

Package to prep for tenure-track research faculty interview

Use these questions and tips to prepare! Note that this is aimed at positions in the natural and social sciences, but many questions would apply more widely. Compiled by Alana Westwood (www.alanawestwood.com) with support and advice from folks and sources too numerous to name... thank you!

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Questions asked by interviewers

General

Fit

1. Why do you want to be a professor?
2. Why do you want to work at [institution] in particular? (tips: demonstrate fit, discuss department reputation, complementary research of faculty, balance of research and teaching)
3. What are the main strengths you bring to this position? (tips: scientific hard skills, soft skills like mentoring, can fill research gaps, funding record)
4. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the department?

Managing time, challenges, and relationships

5. How do you think your collaborators would describe you if we asked them?
6. What did you most enjoy from your PhD/postdoc and what did you find most challenging?
7. Can you tell me about a time where you have demonstrated strong leadership skills?
8. What are your weaknesses?
9. Tell me about a time where you were required to take on multiple projects at once, all with pressing deadlines.
10. How do you handle interpersonal conflict at work? Give us an example.
11. Describe a sticky situation you have been in in the field and how you got out of it (tips: clarify if emergency in terms of dangerous, or in terms of the science).

Readiness and future goals

12. What criteria will you use to assess us (the university)? (tips: administrative support, collaboration in the department, balance between teaching/admin/research, facilities)
13. How will you balance teaching and research? (tips: set by university, integrate them through student recruitment and long term class-led projects)
14. What facilities or start up materials would you need for this position? (tips: by an in-person interview, be ready with dollar figures and specific equipment or lab needs)
15. What are your career plans at 5 years, 10 years, and on the long term? (tips: obtain tenure at [institution], productive team, impact, admin)
16. In 10 years how would you define success? (tips: satisfaction, usefulness of research outputs, student evaluations, grad student eval)

Research

Research program and funding

17. What would be the focus of your research program / What projects are you aiming to get funding for over the next five years?
18. How will you fund your research? (tips: tri-council, provincial, philanthropist societies, contract work, NSF, industry partnerships, gov't partnerships, field-specific opportunities to stand out)
19. Tell us the title of your NSERC discovery grant (or similar), and break it down into undergraduate, Master's , and PhD projects.
20. What makes you competitive for grants?
21. What new skills would you like to get out of your next research project?
22. What motivates your research?
23. What is your experience working with funders and other stakeholders?

Contributions

24. What are your major research contributions? What are you most proud of?
25. Tell us about your dissertation and its major contribution. (tips: 3 minutes max, convey 'so what' factor)
26. What theoretical framework did you use when developing your research?
27. What are your immediate and longer-term publication plans? In what journals?
28. Where will you present your research results?

Disciplinary knowledge

29. Who or what influenced you to pursue this field of study?
30. What are the most important research questions right now in your field?
31. What were the critical advances in your field over the last 20 years?
32. What direction should your field be moving over the next 20 years?
33. Who are three people (or papers) that have had a big influence on you and why?
34. Tell us about a paper you've read recently that you liked and why it had an impact on you
35. What are the three greatest threats facing [your topic area], and how would you address them?
36. Who do you think is the most overrated theorist/professional in your field? The most underrated?
37. How do you evaluate research in your field?

Collegiality

38. What is your experience with interdisciplinary research?
39. How will you be able to collaborate with other members of the department? (tip: read everyone's bios)
40. How will your research program contribute to filling the gaps in the department?
41. How important is collegiality to you and why?
42. What societies do you belong to and what meetings do you attend?
43. Outside academia, who do you think is interested in your research and why?
44. How have you decided what contributions warrant authorship, and in what order, in the past?

Mentorship

45. What is your mentorship philosophy/supervision style?
46. What size lab (# of students) will you have, and what is its ideal composition in terms of graduates, undergraduates, postdocs? (tips: start small and grow at comfortable pace)
47. What are some ready examples of graduate projects? Undergraduate projects?
48. How will you find and select your students? (tips: diversity/equity-denied groups, networks)
49. Have you ever worked with a student in crisis?
50. How will you help graduate students with the development of ideas or getting involved in research?
51. How much input should students have in faculty reviews and tenure?
52. What would you do if you were working with a student who was failing or contemplating dropping out? (tips: coaching, goal setting, group projects with quick turnaround time, university resources)
53. Are there structure/policies at the department level that you think facilitate success for research students? (tips: milestones, advisory committee involvement, collegiality)
54. How will you deal with students who are less engaged or interested than others?
55. Describe your best and worst experiences with a mentor.
56. What do you look for in a graduate student? How do you judge whether a relationship with a student is likely to work out?

Teaching

Courses

57. Which of our core program courses do you feel comfortable teaching and why?
58. What two specialty courses would you like to develop for our program? What topics would they be, in what style, what is the student population? What texts and assignments would you offer?
59. What level of courses do you prefer to teach, and why?
60. If you were to create a course abroad/field course/experiential learning course, what would it be and why?
61. How would you teach our introductory course? What textbook would you use? What kinds of assignments?
62. How would you teach our upper-year seminar? What would you have them read?
63. How would you teach our methods course?

