

More Comments on Interviews at the Winter Meeting  
(from the YMN)

As we get closer to the January AMS-MAA Meetings, job-seekers start to think about what really goes on in the Employment Center. I entered this arena in 1999 with little idea of what goes on behind the curtains and wish that I had known more. After more than 20 interviews and a few callbacks, I became a sort of "professional interviewee." That is, I approached the first interview meekly offering tentative responses and unsure of where the questions were headed; my final interview at the conference--three days later-- coincidentally, was with the same school as the first, yet I was a completely different interviewee, who confidently anticipated their questions, had less fear and even had a little fun. There are a few articles out there about interviewing that focus on the questions you may be asked and the questions you should ask; I, too, will touch on this while describing the types of interviews you can expect.

At the conference, I found that there are four different types of interviews: the employer-scheduled ones, the computer-scheduled ones where you talk, the computer-scheduled ones where they do all the talking and the unexpected spontaneous ones that don't seem like interviews, but lead to something. All of the interviews are dual purpose: first, the employers want to find out more about you; and second, the employers want to sell you on their institution. Here are highlights of the different types and some tips for handling them.

#### Employer-scheduled interviews

It is now quite common for employers to contact job candidates before the conference to schedule interviews that tend to be 30-60 minutes in duration and may take place in the Employment Center, over dinner, in the noisy Networking Center, in a hotel room or even in the hallway of the convention center outside of a men's bathroom.

For these, the interviews are longer and the interviewers know something about you already (since they read your dossier prior to calling) so questions can probe deeper and you can present a much clearer picture of yourself. In every case, you'll be asked to describe your teaching experience in general, though some give it a twist: by asking about best/worst experiences, innovations attempted, use of technology, ways to incorporate applications, and/or how you handle students' questions. There is time to get concrete, so give examples of projects assigned and of situations you've been in and how you dealt with them. Demonstrate that you reflect on your teaching and strive to be better at it.

When asked about research, it helps to ask about the math background of the interviewer and then deliver your general audience or expert description based on the response. There will be follow-up questions about your future plans for research and how you'll adapt to directing undergraduate research projects. Even in long interviews and in interviews for postdoctoral research positions, it is crucial to be judiciously succinct when the topic turns to your research. Questions about research serve to see where you've been and where you are going with it and to see how well you explain complex ideas. Prepare your answers to all of the questions--about both teaching and research--ahead of time so that you can give more polished responses. [This preparation is crucial to success in the short-form interviews described below.]

These longer interviews also provide more room for the employers to describe their institution and for you to ask questions about it. Often, you'll be asked how much you know about them and you should never fear this question. Though you earn brownie points if you've heard of the school, most professors at small colleges expect that you'll require some introduction to their institution. On the other hand, you should be prepared to explain why you applied for the position.

There will be time, so you should be prepared to ask questions. Mine were about the tenure process, teaching load, research/travel support, local seminars/colloquia, early sabbaticals, service (advising, committee,...) requirements, numbers of math majors, computing resources (for both teaching

and research), typical careers of math graduates, size and diversity of the student body, size and diversity of the faculty, the campus interview timetable, etc. "What would you change about your institution/department/town?" is a question I asked in every interview that is a great barometer not only for faculty contentment, but also of the openness of the faculty members to consider the state of the institution.

Another thing I noticed is that these interviews sometimes became chummy, which could unwittingly invite some "illegal" questions about your marital status, sexual orientation, religion (which is only a taboo subject with non-religiously-affiliated schools) and ethnic origin. Only give information that you are comfortable revealing. As for the others, there are a couple of strategies: turn the tables by saying, "Wouldn't it be unprofessional of us to mix our public and private lives?" or politely deflect to a different topic.

#### Computer-scheduled interviews

The computer-scheduled interviews are 15-minutes long and come in two varieties. There are those in which you talk and those in which the employers talk and rarely is there a hybrid. Still focusing on a discussion of the main categories of teaching and research, but with less depth, these minutes blow by so quickly that there is little time to think about what you are saying. Once you've practiced your interview patter, though, it should be a breeze to do one of these interviews when they are asking you questions.

However, 4 out of the 5 computer-scheduled interviews I had were of the other variety. That is, the employers talked the whole time, delivering a fifteen-minute description of their institution. For many reasons, including the desire for efficient usage of time, it is important to discern early-on the type of interview you are undergoing. With the first one of this flavor, I recall being very frustrated because I didn't realize that they meant for me not to get a word in edge-wise; in fact, I assumed that I failed the interview miserably. Reflecting on this experience, on the others, I took the initiative to ask questions that would steer their spiel to give me the information I wanted. These were still valuable interviews in that I learned about institutions I hadn't previously considered; after one, I sought out the interviewers later in the meeting for a discussion in a less time-constrained milieu.

#### Unexpected and word-of-mouth interviews

You are always being interviewed at the conference, even when you're just hanging around. Remember that you are wearing a nametag that constantly advertises you to the crowd there in the convention center and so you should use every opportunity to network and get a foot in the door. To illustrate: I gave a talk at the meeting and had made sure to invite my prospective employers to attend. Meticulously planned and practiced thrice the presentation went off without a hitch. Then, after the talk I hung around the room for idle chit-chat with audience members that led, quite unexpectedly, to three people asking me to apply for postdoctoral research positions at institutions to which I hadn't considered applying. One of these people had been sent to the talk by a co-author of my advisor and she was particularly convincing and persistent. After a cursory quick campus visit, I ended up taking a productive postdoc with the aforementioned co-author at her institution.

#### Conclusion

Be aware of the different types of interviews and their purposes. With a little planning and preparation, you'll succeed. Don't forget to find time for yourself, keep a diary of names of people you meet, and have a little fun.

Chawne Kimber  
Lafayette College  
kimberc@lafayette.edu