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Gaining “Interview Success” Starts with a Workshop

A grad student shares how the tips and other advice she gleaned from CSW’s annual workshop helped downsize her anxiety

I am scared...I am so scared

It is job application season and I try to catch my breath, hiding my procrastination and my panic while doing other not-so-important things. When I was first told about the Center for the Study of Women’s Interview Success Workshop, it seemed like a good idea. As the day approached and the pile of documents on, over, and around my desk grew bigger instead of smaller, devoting two hours to hearing about the market seemed an excruciating prospect: one more thing I should be doing instead of grocery shopping, reading bibliography after bibliography or, last but not least, sleeping.

How wrong I was

First of all, I felt welcome. It is difficult to explain, as everyone was already there when

poor me reached the room. I quickly sat in the last available space and a sizeable amount of my anxiety immediately decreased as I realized that my pain was shared, my fear was common. I was not the only one feeling uncomfortable about job hunting; everyone was in the same position. Where I come from, this feeling is called *teoría del ventilado*—ventilator theory, in other words—and maybe it is better if I do not go into more specific detail about it.

Soothing words help

The introductory words by CSW Director Kathleen McHugh contributed to making me feel that job hunting was not a solitary endeavor. Of course, it is solitary because you need to hunt alone for your own academic sustenance. You are

not alone in the process; instead, you are a piece in a larger system—a system that works without you in it and will continue to keep on working. I knew this beforehand intellectually, but knowing something in theory is different from experiencing it in real life. There are plenty of examples of things that seem easy—writing an abstract, finishing an almost finished chapter, returning books on time—but are, in fact, somewhere between extremely difficult and nearly unreachable. Going to the workshop helped downsize my anxiety.

Successful examples help, too

And then we were introduced to Professor Allyson Nadia Field from Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA, a real human being, not much older than myself—at least, in academic years—

who went on the job market and found an actual job. I hear everyday, “in this economy the situation is bad,” “before the crisis, the situation was better,” “the amount of positions in [any field] is scant” and many other similar lines. I read the news about G-20 or the Greek crisis, and I wonder whether it might affect the stock market of who-knows-where, then the shareholders in who-know-what, and then the universities that had invested there would have to decide between a neonatal oncologist and a Spanish 1 teacher. And you know what happens then: “I regret to announce that [your Humanities position] has never existed/has been canceled.” Knowing she was hired in a place as great as UCLA—albeit weeks before the economic crash of 2008—was a relief.

A set of commandments

Professor Field shared these commandments to follow:

- Know your strong points.
- You cannot speak too slowly.
- Ask questions.
- Own your authority.
- Ask for clarification to buy time.
- Tell stories: People love to hear stories.
- Do not assume that they know about you.
- Be your own applicant.
- Show who you are going to be as a colleague .

And all these commandments can be rolled into one: Be the best version of yourself. The commandments can also be divided into three phases: before the show, your routine, and general advice.

Before the show

Professor Field kindly reminded us that you do not need to look outside of your institution: you can be mock interviewed at home. Almost every department offers such opportunities in the fall; so take advantage of the opportunities! As a dear professor told me, it is always better if you suffer at home. There is one additional thing that I, at least, would not have thought about if I had not been told: ask *them* (the mock interviewers, your advisors, your fellow graduates) what your strong points are. I know that—with the possible exception of family and close friends—nobody knows you like you do. We are not thinking about who you are in real terms—that nice person who likes puppies, hiking, and Swedish cinema—but who you are in academic terms. You need to discover your academic bling-bling. Maybe it is something that you consider relatively common: being an Internet genius, being extremely nice and polite, being the next [name of someone well respected in your area]. Do it. You may be surprised by the answers.

She gave two additional pieces of advice. First, do not compare “whose is longer.” In other words, do not compare the length of yours with other

people’s vitae. Second, avoid succumbing to the brain eaters. Do not get addicted to forums or wikis about the market.

Your routine

Lucky you, you got an interview. After sending tons of emails, paying insane amounts of money to a filing service, and suffering like a bull on the day before San Fermín (I am Spanish, you can put your cultural reference here)...you are one of the chosen!

Professor Field reminded us that during your talk, it is impossible to speak too slowly. Unless you have worked for a decade as a professional broadcaster, you are going to be nervous, and although you may think that you sound like a Walkman running out of batteries, you definitely do not.

Another great recommendation—useful during one’s campus visit and in your professional life—is plant questions by asserting: “And I would be happy to discuss this afterward.” Maybe someone in the room is actually listening and runs with what you have suggested. And there you are: someone challenging you with a question that exactly fits your research. In addition, never forget that you are the authority in your field. Do not let them frighten you with their stature and their years in academia. You are the authority about your topic. Do not assume that they might know more than you about it. They may know more about other

things, but those happen to be their research topics or the result of longer lives. You would not dare to think that you know more than they do about their topics. Be as gentle with yourself as you are with the others.

There are also some resources if you get a difficult question or if someone tries to troll your presentation. Ask for clarification to buy time, and then tell stories: “I am glad that you’ve asked me that question. It reminds me of this book/article/a time in class when...” It’s a technique that can be a life saver. And, speaking of candy, bring snacks with you. You will need some extra energy along the way.

General advice

You have scrutinized the department, read its faculty publications, and investigated the core mission of the university. You know them better than you know some of your friend, but do not assume that they know about *you*. Some of the interviewers may not have been on the committee that invited you or they may have you confused with another applicant. So try to expand about yourself with each and every faculty you meet during your campus visit. Do not be afraid of repeating yourself: You will be the only one noticing that you told the same story to three different people.

Do not forget to tell interesting things about yourself. At this point, what they are seeking is

a colleague. They want to know how would you fit into the internal politics of the department and whether you seem capable, hard working, and professional. Of course you are! Do not be ashamed of the excellent professional you are, the knowledge you have accumulated in long years in school, or the fresh approach and energy you can provide.

To sum up what I learned: Listening to other people’s experiences and advice can have a positive effect because it will open windows and bring fresh air into a room you thought to be a bricked-up basement. And thanks to CSW for putting together workshops like Interview Success!

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