Pedagogy

64. What is your teaching philosophy? (tips: mention science of pedagogy and discuss inclusion and different lenses)
65. What were your best and worst teaching evaluations? What is an average one?
66. How have you managed difficult issues while teaching (cheating, inappropriate student behaviours, etc.)?
67. Give us examples of innovative teaching techniques, assignments, or ways of engaging students.
68. How can your research inform your teaching?
69. How does multiculturalism and accessibility affect your teaching approach/What teaching tools would you use to reflect a diverse student body?
70. Why do you want to teach?
71. What makes a good teacher?
72. How do you assess whether your students are learning?
73. How do you stay on top of the teaching literature? (tips: subscribe to journals, institutional support)
74. How do you teach students that have never been exposed to [discipline]?
75. Where do you see teaching in [discipline] going in the next 5-10 years?
76. What would you do if one of your students was failing? What would you do if 50% of your students were failing?
77. What do you see as the difference between undergraduate and graduate education?
78. What is the fairest way to evaluate students? (tips: contrast straight scales vs curves, exams vs papers, others)
79. How much freedom do you allow your students to be creative with their assignments and presentations?
80. What do you know about the typical students at this university?

Experience

81. How do you use new technology in your teaching? How do you deal with students using technology in the classroom?
82. What teaching strengths you would bring to our program?
83. Are you willing to accommodate students with special needs? Have you worked with students with special needs in the past?
84. Tell us about a time when you successfully managed a difficult student, and a time when you did not successfully manage a difficult student.
85. How comfortable are you teaching online or distance education?
86. Teach us a concept as if we were first year students.
87. Give an example of when you presented technical work to non-technical people or non-experts.
88. How do you quantify your performance as a teacher?
89. What's your most proud achievement of in teaching?
90. Have you ever been formally or informally disciplined for student complaints before? If so, what happened?

Administration

91. What role do you envision playing in the administration of the department? What committees do you expect to be on?
92. What kinds of administrative or committee experiences do you have?
93. What professional memberships do you hold and why did you become a member?
94. [For current researchers/postdocs] Are you ready for a major cut in your research time?
95. What have you learned by watching junior faculty succeed and fail?
96. Have you supervised TAs or RAs before? How have you managed these relationships?
97. What are you looking for in a department chair or department?
98. What would you do recruit top students to our program?

Additional information to prepare

99. The backgrounds and publications of the hiring committee
100. The names and backgrounds of all faculty, the chair, and the dean
101. The degree programs in the faculty and the major courses
102. Strategic planning guidance for the department and the university
103. The name of the President and VPs

Questions to ask of the institution

Questions to ask the committee

1. How does the department approach inclusivity and diversity?
2. What is the long-term vision of the department?
3. Why is the unit hiring at this time? Is the unit in an expansion phase? Are more future openings anticipated?
4. How are service assignments made? What are the expectations?
5. How are courses assigned? How many courses and which courses does a new faculty member usually teach in each of the first 1 – 2 years?
6. What ability do faculty have to develop new courses or programs?
7. How is faculty performance assessed each year? Does this relate to the evaluations for reappointment and promotion?
8. How are interdisciplinary efforts assessed? What about activities that cut across the research, teaching, and service missions?
9. What separates a good faculty member from a great one at this institution? What kinds of attitudes or work habits make people successful here?
10. What are the departmental funding opportunities for research and travel?
11. How does graduate student recruitment work here?
12. What kind of teaching support is available, such as TAs?
13. Is it possible to share space and lab equipment?
14. How do you feel about the class sizes here and how they relate to teaching effectiveness and student experiences?
15. Tell me more about interactions with [related department, university, or institution].
16. Is there an active undergraduate or graduate student society, and what kinds of activities do they do?
17. What is your favourite thing about your university?
18. What is the greatest challenge facing this university in the next 5 years? This department?
19. Where is the money being spent in this institution? Where would you spend the money, if you could control the budget?
20. What is the next step, including the time frame, in the interview process?

Questions to ask Chairs/Deans/Head academic advisor

1. I have read the university's strategic plan. [tailored question related to plan]
2. How does this position fit into the big-picture strategy for the department?
3. What do you see as the departments' strengths?
4. How would you describe the type of teacher and researcher that the institution usually hires?
5. Based on my knowledge of the program, there are some courses I could see myself teaching immediately others I would be interested in developing. What would you envision me teaching?
6. How many courses does a new faculty member usually teach in each of the first two years?
7. What is the process for establishing new courses or areas of research?
8. At what class size are TAs or graders provided?
9. What is the tenure process and expectations?
10. What are the Tri-Council funding rates in the department?
11. What is the typical range of start-up funds, and in what time frame must they be spent? Does this include lab furniture, renovations?
12. Are there shared resources for faculty, like vehicles, equipment, or support staff?
13. Are there departmental funds to support research or travel?
14. Are there international or study abroad connections, and can faculty become involved?
15. Tell me about the demographics of your students (age range, economic backgrounds, characteristics, diversity, education backgrounds, goals)
16. How are students recruited to this school?
17. What is the graduation rate for undergrads and graduate students in this program? Where do your graduates go? How do recent graduates view their preparation for the field?
18. How would you describe this department to a fellow Dean/Chair?
19. Is this a cluster hire? If so, how do you imagine collaboration and involvement within the cluster?
20. What proportion of new hires obtain tenure? What is the retention rate of new hires?
21. How are pre-tenure faculty evaluated?
22. What, in your view, characterizes an outstanding faculty member?
23. Who makes the decision about hiring for this position, and what is the timetable?

