

MAA Project NExT Panel Discussion -- Introduction to the Hiring Process: Preparation, Execution, and Follow-up

Your panelists and moderators:

sarah-marie belcastro, Univ. of Northern Iowa / Bowdoin (smbelcas@math.uni.edu)
Michael Boardman, Pacific University (boardman@pacificu.edu)
Dennis Luciano, Western New England College (dluciano@wnec.edu)
Mark Nielsen, University of Idaho (markn@uidaho.edu)
Dusty Sabo, Southern Oregon University (Sabo@sou.edu)
Tamara Veenstra, University of Redlands (Tamara_Veenstra@redlands.edu)
Carolyn Yackel, Mercer University (yackel_ca@Mercer.EDU)

This packet of information contains:

Summary of major points made by panelists
Information Applicants may Seek from Ads
Do's/Don'ts list for Joint Meetings interviews (Carolyn Yackel)
Campus interviews: What Should Be on the Schedule
Tip List for Campus Interviews (Carolyn Yackel)
Guide to Non-Discriminatory Interviewing (Southern Oregon University)

What the Panelists Had to Say

Before beginning a search, consider what qualities you (as a department and/or as a committee) require in a candidate, and what qualities you desire in a candidate. Use this information to write an honest position advertisement; the way in which the ad is written will strongly affect the applicants and applications you receive. Be sure to consult with an Affirmative Action or Equal Opportunity Officer if you have one at your institution. Advertise on the AMS's Employment In the Mathematical Sciences webpage.

Timelines for searches vary widely, but these panelists prefer deadlines from late November to early January. Many committees initially cut their applicant list down to their top 10 - 50 candidates by early December, followed by a round or two of discussion to trim the list to 10 - 30 candidates to be phone interviewed or interviewed at the Joint Meetings. Campus interviews then take place in February and March. Be aware that if your committee's timeline is significantly different from this range, then you may have trouble either in getting a candidate to accept an offer early, or in finding acceptable candidates remaining in the applicant pool.

Funding for advertisements and budgets for attending the Joint Meetings and conducting campus interviews are generally somewhat flexible, and usually paid for by Dean's offices or other upper-administrative offices. Start asking at the Dean's level for this information.

If your administration and budget allow, attend the Joint Meetings to do preliminary interviews. Avoid the Employment Register (computer-scheduled interviews) but embrace the Interview Center (self-scheduled interviews). Allocate 1/2 - 1 hour per candidate, and have at least two department members present per interview.

Phone interviews are useful after the Joint Meetings to help determine the list of campus interviewees. (If you don't go to the Joint Meetings, phone interviews are a good substitute; if you do attend the Joint Meetings, then you may wish to do phone interviews with very promising candidates who did not attend.) Many committees use phone interviews as a way to gauge the depth of a candidate's interest in their institutions. It's best if you can alert the candidate (by email) that you'll be calling. Be sure to mention the time in both your time zone and the candidate's time zone, if they differ.

You should arrange for the candidate's housing and meals during his/her interview. Some committees arrange travel in conjunction with the candidate; others ask the candidate to make arrangements and get reimbursed after the interview.

Campus interviews have many purposes. Chief among them are: assessing the candidate's teaching and research skills; determining fit with the department, institution, and students; giving the candidate enough information to assess the position. Research skills are generally assessed by having the candidate give a research talk, or by relying on letters of recommendation. More difficult seems to be assessing teaching skills; you can have a candidate teach a class or give a general undergraduate talk, though neither is really ideal. We recommend against trying to assess a candidate's teaching skills by viewing a research talk. Determining fit is generally done by having the candidate meet as many people as possible and then getting feedback on the meetings.

Using feedback from all quarters, the committee should come up with an ordering of the candidates to use in making offers. Often department heads or deans actually make the offers and do all the negotiating. Your search may not be over at this point, because you may be called on to answer questions during the negotiation process, and your top candidates may turn down offers.

Supporting new hires is important both for retaining new faculty and helping them get tenure later. It is common for new faculty to receive teaching load reductions in their first year. If you can, assign a mentor (either from within or outside the department) who is willing to answer many questions. Talk to the dean about supporting a Project NExT application, and ask the new hire if s/he is interested (s/he should be!) Take care of these matters before the school year ends, and you'll have completed a successful search.

Information Applicants May Seek from Ads and Websites

Relative importance of research and teaching

Application materials (cover letter, CV, teaching statement, research statement, graduate/undergraduate transcripts, AMS cover sheet, n letters of recommendation (k on teaching))

Minimal requirements for position (Ph.D. in mathematics, statistics, mathematics education, etc.)

Research specialties preferred (are others acceptable?)

Teaching specialties preferred (are others acceptable?)

URL for department

URL for institution

Community in which institution is located

Size of school

Average class sizes

Existence of master's and/or doctoral programs in department

Salary range

Number of department members

Teaching load (how many courses? how many contact hours each?)

