



Careers

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Off the List

A search committee thought it had selected 18 excellent candidates—until it met them

By ALLAN HOFFMAN

THE INTERVIEW had just begun, and my stomach was already sinking. Seventeen minutes to go, and I began thinking of bad blind dates deep in my past. I fought the urge to look at my watch. What could a candidate have done in just three minutes to be out of the running? Well, she had shaken my hand limply when we met, had looked down at her shoes (or mine?) rather than directly at me, and could barely manage a smile.

Admittedly, the windowless interview room in the hotel basement at the American Historical Association's annual meeting last January wasn't elegant. And it cannot have been easy to sit in a holding room with 30 other candidates, some of them competing for the same position, waiting for those of us with tenure to materialize and mispronounce her name to the entire room. But that moment is what you've been training for, I thought. You're going to have to meet new students, colleagues, and deans in this profession, right? *Right?*

Midway through the first of two long days of interviewing, my colleague and I were worried. We had finally gotten authorization for our first tenure-track search in years, the committee had been reading dossiers for weeks, and we thought we had selected 18 excellent candidates—OK, maybe they all weren't first-rate, but at least five or six struck us as phenomenal.

Until we met them, that is.

(And that's one reason I'm using a pseudonym, not comfortably, and for the first time in my life. I would like to help future candidates and advisers navigate this often vicious process. But candidates reading this may recognize themselves, and no one else should be able to add to their distress. Advisers are a different matter. And, of course, I am protecting my university—and myself—from the liability that stems from speaking truthfully about searches. No wonder candidates have such a hard time

learning the ropes.)

I don't think I've seen so much personal awkwardness on display since a high-school dance. Fully half of the 18 candidates didn't know anything about our department: not about our faculty, our curriculum, or how we organize the major (all of which is available online).

We asked candidates to talk, succinctly, about the intellectual stakes involved in their dissertations—how their work mattered in larger contexts. Not more than a third could handle the question. My extremely sharp, well-read colleague who is not a specialist in the candidates' fields, frequently had no idea what they were talking about.

I know dissertation topics tend to be narrow—it's the nature of the beast—but please, advisers! Listen up! Your students must be able to explain why their topic—20 years in the lives of back-

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Off the List

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woods trappers, say—ought to matter to anyone, much less a small-to-medium-size department that has made clear from the get-go that it is looking for a teaching generalist.

We were not interested in their many nods to cutting-edge research or their secret handshakes in the form of the latest lingo. We were looking for someone with an easy grasp of subjects that are of interest to a group larger than the candidate's last graduate seminar.

That problem seemed more acute with the Ivy League candidates we interviewed—who we figured wouldn't really be interested in us—but we were ambitious enough to want to interview them anyway. An impressively self-confident bunch, they all had esoteric dissertation topics that they evidently expected would wow us.

Wrong.

In the end, three of our four finalists came from second-tier institutions.

In our next search, I will be far more skeptical of Ivy League candidates, even though my colleague on the search committee and I are both products of such programs. If I don't really understand the topic on paper, I'm not going to count on the candidate being able to explain it any better in person.

We interviewed students of renowned historians who clearly had spent no time discussing the realities of the academic job market with their advisees. Here's one reality: Junior historians teach the survey course. So even if you haven't taught freshmen, you need to have thought about how to engage them in the classroom. And if you've taught only elite undergraduates, search committees need evidence that you can reach students who fall outside of your comfort zone.

We asked one candidate from a top-tier department how she would handle students who didn't really want to be in her class. She paused, not quite grasping the idea that students might feel resentful at having to take a required course, and said, "Well, I have a problem with the fact that they don't want to be there."

Problem? My colleague and I worked not to catch each other's eye. Problem? Yes, we have a problem with it, too, but it's what we (and most academics) live with every day of our professional lives. Off the list.

Or there was the famous professor's advisee whose dossier I loved: superb letters, fine scholarship, excellent teaching experience for a doctoral student. We asked her how she might approach indifferent students. "Oh, they wouldn't be indifferent to Marxist-feminist-postmodernism," she said confidently, and was off: "We'd start the African-American history course by establishing that gender makes race."

"Excuse me," my colleague interrupted, "I don't understand what you just said."

She babbled on happily in code for a while.

"OK," he persisted, "how are you going to persuade students of this?"

She was ready for us: "Oh, I'd have them read a short journal article, no more than 25 pages, that would make the case; they would be persuaded, and we could move on." She crossed her arms, satisfied.

I don't know where that strategy could be successful, but certainly not at our institution. We weren't even sad (except for our profession) as we crossed her off the list.

