

Questions to ask (and be prepared to answer) during an academic interview

The following questions have been collected from diverse resources by Kathryn L. Cottingham, Assistant Professor of Biological Sciences, Dartmouth College.

Dean

- **Big Picture**
 - What is the long term plan for this school/institution?
 - How does this department fit into the long-term plan?
 - What is the outside perception of this department? Strong? Unified? Interactive?
 - Admissions profiles:
 - Undergraduates: who applies? who is accepted? who comes here? Where do they go after graduation?
 - Graduates: who applies? who is accepted? who comes here? Where do they go after graduation?
- **New Faculty Assimilation/Success**
 - What sorts of programs are available for new faculty members?
 - Formal mentoring?
 - Orientation?
 - Written faculty handbook?
- **Research**
 - What resources are available to initiate student research?
 - Is there support for summer research by undergraduates?
 - Are competitive, within-institution seed grants available?
 - What are the indirect costs of grants?
 - What are the expectations for the summer? On campus? Or is field work ok?
- **Teaching**
 - What are typical teaching opportunities, across the college?
 - How much variation is there across departments?
 - Are teaching training opportunities available? What kinds? How often?
 - Can one buy out of teaching obligations?
- **Faculty Review/Tenure**
 - What is the schedule and mechanism of faculty review?
 - How much of the department is already tenured? Is there a quota?
 - Who decides tenure and how?

- How is chairmanship determined? How long is the term?
- **Students**
 - What kind of graduate students do you attract?
 - Where do they go once they finish their degrees?
 - Who pays for graduate students? Are there any training grants?
 - Do students have a say in search decisions?
 - Do students have a say in department administration?
 - What interdisciplinary collaborations are already in place? (Are there any training grants, for example)
 - How many undergraduate majors come through the program each year?
- **Research**
 - What is available as "set up" money?
 - Is there department research support available? Of what kinds?
 - Are there vehicles available for field trips/research use?
- **Teaching**
 - What secretarial help is available for working with courses? With grants/papers?
 - What is the teaching expectation through time? How many courses?
 - Which courses?
 - What would this person teach over the next 3 years?
 - How much flexibility in what an individual teaches?
 - How much flexibility in when courses are scheduled (within a week, within a year)?
 - How big are classes? Are teaching loads weighted by the number of students in the classes?
 - Is there time to prepare the first course?
 - Can I teach a seminar the first semester/quarter?
 - Are TAs available? For what courses?
 - How much funding is there for courses, particularly new ones?
 - How do ideas for new courses get processed?
 - What are the teaching labs like?
 - Are there computer teaching labs? Software? Support personnel?
- **Service**
 - What non-teaching expectations are there?
 - What are the    standing   department committees?
 - How does undergraduate advising work?
 - How does graduate advising work?
- **Promotion & Tenure**
 - Are there annual reviews before tenure?
 - Who decides on tenure?

- **Graduate & Undergraduate Students**
 - How about the students? Are they motivated? What do they do after graduation?
 - What support is available for graduate student research? Enough computers?
 - What support is available for undergrad research?
 - Are work study students available from time to time?
 - Is there travel support? How often? How much?
 - Do all biology majors do research?
 - Do they have to submit a thesis?
 - Are there any curriculum changes in the works?
 - Do grad students with TA's have time to get their own research done?
 - How are most grad students funded?
- **Research**
 - What support is available for research?
 - How's the library? Journal availability? Where do you go for the obscure stuff?
 - Does the administration support travel to scientific meetings? How often? How much?
 - How much equipment sharing is there?
 - Do you feel like this is a congenial environment?
 - How much collaboration is there within the department or college?
 - How much external collaboration is there? Is this supported by the administration?
 - Who does grant book-keeping?
 - Is there access to mainframe or UNIX-based computers?
 - How much technical support is there for computing?
- **Teaching**
 - What do you teach?
 - What is the general teaching expectation through time? How many courses?
 - What would you like this person to teach over the next 3 years?
 - How much flexibility in what an individual teaches?
 - How much flexibility in when courses are scheduled (within a week, within a year)?
 - How big are classes? Are teaching loads weighted by the number of students in the classes?
 - Can I teach a seminar the first semester/quarter?
 - Are TAs available? For what courses?
 - How are TAs trained?
 - How much funding is there for courses, particularly new ones? Can you buy what you need?
 - How do ideas for new courses get processed?
 - What secretarial help is available for working with courses? With grants/papers?
 - Is this a Mac based or PC based department? What are the student computer labs like?

Miscellaneous Questions

- **Salary/Benefits**

(Ask administration, untenured faculty, or benefits coordinators)

- How much?
- Hard money or soft money?
- What are the fringe benefits like?
 - health insurance. Who pays? What %? How does copay work?
 - maternity coverage/leave. How long a leave is guaranteed?
 - sick leave
 - retirement plans (TIAA-CREF? How do they do it? Matching? Who pays?)
 - any mortgage assistance programs?

- **Raises**

(Ask administration & untenured faculty members)

- what are the typical ranges?
- On what criteria are raises granted? Who decides?

- **Living**

- cost of living: high/low?
- housing costs

- **Start Up**

- How much money for equipment, supplies and travel as "set up" money?
- Can the spending be spread over a number of years, say two or three?
- Summer salary included?
- How about summer salary for undergraduate and graduate students until grants?
- Is there seed money available from the college/university?

- **Tenure**

- schedule -when do people come up?
- Are there annual reviews before tenure?
- Who decides on tenure?
- On what criteria?
- Are the criteria written down and handed out to new faculty?
- What percent succeed?
- Is there a "tenuring up" policy?

Graduate Students

- **Big Picture**

- How much teaching does the average student do?
- Do you get trained?
- If so, how?
- Would there be interest in seminars to improve teaching methods?
- Can you take a more active role in teaching, if you want to?
- **Research Training**
 - How many of you had M.S. degrees when you started here?
 - How many of you had research experience as undergrads or as technicians?
 - Do you feel like you're exposed to sufficient techniques here?
 - Is there support to get training elsewhere if it's not available here?
 - Do you have enough computers/equipment to get your research done?
 - What do you need that I could buy with startup funds to help the community?
 - Do you have enough time to do your research if you're also teaching?
- **Details**
 - How's the food? Beer?
 - Do alumni come back and tell you about life after graduation?

Questions to be Prepared For

- *In one of my interviews, I was given these four topics in advance:*
 - Future research plans: what directions do you see your research taking in the next 5-10 years? What will be the topic of your first major research proposal as a new faculty member, and where will you submit it? What balance do you anticipate between field research and lab/office based research? If field work will be important, what field sites would you want to consider in the first few years?
 - Education: Given our curriculum needs within the X group, how will you contribute to the undergraduate and graduate curricula? In particular, what graduate course(s) what you like to teach, and what will be your basic teaching model (e.g. lecture, lecture + lab, discussion, etc)?
 - Graduate and undergraduate research: How will you engage graduate and undergraduate students in your research program? That is, what style of advising/mentoring will you use?
 - Resources: What critical resources do you need in order to establish a successful research program? What critical resources may already be here? What kind of help would you want from the X group, the Department, and the University for you to achieve your goals?
- *From Everham & Smallridge, ESA Bulletin Dec 1994*
 - What is the main point of your dissertation?
 - What are your professional goals?
 - What is your concept of teaching in a 4-year college as opposed to a research university?

- What types of mentoring have you experienced -- and what would you do similarly or differently?
- What courses have you taught before?
- What do you see as the major challenges of teaching at a large (small) university?
- What do you want to teach? (grad, undergrad, seminars) Statistics?

Questions Known To Catch People Off Guard

- The illegal questions: spouses, children, etc.
 - For example: will anything need to be done for your spouse/partner (like find them a job)?
- Would you take this job if it were offered to you?
- How would you handle an interpersonal conflict in your lab?
- A break-up between two members of the lab who were involved?