

Magazine

My word

How (not) to get a job — part II Cori Bargmann

One day, the young scientist finds herself asked to a job interview. What is going on there? Where will she go? What will she do?

The interview process varies at different institutions, but always includes a job seminar. It ought to be obvious what to do here: have interesting results, sound impressive. Nonetheless, even though most of us have sat through many good and bad seminars, it's hard to convert that passive experience into useful knowledge. Where do you start?

I have a colleague whose talks are masterful performances, entertaining, full of substance, graced by the telling anecdote; I am mesmerized the entire time he speaks, knowing full well that I could never perform at that level. But anyone can follow a few simple Rules of the Seminar.

First, give a talk that is clear. Like most forms of minimalism, this looks easy but is actually fiendishly difficult. Second, present every experiment with a rationale at the beginning and a conclusion at the end. Many young scientists don't repeat themselves nearly enough for a naive or weary audience to follow them. Third, show enough data to convince the audience, but not so much as to exhaust it. I remember a particularly grim seminar with twenty-five indistinguishable RNAase protection slides. Yes, I wanted to see the first of them, but some variation — a summary slide, anything — would have been very welcome by the end. I like to think of the data as a weapon, but a saber, not a club. And the seminar should end at the appointed time. A speaker who runs late looks disorganized.

These rules apply to every talk, but a few special points apply to a job seminar. For example, this talk is used to gauge how good a teacher a faculty candidate will be. That means that, here more than ever, it's important to put the work into a larger perspective. There should also be an extra hint of the marvellous possibilities to come, since the candidate sells her future as well as her accomplishments.

Assuming one agrees with these generalities, how does one achieve the specifics? Well, I doubt that it's possible to over-rehearse a talk. I can remember one seminar where the slides were perhaps a little slick, but the response was respect and a trace of envy; it didn't hurt the candidate at all. And for the rest, this is the time to call in all your friends for brutal criticism of a practice seminar, starting at least a week before you go. Only your friends will tell you what's wrong with your talk, and even they won't tell you when it's too late to do anything about it.

The remainder of the visit consists of interviews with potential colleagues. In principle, this is delightful. How often do you have a chance to discuss your/their work with so many eminent scientists? In practice, of course, the candidate is under pressure, lessening the delight just a little.

In each interview, the candidate is asked what she plans to do in the first few years as a faculty member. Surprisingly enough, the strongest candidates on paper don't always articulate their ideas well at this step. In my own first interview, I blush to report that I had not even considered the answer to this question. Make sure that you do. Get used to saying it over and over again, as you will in office after office. Try not to feel like a fool when repeating yourself. Oh, and for reference, here are two opposite examples of bad answers to the question, "What will you do next to study fascinating enzyme Q?"

"Crystallize it." (Two-word answers are never popular, however accurate they may be. Why crystallize it? What will the crystal structure tell you? A common critique of applicants is that they don't see the big picture. Be sure you know the questions that you're going to use the crystal structure to address.)

"I will study its regulation, upstream and downstream enzymes in the pathway, possible links to human disease, generate mouse knockouts, and do detailed structure-function analysis." (You may actually want to do all these things. Never admit it. There is no better way to make your work sound pedestrian than to give a list of experiments that could apply to absolutely any 'enzyme Q'. Find something to say that draws on your current knowledge of the problem. And never, ever say that you'll compete with your current advisor.)

Throughout these interviews, something else, something subtle, is also going on. Each faculty member is asking himself: do I want this person as a colleague? Do I want her in the lab next door? Do I want to teach with her?

This process is not overt, but the person who's aware of it has an advantage. For example, the faculty member usually doesn't want a colleague who's doing exactly the same work as he is, but someone who's interested in his work does seem more appealing. It's not a lot of trouble to be familiar with the research of the faculty before the visit. It doesn't look like showing off; it looks like serious interest in the job.

Finally, give some thought to the kinds of questions you need to ask your interviewers. Sensible questions not only further emphasize the fact that you're interested in the job, they also induce respect for you as a thoughtful professional.

Address: Department of Anatomy, University of California, San Francisco, USA.