Type of school (liberal arts, comprehensive, engineering, etc.)

Character of the department (fun, boring, arrogant, geeky, etc.)

Types of courses offered and emphasized

Interesting teaching opportunities (capstone courses, liberal arts math courses, senior theses, etc.)

Mission of the department (if any)

Interesting outreach programs (community outreach through tutoring, involvement with high school teachers, summer programs, etc.)

Character of the school

What the students are like

What relationship faculty are expected to have with students

Affirmative Action/ Equal Opportunity statement

Do-s/Don't-s list for Joint Meetings interviews (Carolyn Yackel)

Do have interviewers wear name tags or have name plates in front of them. Otherwise, candidates might spend a large part of their consciousness trying to remember the names of the interviewers in order to write a good thank-you letter.

Do hand out brochures about your school, a business card, etc. before beginning so that the candidate knows what to take notes on and what to just observe.

Do act like yourself, but possibly toned down. Candidates want to know what their potential colleagues might be like. If you exhibit no personality, they find out nothing.

Do ask for a copy of a CV or other materials if you can't find your own copy. It's boring and uninformative for a candidate to repeat what is on his/her CV, so you may as well ask about other things or ask details that can't be included on a CV.

Do take notes, if you like. The candidate may also want to take notes. Everyone knows that both sides are meeting with multiple parties. How else would one keep them straight?

Do ask questions related to your mission (if you have one). This is a great time to find out if someone cannot or will not get on board with your program. What is expected of faculty at religious institutions varies greatly, so this is particularly important to convey. If you are a religious institution that requires some kind of religious stance from your faculty, have a conversation with the committee before interviewing about how to explain the expectations.

Don't conduct your interviews in a hotel room. Under no circumstances should interviews conducted by one person take place in a hotel room! Even when there are multiple interviewers, a hotel room is not an ideal venue. What works better are conference or sitting areas in hotels, areas in the conference center that are not highly traveled, etc.

Don't talk only about your institution. If you have a lot of factual information to impart, why not write it down on a handout?

Don't ask only about the candidate. He/she also wants to know about your institution. What you choose to tell is revealing in terms of your priorities.

Don't discourage interruptions during your spiel. This is when candidates hear what you might need to know about them. After a 10 minute spiel, it's possible that a candidate may have 10 anecdotes and facts to relate. That is too many to expect someone to keep in his/her mind. If you don't allow interruptions, you've just lost possibly important information.

Don't ask detailed questions about curriculum, unless you warn candidates in advance that you will do so. Thoughtful faculty members do not make spur-of-the moment decisions about curriculum. Why would you want a candidate who does so? It is okay to ask if the candidate has ideas or thoughts, but it is absurd to require detailed answers based on no research or evaluation of the possibilities.

Do ask (possibly at the end) if there are other materials the candidate would like to share.

Campus interviews: What Should Be on the Schedule

Meetings with department members: The candidate will want to know the personalities and ideas of his/her potential future colleagues. He/she will want to discover how happy the people in the department are, how they feel about their work, and what it might be like to work with them and interact with them. Allow each member of the department and hiring committee individual time with the candidate.

Meeting with the Dean: Usually this is a requirement. The Dean can give lots of the gory details about benefits, etc. At small schools, meetings with the President and/or Academic Vice-President can be useful for the candidate and may also be mandatory.

Extra-departmental people the new hire will be working with: The more information a candidate can find out about the environment, the better. These contacts can give the candidate clues to how easy it will be for a spouse or significant other to get hired, how the department views and treats staff, etc.

Meeting(s) with students: Someone I know once said that he always hated his students the first week of class, because he didn't know them and he was forced to spend so much time with them. We do spend a lot of time with our students. Many of us like certain kinds of students more than others. It's important for a candidate to get to know the kind of students at your institution. It's also important for a candidate to get a feeling for the campus atmosphere and the attitudes of the students on campus.

Meeting(s) with faculty from other disciplines: This allows the candidate to find out what attitudes are pervasive on campus. He/she can ask about how the department is viewed by other faculty. It's also a good time for candidates to find out about committee work. Meeting other faculty can give a candidate an idea of what to expect of future neighbors and friends.

Schedule an opportunity to see the candidate interact with students.

Schedule a campus tour. This can be a good opportunity for the candidate to interact with students, if you can get some students to give the tour. It can also be a relaxed way for one of the department members to meet with the candidate. However, be sure to be sensitive to the weather--a rainy campus tour can be miserable.

If possible, give the candidate time to check out the campus and the region (this can be an extra day with nothing scheduled). Otherwise, a tour of the surrounding region will help the candidate determine community fit.

Give the candidates a chance to ask for anything that's not included in the schedule that they are interested in. For example, perhaps one is a serious biker and would like to see the bike trails in town as part of the local tour.