Questions to ask other faculty/prospective colleagues

1. What types of mentoring and support are available for new hires?
2. When you were junior faculty, how many courses did you teach and which ones? How much influence did you have over that?
3. When you were junior faculty, what support did you receive for your research?
4. How would describe the working atmosphere, colleague support, and workload?
5. What's your greatest frustration with your job?
6. What technologies have you found to be particularly embraced by students and colleagues in terms of teaching?
7. Where do you feel the emphasis lies between teaching, research, and administration?
8. How supportive is the university of your family life? (tips: make sure this question is confidential and to someone you trust, particularly if asking about daycares, parental leaves, or spousal hires)
9. How involved are faculty in recruiting students? How do you recruit your students?
10. Are there enough high quality students to serve as TAs and RAs?
11. What committees are available for new faculty to join, and how much of a voice do they have in the department or on campus?
12. Is there enough administrative support to meet your needs?
13. How unified is the department? If there are splits, are the divides political or personal?

14. What is the expected allocation of time for the tenure process? How long does it take to reach associate and full professorship?
15. What kind of technology is available in the classroom?
16. What do you wish you had asked or known when interviewing?
17. Who are your collaborators?
18. How has the department changed since you arrived?

Questions to ask students

1. How do you feel about the level of diversity here, both in terms of people with diverse identities and ideas? Is there enough?
2. How have you found faculty here as mentors and teachers? Are they approachable and supportive?
3. Why did you choose this program?
4. Would you recommend other students do this program? Why or why not?
5. Are there any university services or supports that you find lacking? In what way?
6. Has everyone who wanted a TA or RA position that you know of been able to find one?
7. For those who are TAs or RAs, did you feel sufficiently trained?
8. What input do students have in course development or introducing new courses?
9. Have you noticed any tension between faculty members?
10. Graduate students, how are you funded and is it enough?
11. Are you able to access travel funding for conferences?
12. What do you want to do when you finish?

General interview tips

- Attitude is key. “I don't think people are censured for specific things they say, but because of the way they say them — nonchalant or arrogant or dispassionate”
- Be calm, contemplative, and brief
- Use pauses liberally
- Speak up, confidently and firmly, and frame in the positive
- If dissatisfied with an interview response, re-address in the follow-up thank-you email
- Don't appear to judge the department, but ask genuine questions about how they relate to other aspects of the university
- Write personalized thanks you to everyone you met during the in-person interview as a follow up
- For the in-person interview, bring a water bottle, snacks, be sure your shoes are broken in and won't give blisters
- Remember that you are interviewing *them*
- Be prepared with an elevator speech for quick, side discussions where folks ask, “Oh, what do you work on?”
- Create an ‘interview notebook’ on paper, *not* a phone or tablet, which includes:
 - your schedule for the day along with all room numbers and directions
 - the names of everyone you are meeting with and one sentence to remember them by
 - brief notes on teaching philosophy, research, mentoring, grants
 - questions to ask each group
 - space to take detailed notes of their answers

Tips for videoconference interview

- Look at the camera rather than the screen for better eye contact.
- Use a few post it notes on your monitor for key points of your platform, but not too many so that you look distracted

Research presentation

- Clarify expectations beforehand: how much of your presentation should be devoted to future research plans (e.g. is there a separate session for future plans)? What is the audience of the seminar?
- Practice first with immediate colleagues, then as wide of a community as you can from different/related disciplines
- Make the presentation accessible (e.g. colour-blind friendly, use principles of Universal Design in Learning)
- If there's a 'chalk talk', don't assume everyone went to your presentation and knows your research, so start with a short summary of yourself and your work. This will usually be outlining the process of applying for a grant
- Practice writing on the board ahead of time so it's legible and you don't block it with your body
- Start by linking your work to general theory/an issue to be tackled, a few key projects that you've done that contribute, followed by the work you will do next
- Include how you'll tie in undergraduate or graduate research

Useful resources (last updated 03/24/2020)

<https://www.nature.com/naturejobs/science/articles/10.1038/nj7488-397a>

<http://thecomonline.net/reflections-on-the-academic-job-market/>

<http://ecoevoevoeco.blogspot.com/2015/10/how-to-get-faculty-position-ii.html>

<https://tenureshewrote.wordpress.com/2013/10/28/i-can-haz-job-tips-and-tricks-for-the-academic-interview/>

<http://theprofessorisin.com/2020/01/27/dispatches-from-the-front-what-candidates-are-doing-wrong-part-i-of-iii-do-your-homework-please-please/>

Specific to video interviews

<https://theprofessorisin.com/2011/10/31/thephoneorskypeinterview/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQwanxQmFnc>