

Planning for a Campus Visit

Congratulations! By the time you've been asked to for a flyback, you've survived several levels of screening. People are excited by you and invested in your candidacy; they've worked hard on the search and now they want to hire someone wonderful. They want you to do well. Indeed, your potential colleagues want to be galvanized by a candidate who embodies an ideal of themselves and the profession – a productive scholar, inspiring teacher, engaged and engaging colleague (with different emphases at different institutions). They realize they are picking a colleague who will likely be around at least for the next six or seven years – and perhaps for the next thirty or forty. Think of yourself in the colleague role, and not as a graduate student preparing to defend a dissertation. Project yourself as a smart, mature, and likable colleague.

Meanwhile, bear in mind that you are learning as much about them as they are about you. Take in impressions of the department, the university, the student body, university resources available, the campus feel, the town or local resources, how faculty talk about students, how faculty talk about their work, their lives, and about each other. Do remember that you can only learn a limited amount about the faculty as individuals and as a system – do not rely on your impressions of who seems nice or not nice, interested in you or not interested. You can't know these things for sure given the shortness and the unusual context of your visit. Moreover, if you wind up at this department, these relationships will develop slowly and often unpredictably over time. Take in what you can, and be alive to new opportunities or ways of imagining your future. But at the same time, be aware that if everyone seems openly miserable or there are other signs of major dysfunction, you don't have to take a job that, after deliberation and consultation, you don't want to take. This should also help keep you calm: you are a consumer during this process too.

More specific advice about the stages and tasks of your visit follows.

Planning the Visit

You will likely be invited to visit in a telephone call from the department chair or search chair. Make sure you go over the practical matter of travel and funds for the visit: some schools will take care of all such arrangements on their own; other institutions may need you to pay for hotel rooms before they reimburse you (some may be able to reimburse you for solo meals; others may not); others will offer you a budget. If the host department will reimburse you, ask how long this may take. Make sure to find out what records you need to submit and hold on to all receipts as a rule.

N.B. You will likely be speaking to departmental or administrative assistants during this planning process. Remember to be friendly and polite at all times.

Make sure you get a full schedule for your visit beforehand. Your visit is likely to include: solo meetings with faculty; group interviews; meetings with a dean or deans; meetings with undergraduate or graduate students; mock or real classroom teaching; a job talk; a less formal

discussion of research; multiple meals with potential colleagues and students; campus tours; city tours or tours of the area; receptions or parties.

Do ask (in advance) for a chance to meet particular people or representatives of programs you are interested in. "Could you arrange for me to talk with some faculty from the Women's Studies program?" "I hope I'll have an opportunity to talk with someone from Physics."

Also consider asking for a campus tour if one has not been scheduled. In addition to giving you a good look at the place, walking can be a rare treat amid an endless sequence of conversations over coffee. But be aware of potential footwear problems if the visit is taking place during likely bad weather.

Research the department fully (again). Know who the people are with whom you are meeting. If you haven't already done so, this is the time to check out web pages. If you're familiar with someone's work, you can acknowledge that where appropriate. And whenever conversation suddenly deflates at dinner or during a late-night drive back to your hotel, you can ask about their work (it will give you a few minutes' breather, will show that you can think about things other than your own dissertation, and is likely to prove to be interesting).

Last, if you don't have all the information you need, feel free to call back with questions.

Planning the Talk

You should ask about your talk, if you will be giving one, during the initial phone calls with the chair. Make sure you find out the desired length of the formal presentation and of the Q&A; the number of likely attendees; and the constitution of the audience if this is possible (e.g., ask if the audience will include undergraduate or graduate students, or members of other departments). These questions not only give you necessary information but also communicate that you know how to speak differently to different audiences: the job talk will be a crucial sign not only of your ability to perform research but also (as in the interview) of your pedagogic persona and skill.

When planning your talk, make sure you will fill no more time than you have been given; the ideal amount is just a few minutes short of the *minimum* length (if you have been told 30-40 minutes, talk for 30 minutes; if you have been told 45, talk for 40). This leaves you time to make asides, to elaborate, to sense what's happening in the audience and respond to it. Also, if people regret that a great talk has ended a little early, they will ask energetic questions. You do not want to be remembered as the person whose talk went on forever. Know how many minutes it takes you to read a page. **Practice** the talk, definitely **out loud** (at least twice), and in front of an audience if possible. Try to get your jitters out beforehand (this works!). Try to give a mock version of your talk here in your department or with peers or friends.

A school may tell you they just want you to talk informally, off the top of your head, for twenty or thirty minutes. Do not take this literally. Twenty or thirty minutes is a 10-15-page paper. If they want to hear about your research generally, you can talk from an outline – which should include consideration, possibly detailed, of at least one specific example. If that seems scary, you

can explain at the start of the talk that you will describe the research project (a description that you will have practiced) and will then read for ten or fifteen minutes “in order to present my argument in the most concise form,” or “to give you a taste of how it goes,” and that then you will talk more informally about the remaining contours of the project (e.g. describing the trajectory of a single chapter) before opening it up to discussion. Bear in mind that sometimes when schools ask for an “informal” talk, they are really requesting an accessible talk.

The subject: The talk, ideally, will give the audience a new and exciting set of ideas about a familiar text or familiar area of research. Alternately, the paper can make an audience see the importance or centrality of something unfamiliar. Be certain to explain the stakes of your argument for your field explicitly in ways easily understandable to people outside the field or outside the department. Remember that many of the folks in the room will be unfamiliar with your research: make certain you relate the argument of the talk to your research generally; be ready and able to frame your research’s contribution with excitement and precision. Provide plot or other summary of core ideas or texts whenever needed and especially if you will be focusing on a close reading or specialized technical description. Aim for eloquent clarity over sophistication for sophistication’s sake.

People like to have something to hold on to during and after talks: consider a handout with any long or important passages or images you will be discussing. Your contact information should be included at the top. If possible, photocopy the handout before you arrive at the school (or ask in phone calls beforehand if they can do it for you); bring more copies than you expect audience members. Remember that a handout will outlast your stay: make it visually appealing.

See also “Giving the talk” below.

On-campus Visit Pragmatics

The visit will be a physical endurance test. Your days may start early, will include lots of contact with new people in an intense context, and may go late. You will have traveled and are likely to be exhausted. Be aware of the importance of getting sleep before and during the visit – don’t be shy about turning in early if you are invited out after dinner: you may (i.e. are allowed to) regretfully decline any non-scheduled activity. Bring any sleep aids you might need (e.g. earplugs). In addition to your phone alarm, consider a second prompt, e.g. ask for a wakeup call from the hotel front desk in addition. Also bring whatever you need to turn your hotel room into a personal, restorative space.

Likewise, it is a good idea to provision yourself with supplies for the visit that will allow you not to fall prey to logistical emergency or even to worry. Even if you do not normally carry them, consider bringing things like breath mints, a sewing kit, aspirin/ibuprofen. An extra shirt is an excellent idea. Make sure you have any needed medications or an extra pair of glasses.

Make sure to bring your talk with you in your carry-on, not your checked baggage; ideally, you will take your clothes for your talk – including shoes – in a carry-on as well. Email your

talk/slides to yourself beforehand in case of emergency. But if you do so, bring hard copy in addition, in case of emergency.

Caffeine: often meetings during the day will take place over coffee. Be aware of your level of caffeine consumption: you don't need any more nervous energy than is naturally percolating in your system.

Visit Etiquette and Events

Be friendly but purposeful. Remember that you are to inhabit your professional identity at all times. The good advice to **be yourself** is much easier to follow during a long, on-campus interview, but do be yourself on good behavior. **Don't ever be quite off your guard** (e.g. over drinks, at dinner with a friendly young faculty member, when being driven to the airport at the end of the visit). Be wary of people who treat you as a friend and who want to take you into their confidence (you have no idea what their relationship is to the department or what their agenda might be, if they are potential friends or creeps). Sometimes strange things happen: be polite at all times but don't be afraid to set limits ("I don't know that I have an answer for that"). Do not succumb to a solicitation to gossip or complain about your graduate program or its faculty (or anyone else in the profession). The best rule of thumb: have integrity – and some circumspection – with everyone you meet and you'll do fine.

The chief unit of experience during an on-campus visit is the conversation. Ask a lot of all kinds of questions for your comparative mental file: enrollment, changes in the student body, interdepartmental interaction, lecture series, fraternities etc. It is useful to know, and people like to talk about their institutions. In addition to teaching you about the specific campus you are considering, this sort of questioning during an on-campus visit is one of the most important ways you can learn about the structure of your profession, about different kinds of schools, departments and curricula and how they work, about the range of professional demeanors, etc. Ask about the city/town/area. Try as far as is possible to imagine what your life will be like in this place; ask the questions that will help you imagine. Ask about people's work to find out what sorts of colleagues you will have at the school. Remember to ask your interlocutors about their desires: with colleagues, ask about courses they want taught or areas of expertise they want filled; ask about mentorship of graduate students and contact with undergraduates. With students at all levels, ask what sorts of courses they are dying to have taught. Do not promise to meet all needs, however. Give your own spin and be ready, with students or potential colleagues, to give your ideas about what is important in these areas. Let them know additional strengths, skills, or knowledge you have to offer.