Tip List for Campus Interviews (Carolyn Y. and sarah-marie b.)

1. Most likely, when you bring candidates on campus it will be winter. If the interview is to include a campus tour by foot, have that on the day the candidate doesn't meet the dean, and arrange for that day to be more casual. Remember to tell the candidate this, so that he/she can wear more casual clothes. Think this doesn't matter? You try walking on ice in a straight skirt and two inch heels.
2. Be careful who you send to the airport to pick-up and drop-off the candidate. You might be tempted to pick the only person who is willing, but these are the candidate's first and last impressions of the department. For the pick-up person, you want someone who is easy to talk with, and will not say bizarre things about the department or harass or scare the candidate (yes! it does happen!). For the drop-off person, you want someone who might be willing to either answer last questions, hash over the interview, or leave the candidate to his/her peace. If you don't think you'll be able to pull this off with all the candidates, consider using a limo service. You can just budget this into the transportation costs. It works great.
3. It's nice to give candidates time to adapt to their surroundings in the morning, but if you are not taking them to breakfast, be sure to give them ideas of where they could go and a way to get there. (Often candidates stay on campus. At small schools there sometimes aren't nearby places to eat other than the cafeteria. Can they eat there? If so, tell them.) Some people don't eat breakfast, but for those of us who do, it's essential. Be sure to make it clear whether or not breakfast will be part of the schedule each day.
4. Try to be flexible in scheduling so that candidates are not forced to miss more of their teaching than they must. While it might be difficult to corral all of your faculty in on a certain day, just remember that every day of class the candidate misses is one more chip on each of his/her students' shoulders. Many candidates have several on campus interviews, and missing many classes makes for a difficult/horrible semester for even the most committed teachers.
5. Make sure to ask about the candidate's dietary restrictions, allergies, other special needs, etc. If you house an asthmatic person in a smoking hotel room, or feed a vegetarian at a meat-dishes-only restaurant, your candidate will have a very negative experience and may not accept a job offer.
6. Don't forget to put a little bit of flex time in the schedule, so that the candidate can go to the bathroom! It's also useful if candidates have a few minutes to themselves from time to time, in order to relax, recharge, jot down notes, etc.

GUIDE TO NON-DISCRIMINATORY INTERVIEWING

Interview questions must directly relate to advertised qualifications and skills. Care should be taken to avoid inadvertently asking inappropriate questions at the interview. The following are adapted from federal Equal Employment Opportunity guidelines. (This document comes from Southern Oregon University.)

1. You may not ask questions about one's race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, disability, or age.
2. You may not ask questions about marital status (e.g., whether the candidate is single, married, divorced, separated, engaged, or widowed), pregnancy, plans for a family, or child care issues. You may inquire if the applicant has any commitments that would preclude her or him from satisfying job schedules. If such questions are asked, they must be asked of both sexes.
3. You may not ask questions about weight and height unless this information is job-related.
4. You may not ask questions about one's state of health.
5. You may not ask questions about disabilities.
6. You may not ask questions designed to discover one's age.
7. You may not ask questions concerning the candidate's place of birth or similar questions about the parents, grandparents, and spouse of the candidate.
8. You may not ask in a series of interviews for a given position questions of one sex and not the other.
9. You may not ask questions about a foreign address which would indicate national origin. You may, however, ask about the location and length of time of one's current residence.
10. You may ask if one intends to become a U.S. citizen (i.e., for proof of his or her citizenship), if one intends to become a U.S. citizen, or if one's U.S. residence is legal, as well as the status of one's visa. You may not inquire if a candidate is native-born or naturalized.
11. You may not ask what is one's mother tongue or how one's foreign language ability has been acquired.
12. You may not ask about one's willingness to work on any particular religious holiday. You may ask about one's willingness to work a required work schedule.

13. You may not ask if a candidate has filed or has threatened to file discrimination charges.
14. You may not ask questions about any relative of a candidate which would be unlawful if asked of a candidate.
15. You may not ask questions about organizations that would reveal the race, color, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, or national origin of the applicant. You may not inquire about the applicant's membership in clubs, social fraternities, societies, and lodges or other organizations which are not job related. You may inquire about membership in job-related organizations (e.g., does an applicant for a position in an English department belong to the Modern Language Association?).
16. You may not ask about military service in the armed force of any country but the U.S., nor may you inquire into one's type of discharge. You may ask questions concerning service in the U.S. armed forces if such service is a qualification for the position being sought.
17. You may not ask questions which would reveal arrests without convictions. You may ask about convictions but not arrests for crimes which relate to the candidate's qualifications for a position.
18. You may not ask questions about one's credit rating or request financial data.
19. You may not ask about the maiden name of a married woman applicant or the original name of an applicant whose name has been legally changed.
20. You may not ask the name of an applicant's pastor or religious leader.