



Preparing for successful interviews and chalk talks

Ideas and advice from a Rising Star Webinar on 8/19/20

Once you get invited for a faculty interview, you need to know what to expect and how to prepare. During this webinar, our expert panel provided tips for successful faculty interviews, paying particular attention to the chalk talk and how to nail it. Rising Stars' questions submitted prior to this webinar were also answered.

Panelists

- **David Russell**, Professor in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, former Chair
- **John Parker**, Associate Professor in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Director of the Veterinary Leadership Program
- **Brian Lazzaro**, Professor in the Department of Entomology, Director of the Cornell Institute for Host Microbe Interactions and Disease
- **Susan Daniel**, Associate Professor in the Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering
- **Américo López-Yglesias**, former Cornell Rising Star and Assistant Professor of Microbiology and Immunology, Indiana University
- **Maureen Hanson**, Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor in the Department of Molecular Biology and Genetics

Describe some characteristics of the best and worst chalk talks you have seen and why you think they were great or not-so-great.

David Russell: Make sure you develop a clear structure to your chalk talk. For example, outline an R01 with significance, what you will do, why it is innovative, and your vision and path to funding. Drive the process.

John Parker: The worst chalk talk focused almost entirely on what had been done! The best ones make the best use of the time available, one hour is short. Be organized. The rationale and your understanding of the justification and impact of the research are critical.

Brian Lazzaro: Don't wing it! Be organized. Have a vision for your research program, both short and medium term. Long term plans are not so helpful since research directions change. Make sure you look at the funded grants in your area and those of people in the department at which you are interviewing. Don't forget to

consider the structure of your lab, grad students or postdocs or technicians? Mention your teaching interests and goals, propose courses you might teach or develop.

Susan Daniel: Tailor your talk to the department. Think carefully about how to connect with those in the department, and outside of the department for your research. Focus on the future, not what you have done. The worst chalk talks go “off the rails” with back and forth between you and a faculty member, or between faculty members. Have a strategy to gain control back.

Américo López-Yglesias: Bad chalk talks lack a clear hypothesis. Make sure you really take the time to prepare a solid application in the first place and do your research about the department. It will save time when preparing for the chalk talk. Organizing like your first R01 is great but think about the second grant and the medium-term plans so that you can respond when they ask. Make sure you discuss your ideas with lots of colleagues to hone them, so they are fully formed before you propose them in your chalk talk.

Maureen Hanson: Make sure you create an outline for how you will go through your chalk talk. If you can, go to the room early and write your outline on the board so you can spend your time talking rather than writing. Bring notes so you don’t wing it. There are strategies for virtual chalk talks like buying a white board so that you can position your camera to show you and the board. That way the people can read body language too. Definitely don’t forget to consider your contributions to diversity and inclusion. The worst chalk talks get into the weeds in details. Realize that most people at the chalk talk will not be an expert in your area, and they need to understand too.

Q&A:

1. Faculty screening happens in multiple steps. Can you give examples of questions/topics that are asked at the skype/phone, in person, 2nd visit?

- The most frequent question, and the key one, is why did you apply here?
- There is often a “long short list” of individuals who are screened in this way. A common set of questions is asked to each candidate and responses are compared.
- Make sure your personality shines through in the virtual environment
- If you encounter technical challenges, admit it, say something and suggest that this may not be a fair representation of you and that you would like to reschedule.
- Do your research and mention names and programs where you see potential collaborations

2. What advice do you have for developing networks and knowing who is good to propose as a collaborator and who is not? Frequently, candidates of diverse backgrounds have a less established network and may be more likely to propose working with someone that “everyone knows will never collaborate”.

- Do some research, use the network you do have and ask those in that network to help you expand your network by connecting you
- Ask mentors here from this workshop
- If you are not sure about a potential collaborator, express interest, but don’t hitch a wagon to them (don’t make your research success dependent on them)

3. Realizing that there may be different chalk talk styles at different institutions (address specific problems towards a larger vision, first R01 aims, etc.), should I prepare multiple chalk talks tailored to the specific department?

- As stated in the opening comments, it is important to do the extra work to tailor your application

materials and chalk talk to each department.

- Research the values of the institution and know your fit
- Ask about the structure and what they would like you to cover

4. Are there certain “first date” type topics that I should not bring up during an interview? In a similar vein, should I discuss international projects to promote science communication and gender equality, would that be seen as an advantage, or as a negative point (i.e., people could think you “lose time”)?

- If you have something of meaning to you, but are not sure if the department will buy in, such as science communication, pay close attention when you toss out a “feeler” comment to see if they take the bait and show genuine interest. If not, drop it and save it for a later time.

5. How should I approach “illegal questions”? For example, about spouse, family, etc. Sometimes you will face a completely illegal question. There are many ways to handle this.

- You can be forthright and if it is a deal breaker then the match was not meant to be. --You could answer honestly in the moment—“Are you planning on having kids?” “Not at this time.” Or “That is not in my current plan.”
- You could state that this is an illegal question, but you run the risk of offending the person since they may honestly want to know to connect with you.
- You can answer with a quick yes/no, and pivot to explaining how that does not affect your work ethic and emphasize the success you have had in science.
- There are lots of ways, but definitely find one that you are comfortable with, it could happen.

6. If there is truly a deal breaker issue, when should you bring it up?

- The panel agreed that it is best to raise these issues once you have a verbal offer
- At the stage of a verbal offer, there is opportunity to solve dual hire issues that may be much more challenging once a contract is signed. It is true a verbal offer can be rescinded, but it is important at this stage to make clear what you need to be successful. This includes accommodations that will allow you to focus on your research.

7. The interview is actually a two-way interview. I am looking for the right fit for me and my future program too. What are some things that applicants should look for when interviewing for an academic job, i.e. red flags etc.

Red flags:

- The search committee does not clearly state what they are looking for in a candidate
- If while being walked around, the faculty are introducing themselves to each other. This shows there is little connection and collaboration in the department.
- If interviewers talk a lot about department politics. There is a common statement that “Faculty are more likely to leave a marriage than a tenured position” so make sure it is a good fit
- A micromanaging and/or alienating chair.
- When you ask where your lab space will be, they can’t show you because the “building is being built”. You need lab space when you arrive.

Signs of a good, collegial, department

- Great leadership and collegiality. Faculty should like their department and be able to provide specific examples to support their statements.
- Colleagues know each other and have friendly interactions
- Positive attitudes about science and other topics