digital preservation, information systems design, bioinformatics)?
  - What courses do they offer?
  - Do they have a distance education program?

### **RESUME OR VITA: HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?**

Resume: A *resume* is a short account of one's professional or work experience and qualifications.

- Typically 1 ½ to 2 pages long.
- Includes information on your education, previous work experience, and contact information.
- Its purpose is to get an interview rather than land the job itself.

Vita: A *vita* is a longer document usually used by persons interested in an academic position. The word *vita* often used as the shorthand way of referring to the document itself. *Curriculum vitae*, abbreviated CV, is Latin for "course of a life."

- Varies in length depending on the extent of history of the person. A 20-page vita is not unusual.
- Includes information on your
  - Contact information
  - Education (incl. summary or title of dissertation)
  - Professional experience (work, teaching, and research)
  - Administrative experience
  - Publications
  - Presentations
  - Areas of expertise
  - Areas of teaching and research interest
  - Professional memberships
  - Honors and awards
  - Academic or professional service
  - References (may also be included on a separate sheet)
- Its purpose is show to your professional growth in greater detail than a traditional resume.

- Study their faculty.
  - What are their interests? (Do you fit in? Do they agree with yours?)
  - Check their publication records.
    - Are they up to date?
    - Do they collaborate with colleagues?
    - Are they interdisciplinary?
    - How many faculty persons are there? (Too few – will you be overworked? Are they expanding?)
    - Do they use adjunct instructors? Do they rely on them too much?
    - Do they share positions with other departments? If so, with whom?
  
- Study their students
  - How many students are in the program?
  - What is the hire-record of the school's graduates?
  - Do they have an alumni program? If so, how active is it?

Talk to your own faculty about their impressions about other schools. Keep in mind that everyone has their own opinions. Your faculty person may know one or two of a school's faculty members quite well, and as a result, may form his/her opinion based on that relationship. Or they may have studied or been employed at the school you're interested in. Keep in mind that this may have been a while ago, or their experience may have been a negative one, or they may have heard positive or new information about the school from their network of colleagues. Keep your own perspective when talking to other people. Trust your own instincts as you gather your information.

Join the professional listservs of your field. Reading through several months' worth of messages can give you a good sense of how different schools and faculty represent themselves and what concerns they focus on. JESSE-L is a moderated discussion list that covers curricula, administration, research, and education theory and practice as they relate to information science issues). ALIS-L is the general ASIS&T mailing and announcements list of the American Society for Information Science and Technology.

JESSE-L URL:           <http://web.utk.edu/~gwhitney/jesse.html>  
 ALIS-L URL:           <http://mail.asis.org/mailman/listinfo/asis-l>

### **Formulate Your Questions**

Recall that the ASIS&T interview is a preliminary interview. Its purpose is to provide you and the interview committee with the opportunity to get to know each other. You won't be offered a job at the conference and it's unlikely you'll be asked on a campus visit. So the questions you ask should be geared towards learning if you and the school are a good fit for each other rather than nitty-gritty issues of salary, housing, etc. These latter items are to be saved for the negotiation phase further down the line. What you want to learn is *Do I fit in with this group of colleagues? Do my goals and interests work with theirs? Do I like them? Do they like each other? Could I do good work here? Could I be happy here?*

To this end, you will want to ask general, but focused questions to learn about the school, their faculty and students, and their programs. Assuming you've researched the school before the conference, ask questions which spotlight the school specifically. For example, as web technology changes the profession and as information schools face budgetary and political pressures, some schools have merged with other academic departments.

To learn more about the impact this has had on a school, you could ask the following:

*On your web site, you've announced you recently merged with the School of Communications. Can you tell me how that came about and what the status of the merger is with regard to the curriculum? <or> Can you tell me how the faculty are responding to the changes?*

Or if a school is about to add a Ph.D. Program you might ask:

*I see you're developing a new Ph.D. program. Can you tell me how you envision the program in terms of its goals? How will the faculty be involved? How will you be recruiting new students?*

In both instances, you've asked a very specific question. The answer(s) should help you gain an understanding of (a) how informed particular faculty are on big issues relating to their school; (b) what the current vision of the school is; (c) if the faculty is excited about the changes or not; and (d) where you might fit in to this new environment. Whatever you ask, make sure the question *means* something to you. For instance, don't ask, "So, *what's it like at X-school?*" when what you really want to know is "*Can I teach in your distance education program right away?*"

## Sample Questions

In general, after the interview committee has presented a general introduction to their school and program(s), your questions at the conference should focus on four general areas: the school and its programs, teaching, research, and professional service.