Recapture something of your interview persona in these conversations. Feel free to take a second to think before you speak. **Don't let your answers run on.** The most important ways for you to sound are thoughtful and decisive – as though your words have weight for you, and you expect them to have weight for others. **As important: listen well.** Hear the question out – try not to anticipate the question or to cut off the questioner. Be ready for this to be a question utterly new to you. Let yourself be interested, and consider your ideas – on your work, on curriculum or departmental life – in light of new points of view. As in the job interview, any answer to a

question provides your interlocutor with information about how you think, how you teach, how you respond to and analyze the needs of others. It is less important that you answer correctly or carry the point than that you seem informed, reasonable, and available.

And as during your interview, be prepared to describe the nature of your present research and your plans for future projects in many different ways, and over and over. Have short descriptions, long descriptions, anecdotal entries into the subject, and accounts of individual chapters/components of the dissertation available as different ways of communicating your ideas and keeping yourself interested.

Illegal questions: see “The Chair” below.

Being liked: **it doesn't hurt if your hosts genuinely like you, but they won't actually give you a job because they like you (even if they know you will do a good job). They will offer the job to the person about whom they think: “We'll be making a big mistake if we don't hire this person.”** Both implications of this are important: do not contort yourself to be likable (be yourself, be true to your pedagogic and scholarly ideals); and let your professionalism, scholarly ideals, knowledge, and interest in ideas shine through.

The Dean: conversations with deans take many forms. Be prepared to explain your work to someone utterly outside the field – but be aware the dean may have a Ph.D. in your research area. You may ask about her/his/their background or work as dean. Some deans will want to know your theories of undergraduate or graduate teaching and departmental administrative life; others will be planning chiefly to answer your questions. Take your cues from them. Ask about the student body and changes in the student body. And – the dean's favorite topic, often – ask about the dean's or deans' vision of the work they are doing: changes in undergraduate or graduate education, changes in the campus, etc. Depending on the topics the dean's self-description or conversation opens up, you can also ask about research funding; about grants for course development; about programs in the summer with students; about any activities you would be interested in running (e.g. lecture series, film series).

The Chair: At some point you will probably have a solo meeting with the department chair. The chair is likely to tell you in more detail about the specs of the job. At this point, you can ask questions about the nature of the job, for instance teaching load (if that is not yet clear), or tenure expectations, including credit for work already published. You can ask about the schedule of the decision-making process. Do not ask about other candidates for the position. If the chair brings them up, seem interested, but offer no opinions (if you know the candidates, you can say something nice).

Things to hold back: the consensus is that you should wait until an offer is made to discuss any relevant spousal/partner issues. If the chair asks you, you may respond with a dodge: “they/he/she is very excited about this job.” The question is illegal – though the motivation of the chair may well be friendly. If an illegal follow-up is asked, a second dodge is: “we haven't gotten to that point in discussing it.” Don't worry about acknowledging that you have a spouse/partner. Likewise, wait until an offer is made to ask about salary, research funds, or leave policies. If the chair brings these elements of the job up, perhaps in the context of the

university's expectations for your research, do respond with interested questions or approval. Until an offer is made, however, do not bargain or seem disappointed in conditions of the job. After an offer is made, incidentally, will be your greatest and only chance to bargain and you'll want to discuss requests to make and tactics to use (and requests and tactics to avoid) with your mentor team at that time. (Preview: what you can get varies from school to school depending on the nature of their resources. Some may have money; others may be able to offer entirely different perks. Only rarely can schools offer spousal employment, though many can cobble adjunctships together. However, bargaining is a good strategy and will typically yield a sweetened offer.)

Note: Questions about spouses are also illegal if other faculty members ask them during the visit. If you are asked an illegal question – which might include questions about children or plans for children, marital status, sexuality, religion, health, or age – remember that the questioner is as likely to be motivated by friendly curiosity as, say, by discriminatory intent (which is also possible). Assume a friendly motive. You need not answer any such question. If it feels natural, you may deflect with humor (“What age would you like?”/ “I can *be* _____”), or with vagueness (e.g. in response to questions about plans for children). It is likely that such deflections will recall the questioner to his or her responsibilities. You may also demur: “Oh, I don't think I'm supposed to answer that” (not, “Oh, I don't think you're supposed to ask that”). If you find yourself simply answering during an awkward exchange, don't worry about it or second-guess yourself – again, the questioner is likely to be well-motivated or uninformed about the policy (e.g. if the department hasn't had a hire in a while).