There were candidates who, after re-

ceiving one e-mail message from me, which I signed with my full name and title, immediately began using my first name, even though I was addressing them as "Professor." Did they think I would find their familiarity endearing? Or were they simply oblivious to professional courtesy? Either way it didn't help them, though we didn't eliminate anyone for the breach.

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Why stand on ceremony? Because we wanted a colleague we could tenure easily, not someone I would have to tutor in basic professional social skills—and then wonder whom he was offending without even knowing it.

It's hardly news that e-mail etiquette has a ways to go. One candidate crashed and burned on-screen, telling me that I didn't mean the nice things I said about her conference interview, since we hadn't brought her to the department for our first round of campus interviews. She had been next in line—until she insulted our advertisement, and me, and talked herself out of remaining a candidate.

Then there was the fellow we couldn't help dubbing "Slick Willie." He knew so much about us that I half expected him to ask about my children, by name. His knowledge of our institution (and us), illustrated by his overly familiar questions, verged on creepy.

Look, I don't have anything against

candidates Googling members of the department's faculty. In fact, every candidate ought to have Googled us, and we were suspicious of those who clearly hadn't. But the purpose of doing the Google search isn't to show off the results to the subjects during the interview. We felt slimed, and wanted to wash our hands afterward. Off the list.

Finally, in our four on-campus interviews, we asked the candidates to demonstrate their teaching ability by leading a class discussion. Unaccountably, two of the four candidates flatly ignored our explicit instructions and, instead, delivered a written-out lecture.

I had explained in advance that we don't simply lecture and that we wanted to observe candidates handling a classroom of 25 to 30 students. After an hour of fighting sleep as we listened to those two candidates, while worrying that the remaining ones would bomb as well (and send our first search in a decade into the toilet), we knew they were toast.

What advice can I pass on to future entrants into academe's Big Dance?

First, to their advisers:

- Please weigh in early on your advisees' dissertation topics. Help them choose topics of broad significance.

- Help them learn to explain their dissertations clearly, even to nonspecialists. Help them to understand that talking in footnotes is different from explaining a topic.

- Most of your advisees' interviews will take place at nonelite institutions where they will be expected to teach survey courses and a wide range of other undergraduate courses—some of them required, most of them for nonmajors. I cannot stress that last point too much. If you don't prepare them for that reality, you are not doing your job.

- Please talk to your advisees frankly, off the record if necessary, about the realities of the job market. Talk to them about the necessity of networking—how-

ever contrary it may be to the candidate's (or adviser's) personality, it teaches social skills that most departments prize. And talk to them about how much power the market gives search committees to jettison candidates who don't pay attention to explicit instructions, don't educate themselves about potential employers, or can't manage a handshake and a smile.

- Help your advisees understand basic academic courtesy—how to address people they don't know. Does your academic culture have peculiarities that others might not understand?

- Help advisees understand the difference between a job interview and a graduate-seminar presentation. The latest jargon fails to impress search committees that are looking for a teacher who can increase enrollments as well as a scholar who can be tenured easily. And if you think I'm dumping on essential academic vocabulary by calling it jargon, please send your advisee to a colleague in another department for advice. You've been looking in a mirror too long.

As for the candidates:

- See above. If your advisers aren't doing those things, get help elsewhere. Get your friends together and do this for yourselves. Find someone to advise you. Much depends on a comprehensible dissertation topic and being able to discuss it clearly—to nonspecialists. Practice!

- Please consider the importance of manners and courtesy, in person and in e-mail messages. Avoid jargon. Know your interviewers, but not too well. Act genuinely interested in the job. Search committees and deans notice such things. Listen carefully to their instructions. Ask when you aren't sure. We wanted our interviews to go well, even to blow us away.

So who got the job? The candidate who gave the best interview (two really stood out), talked about her dissertation easily and clearly, was eager to teach survey courses, had ideas about how to do so, and handled herself—and 25 students—beautifully in the classroom. She understood propriety, while letting us (and the dean) know she wanted the job. We loved her.

Allan Hoffman is the pseudonym of a professor and chairman in history who teaches at a university in the Northeast.

Forum: Will I Ever Hear Back?

The Chronicle maintains discussion forums on academic work and life. Here are some comments posted recently in our *Job-Seeking Experiences* forum (see <http://chronicle.com/forums>).

Comment: Man, it's just so rude! I was one of four finalists at a small, liberal-arts college. ... I thought it went well and I had a good shot at the job. Sent my thank you notes and waited. And never heard anything. Found out through the wiki that I didn't get the job. The interview was about six weeks ago, and

I'm starting to think that they won't even have the courtesy to send me a rejection letter? Is this normal?

Response: You'll hear when/if they get their current favorite to sign, and not before.

Response: Or, you'll hear nothing at all—ever. This isn't as typical, but I have applications from five years ago for which I never received any reply. I wonder if I'm still in the running?