### *The School and Their Programs*

Depending on what the interview committee says in their introduction, you may not have too many questions in this area. If you've read their mission statement and other similar school-related information on their web site, you may feel you already know. Nonetheless, it doesn't hurt to show you've done your homework. If their introduction is comprehensive and succinct, you can say something like,

*Thank you. I had reviewed your web site, but your introduction gives me a much clearer picture of what [name of school] is about. If you don't mind, I have a few specific questions. <or> I think I'd like to go directly on to my other questions, if you don't mind.*

- Describe the department/school as you see it in five years. Can you tell me why/how you see it in this way?

- (If no published mission statement is available) Can you tell me what the mission or specific goals of [school name] is?
- How does your mission relate to the priorities of the university?
- How would you describe your school's current strengths? Weaknesses?
- How financially secure is the school? The University? (A delicate question, but may be one you need to know. Use your judgment about asking this.)
- Are you anticipating any retirements in the next few years (Also a delicate question, and one the committee may not be able to or not wish to answer.)

## *TEACHING*

There are a lot of questions one can ask, and the interview period is limited. The following is a very detailed list. Use common sense and ask only the questions that will tell you what you need to know. (You don't need to know every last piece of information about each question.) The following questions with are good ones for the initial interview, though you may not have time to ask them all. Use your judgment.

### Course Load

- What's a normal teaching load? Is it different for beginning faculty?
- Would I be teaching multiple sections of the same class?
- Does the course load change if I get assigned to other duties (for instance, if I teach a distance education class and on-site class simultaneously)?
- Overload – do faculty teach overload semesters? Under what circumstances would that happen?
- What's the average number of students per class?
- If a class is particularly large, is a TA or Reader/Grader provided?
- Is there any travel required? (if school has multiple campus sites)
- Is a "travel course" included in the normal teaching load count?
- Does the time it takes to travel to course site figure in to teaching load?
- How/when are courses scheduled?
- What about summer teaching? Is it required?

### Evaluation

- How are teachers evaluated?
- How are students evaluated?

### Curriculum

- How is/was the current curriculum developed? (You might ask this if recent changes have been made.)

- If there is another school in the state or region with similar programs, how does this school compare/differ with X-school?
- Core classes – would I be teaching any of the core curriculum?
- Are core courses “shared” among the faculty? (i.e., Do people take turns teaching the core courses?)
- Would I be able to develop/propose new courses? (This is good to ask if you have ideas in this direction or already have some courses developed.)

### Students

- Tell me about your students (e.g., demographics: age range, economic, characteristics, educational background).
- How are students recruited to your school? <or> Where do your students come from?
- How do your students/recent grads view their preparation for the field?
- How would you describe the relationships between students and faculty?

### Advising

- What kind of faculty advising is available to your students? As a new faculty person how would I be expected to participate?
- What’s the typical student load for a faculty advisor?
- Would I be serve on doctoral committees?

### *RESEARCH*

Research is a very important component in academe. The search committee is likely to ask you some focused questions about your planned areas of research. It is important that you have given careful thought to how you will answer these queries. Here are some questions you might ask.

- I’ve read about your faculty’s research interests, how you think I’d fit in? (This if the school contacted you, otherwise, part two of the question should be you telling them how you’d fit in.)
- How much time is typically spent on research by faculty?
- How do you support each other’s work? Do you collaborate?
- What type of research grants or support are available for new faculty? (E.g., research/teaching assistants, technology support, secretarial/administrative, travel funds, etc.)
- How are new faculty mentored?
- Technology issues: what kind of computer/information technology will be available to me (either through the department/school or university at large)?

Regarding tenure, some you'll want to ask are:

- What's the expected ratio of research/teaching/service? (A school without a doctoral program might give equal weight to teaching and research.)
- What is the expected time allocation for the tenure process? What's normal here?
- What percentage of Assistant Professors achieve tenure here?
- What percentage also reach Associate level? Full?

### *PROFESSIONAL SERVICE*

- How are professional activities encouraged/supported? (I.e., time, money, etc.)
- How active are the faculty in professional associations?
- How active are faculty in the university senate or other university committees?