Teaching a Class: At some schools, you will be asked to teach a class. Again, find out everything you can about the class – how many students, what level, what subject, how many faculty will be sitting in on the class. Prepare as much as you can but realize that you've taught before, and you are already an expert at this particular task. You can begin the class by thanking the students for letting themselves be part of your job interview. They'll be inclined to be on your side if you clue them in on what's happening. And it's quite permissible to warm up the class by asking them what they've been talking about this semester, who they are, if they are majors in the discipline, all of those things that will put them (and you) at ease in a highly unnatural situation. There is no template of how to teach this observed class, but bear in mind that you are being observed less for your mastery of a subject area than for your teacherly abilities. Play to your strengths, and do your best to demonstrate a range of basic skills. For instance, consider making the class a mix of lecture and discussion (not necessarily in that order). Some other skills to bear in mind: dialogue and other forms of back-and-forth with students; restating – and strengthening – student observations; humor (if that comes naturally); small group work; having the students read aloud; covering the room; reaching some kind of pedagogical goal/endpoint – as well as discipline-based skills.

Meals: Meals present their own challenges. Do not expect your meal to be a reprieve from the pressures of the visit. The meals may provide wonderful food and conversation, or may be demanding or awkward. Some departments socialize, others don't at all; it's possible the last time these people broke bread together was at another job fly-back. Meals can also be hectic or confusing. As many as five or six people may be asking you questions, sometimes on a tight time schedule. Go as easy on yourself as possible and pick something to eat that won't demand

attention – avoid foods that require fingers, sawing away, slurping and twirling. Beware of drinking more than you can handle under a situation of stress and scrutiny. Other people may get drunk and start acting a little wild at dinner; you definitely should not.

Giving the Talk

During the introduction to your talk, you will be speaking briefly about the scope of your project and the relation of the current piece to the larger whole, and what your research accomplishes. It is also appropriate at the beginning to say that you hope, in the question and answer period, that people will feel free to ask questions about both the paper and any other aspect of your work. (Often it is these more open-ended questions that prove to be the most valuable.)

During the talk, anything that makes the audience aware that you are aware of them is good – asides, occasional wit, the old saw of beginning with an engaging anecdote, eye contact, etc. Humanize the experience as much as possible.

Note: if you haven't been religious about this already, attend your own department's job candidate talks. You can learn a lot (both to imitate and to avoid) by watching how candidates calibrate subject matter and length, and how they handle audience questions. Ask faculty – even more than your peers – afterward to get a set of opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the talk and general performance.

Q&A: The question-and-answer period is often the most revealing and occasionally harrowing part of the visit. Most of your questions will be interested and interesting. Your main task here is to stay focused on the question, to make eye contact around the room but keep coming back to the questioner. Don't go on too long. When you are finished, look to see if the person seems happy with the answer. If he or she looks puzzled, you can ask, "Did that answer your question?" Also, if someone asks a really broad question, feel free to define terms or question parts in a way that feels more comfortable. Feel free to ask a questioner to clarify her terms. If you can't make a theoretical leap asked of you, try starting the answer: "that's a great question. I'm not sure I can present a full answer here, but the first place I would start is...next I'd want to..." Sound confident. Compliment good questions, or indicate, if true, that you'd like to talk about that further with the questioner after the session. Be genuinely open to reconceiving parts of your argument/alternate construals of your data, etc. Write useful ideas down (quickly and noting the questioner's name – you can get it afterwards from the questioner or one of his or her colleagues if you don't know who it is). Remember that you can often receive exciting and vital help for your argument in dialogue with your audience. In short, even though this is the most formal of all two-way interactions, do what you can to make it feel conversational, as though you are teaching, and to take advantage of an audience engaged with your work. What you do not want to do is make it seem that, no matter what anyone asks, all you can do is return to your thesis statement or central premises. (If you hear yourself saying "in my dissertation" over and over, stop!)

Problem questions: As with the rest of your visit, be aware that no one knows you well enough to be antagonistic to you personally. Treat every question as if it were friendly, even if it seems

hostile. Be aware that almost every department has someone who asks tiresome, long, obscure, or even rude questions; the rest of the department is usually embarrassed by this person and if you can manage to treat them gracefully, everyone will be grateful to you. It should be reassuring to realize that you really don't have any grounds for knowing the departmental dynamics at work behind a question – so try not to take personally what might seem, at the time, very personal. And bear in mind, occasionally a “hostile” question may be asked by your chief supporter, someone who is trying to let you make your case to people who they know are skeptics. Some people just aren't very good at asking questions. Assume the ulterior motive is positive, and respond politely and confidently, even if you disagree. If disagreements persist (in follow-up questions), just mark off the disagreement with something like “It seems as if we have a genuine difference of opinion on this issue.” Be respectful and polite but hold your ground, unless you realize you really did make a mistake or that you overstated your case.

As with all rituals, the Q&A – and the events of the campus visit more generally – work best when ritual behavior is performed in perfect belief. Do your best to be an excited, exciting thinker, confident, fair, and deliberative, open to interlocutors and to a new possible future.

Good luck!