

# Interviewing at a Teaching-Focused University

By *Donald E. Hall* MAY 28, 2003

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I've just finished another round of faculty hiring for the English department at California State University at Northridge. Ours is a large department (45 full-time faculty members) at a Los Angeles-area "teaching school" -- one with a standard teaching load of four courses a semester. This year will make 20 positions in six years for which I've handled the process of recruitment, interviews, offers, and acceptances (that large number resulting from numerous retirements and an upper administration committed to tenure-track hiring).

With the experience now fresh in my mind, I want to offer some advice to job seekers on interviewing at a teaching-oriented university. I've seen some unequivocal disasters, and I've seen some brilliant interviews in our annual screening process at the Modern Language Association convention, but I'm not sure that most of the individuals involved knew just how poorly or how well they had performed from the perspective of a teaching institution.

We do not, of course, provide post-interview critiques. And many candidates may have thought that they did superbly when they actually interviewed in a way that was wildly inappropriate for the job in question. They were perhaps mystified about why they did not get an invitation to the next step in the process, or ultimately an offer. I can offer a few reasons why.

## Canned Answers

Responses that are clearly designed for an interview with a research university are the kiss of death on my campus. If I open with a question about how your professional goals and priorities make you an appropriate candidate for a job at a teaching-intensive institution, and you respond with a long monologue about your well-developed plans for your second book (after you publish your still-unfinished dissertation, of course), you are clearly signaling to me that your priorities make you wholly inappropriate for a job such as ours.

We do not expect a book for tenure, or even for promotion to full professor. It may be that such answers really do reflect the thoughtfully considered priorities of the candidate in question. I fear, however, that sometimes such answers simply have been learned and rehearsed during prep sessions at the candidate's home institution.

Whatever my suspicions, I usually have to take all answers at face value when conducting a brisk 45-minute conference interview. You may lose the job within the first two minutes of our conversation.

### Don't Be Dull

How you present yourself in an interview is an indication of how you will present yourself in the classroom. Because teaching skills are so important here -- and so hard to judge in a screening interview, even with portfolios and other supporting documents in hand -- presenting yourself in a lively and engaged way during the interview is crucial.

I cannot count the number of times in the past six years that my committee and I have finished an interview with a promising candidate, who answered all of our questions well and whose credentials were impeccable, but whose manner was so subdued, unenthusiastic, or nearly inaudible, that we could not imagine the individual as an effective teacher. I cannot tell job candidates to change their basic personalities, and certainly, there is a legitimate process of elimination that goes on in every set of interviews, but if candidates better understood just how critical it is to present themselves with enthusiasm and clarity, they might approach the interview as a performance venue, where they should demonstrate their best teaching personas.

The same skills that would make someone an effective teacher -- being audible, animated, and excited about the information being discussed -- are those that should be exercised in the interview.

### Teaching Is Not Everything

And teaching institutions should never be considered a refuge from research. Granted, we do not require a book for tenure and do not really want to hear about ambitious research agendas that are wildly inappropriate for the realities of life juggling a heavy teaching load and the usual service expectations. However, we certainly expect research for tenure, and if candidates are wholly unable to talk about their research plans in concrete ways, we will probably rule them out immediately.

In fact, we're particularly interested in candidates who have published an article or two while finishing the Ph.D. or who at least have submitted an article to a journal. That's because the hectic pace of life at a teaching-focused institution -- prepping various new courses, running to meetings, holding office hours, and all the while trying to publish -- is remarkably similar to what graduate students experience in their doctoral programs. Evidence of some success, or clear promise of success in research, is just as important for us as it is for screening committees at research universities, because our new hires will have to publish and teach at the same time, even if the balance between the two is different in our context.

### You Don't Have to be a Research Star

The balance between teaching and research on my campus is different than at a major research university. Because the norm on our campus is not the norm that candidates may have observed among graduate faculty members in their Ph.D. programs, some skepticism concerning such tendentious norms can be impressive.

Dissertations do not have to become books. In fact, most dissertations do not automatically become books, whatever candidates are told that they must say during interviews. Thoughtful answers about research agendas that discuss how a dissertation may lead to a series of articles or how teaching interests may lead to publications on pedagogy or in textbook format are often some of the best and most appropriate responses that we hear. We cannot all become "stars" by way of our research, but we can be stellar teachers, colleagues, and productive scholars within the various contexts of our careers, at community colleges, liberal-arts colleges, comprehensive universities, and research universities.

Why Us?

Candidates should do a bit of homework and be able to talk about why they would want to come to Cal State-Northridge. We schedule interviews at least three weeks before the MLA convention. That gives candidates more than enough time to look on the Web or at standard college guidebooks and find out where we're located, what our basic student demographic is, what sorts of courses we offer, and what the major characteristics of the department, the university, and its faculty are.

The purpose of the screening interview is of course to screen out inappropriate candidates. If a candidate has no idea why she or he would want to teach at our campus then that person is likely to be screened out of the pool. It's perfectly legitimate and necessary to use convention interviews for screening purposes, which is why I initially hesitated to offer the tips above. I certainly would not want candidates who are completely inappropriate for a job at Cal State-Northridge to rehearse and practice answers that would deceive us. Obviously it is far better for us and for future colleagues to find the right "fit."

But what I am more worried about is that candidates are being told to prepare for interviews in ways that do not reveal their strengths vis-a-vis our job expectations and that cause them to lose jobs for which they may be entirely appropriate.

And this brings me to a final point, one intended more for those preparing and professionalizing new academics: Please run workshops on careers and on the hiring process that include the perspectives and voices of those of us who are not teaching at major research universities. My colleagues at Ph.D.-granting institutions may have stellar publication records and superb intellects, but they do not, and cannot, know anything about the intricacies of a career and day-to-day life at a teaching institution unless they have been employed here.

We all want the same thing -- for new Ph.D.'s to get jobs at universities, colleges, or places outside of academe where they can flourish personally and professionally. Let us think of creative new ways to maximize the chances of that happening. I do not know what will happen next year at Cal State Northridge; we are facing a state budget crisis and some uncertainty about how much hiring the university can do until the economic situation improves. I hope we will interview again for at least one, if not two, positions.

What I also hope is that with somewhat different preparation and planning by candidates, our next screening interviews will be ones in which we encounter an even more impressive pool of applicants who have clearly thought about the type of career they would have at a teaching-focused university and can convey their strengths to us in ways that allow us to select appropriately among them. I hope not to be left with the lingering worry that some highly qualified and perhaps very appropriate potential colleagues simply got no advice -- or bad advice -- on how best to interview with us.

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