The questions in the above four sections are neither definitive nor the only questions you should be asking. But they should give you an idea of how to frame your thoughts and your working notes for the conference interview.

### **Questions You Hope You're Asked**

The job interview at the ASIS&T conference is a variable experience. Some interview committees are well organized, some are not. Some have specific questions, some are more informal. In some instances, you have contacted them first, in others, you find out at the conference that you're being looked at. Whatever the circumstances, there are things you should want to say about yourself if given the opportunity. Keep in mind, not everyone will have looked at your vita. So even if what you want them to ask you about is *right there* in your vita or cover letter, you may not get that ideal question.

Here are some sample "ideal questions." If you don't get asked, try to bring them up yourself!

- How would you describe your teaching philosophy? Specifically, how do you address the issue of how to balance theory and practice in a course? (It is a good idea to have articulated your teaching philosophy beforehand. Including it on your vita before your teaching experience section is an effective way to do this.)
- There are many different careers and directions one might choose with a doctorate. Tell us what specifically interests you about teaching and doing research in your field?
- What are you like in the classroom? How would you characterize your interaction style with students? Your teaching style in general?
- Tell us about your research? Where is it headed? What's your "research plan" for the next five years?
- What contributions have you made to the field thus far? What about in the future?

Similarly, there are questions that you would really like to ask a search committee. Their answers (and the manner in which they give them) can give you a good idea of how that school or faculty operates in “real time.” Here are some samples.

- Describe the *ideal candidate* for this position. Tell me how she/he fits in with your overall vision for the department/school?
- If there is another similar school in the state or region: why should I come to X-school instead of Y-school? What makes X-school more interesting?
- Where do you think the information technology is headed in the next five years? How will that impact this school?

### **What Else to Find Out**

Most other questions are more suitable for a second interview. At that point, the committee has demonstrated their interest in you and have invited you to campus (see the next section for a few more notes on this). At the point of the interview itself, you need to know how and what comes next.

Before ending, be sure to ask about their hiring time-frame. Ask when, approximately, they will be making their decisions about who to bring to campus. Ask, too, what their final date for the process is expected to be. (And if you have something happening in that time frame – say a conference or a vacation – be sure to mention this in case they need to contact you.)

### **After the Conference: What’s Next?**

The time immediately following the conference can be difficult. Chances are you had several-to-many interviews, met a lot of new people, and made many new contacts. Once you get back home, there can be a bit of a letdown. This is normal. But while the conference and interviews are over, the experience and your responsibilities have not ended. There are a few things you should do after the conference, in part to prepare for possible second interviews and, in part, to finish up on your “professional obligations.”

First, be sure to send thank you letters to everyone you interviewed with. Ideally, this means to each person on the interview committee, but certainly to the chair of the committee. They should be professional but personable. For instance, after thanking the committee for the opportunity to talk to them, you might add *“I had heard [school name] was setting up a distance education program, but I didn’t know you were linking up with the Communications department as part of it. This really impressed me as I am hoping to extend my professional network in this direction.”* Or you might say, *“I really enjoyed our meeting. It was clear from the humorous interchanges that your faculty is very comfortable with one another. My ideal colleagues would have that kind of rapport.”*

Second, if you promised to send an article, or a file, or even a recipe to someone when at the conference, do so immediately. You may not have interviewed with that person, but it demonstrates your professionalism and courtesy to follow up promptly. Keep in mind, the information science fields are small. You may not have interviewed with this person now, but



could later (or you could be interviewing them!). Use this opportunity to begin building your professional network.

Finally, you should give some thought to what happens should you be contacted for a follow up, on site interview. Go through the same steps you went through in preparing for the conference interview, but consider them in more depth. There are larger issues ask about, but also a more extensive picture of *yourself* that will need to be presented.

Chris Golde's (1999) article, "After the Offer, Before the Deal: Negotiating a First Academic Job" is a useful resource for this. While the article is geared towards job negotiation, it covers issues one might want to consider in preparing for a second interview. The article's point of view is a tad pessimistic, however, assuming that the interviewee is the weaker person in the negotiation process. It does not have to be this way. In the same way an interview is a process of two sides investigating one another, negotiation should be a reasonable discussion of what's possible.

The References and Resources section below includes items which may provide you with additional information and perspective on interviewing and finding the right job fit.

## REFERENCES and RESOURCES

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