Interviewing for a Job at a Community College  
By DANA M. ZIMBLEMAN

People who know me well will be surprised that I am giving advice on how to interview effectively for a college teaching job. I've always been a terribly shy person, ill at ease around strangers. In fact, at my worst job interviews, I've performed like a cross between Laura Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie and Richard Nixon in his 1960 debate with John F. Kennedy. I have an annoying, uncontrollable habit of not looking people in the eye. And if I'm really distraught, I even get that oh-so-attractive sweat mustache. So some committees probably have had a hard time figuring me out. Am I simply a frightened young woman with no self-esteem? Or am I the shifty sort who might steal office supplies?

Given these admissions, you may be wondering what on earth qualifies me to talk to you about appearing in front of a hiring committee. Well, it's quite simple: If I can learn to maintain my composure at a job interview, and I have, anyone can. In addition, I've sat on quite a few hiring committees and observed many effective and not-so-effective (read: pathetic) job interviews. So for those of you out there who have a more dynamic personality than I do, you're ahead of the game if you simply follow a few simple strategies to promote yourself well in front of the committee.

Getting 'The Call'

When the call comes (usually from a staff member in human resources), make sure you write down all of the key details concerning the interview -- date and time, duration, and location. In fact, it might be a good idea to make a list of questions ahead of time and keep it by the phone. That way, when the call comes, you won't be struggling to remember all the things you need to ask.

You also should ask whether the college will reimburse you for your travel expenses. Unfortunately, many community colleges simply don't have the money to pay for applicants' travel to the campus interview. (In all of my interviews, only one community college has paid for my trip.) So, don't assume that you'll be reimbursed, or you may be in for a shock when you're stuck with a hefty Visa bill. You should think long and hard about your chances of snagging a job at a distant campus before slapping down your credit card. You may be better off applying for positions within a reasonable driving distance of your home.

You might get a little help from faculty and staff members at the college in defraying some minor expenses. For instance, someone might be willing to pick you up at the airport to save you from renting a car or taking a taxi to campus. A colleague of mine who served on a biology search committee related a horror story to me about one candidate who spent about $100 for a cab from the airport on the day of the interview. The committee was aghast and would gladly have arranged for somebody to pick her up. So don't be shy about asking for a ride to the campus once you get in the general vicinity of the college.
**Teaching Demonstrations**

You'll probably be informed if the committee expects you to deliver a teaching demonstration, but don't forget to ask about this yourself if the human-resources specialist doesn't mention it on the phone. The worst possible thing that can happen is to be unprepared to teach a lesson if they expect you to do so.

If a teaching demo isn't required, do a victory dance and don't question the committee's motivations. When I served on my last committee, one applicant got really snippy and declined our offer to interview because we weren't requiring applicants to teach a short lesson. Apparently, she perceived us as a bunch of lightweights who didn't care about academic quality. However, many institutions do not require teaching demonstrations primarily because the interview is an artificial setting. After all, committee members aren't students, and it is impossible for applicants to interact with a committee the way they would interact with students. Besides, even though the committee may not expect you to teach a lesson, you probably will be asked discipline-specific questions intended to determine whether you can explain concepts simply and concisely.

If you are required to provide a teaching demonstration, closely follow the directions you've been given. If, for instance, you are asked to teach a composition lesson focusing on how to avoid making sentence fragment errors, resist the temptation to plan an activity that will allow you to use your dissertation topic on medieval morality plays. Remember, the committee will want to know if you can relate to students who sometimes struggle with academic subjects, so don't get too fancy.

During the interview, you may be asked to give an impromptu teaching demonstration, so you won't know the topic ahead of time. Once I served on a committee that asked each applicant to pretend that committee members were a class of basic writing students. We provided a sample paragraph (filled with errors and lacking a topic sentence) and asked the candidate to pretend one of us had written it and to use it as an exercise to help the entire class learn how to craft an effective paragraph. Besides wanting to know whether the candidates could determine what was wrong with the paragraph, we also wanted to ascertain whether they could teach the most rudimentary elements of composition clearly and coherently.

The best applicants pointed out the strengths of the paragraph first (good details, nice title, etc.). They conveyed that they understood that some students might be apprehensive about sharing their writing with other students. In addition these applicants were perceptive enough to understand they had to project a positive attitude but at the same time point out diplomatically that paragraphs need main ideas. The most effective applicants focused on the missing topic sentence first, which took up most of their five-minute demonstration time.

You may find out when you're called about the interview that the committee will expect you to give an impromptu teaching demonstration. More than likely, the committee will keep it simple, so you stand a good chance of being asked to teach a lesson on how to avoid comma splices or something like that. There's very little danger that a community-college hiring committee will ask you to give an impromptu lecture on Foucault. Still, I have heard some horror stories about applicants' being asked to apply some obscure theory in their teaching demonstration. If this happens to you, one of two things are probably at work: Some senior faculty member is committed to this teaching philosophy and thinks it's the best thing since bubble gum, or an "inside candidate" (a popular adjunct who already works there, for instance) may teach according
to this method, so the committee is trying to give this applicant an unfair advantage. All you can
do is keep your composure, and do the best you can.

If you get a question like this, don't immediately assume you're out of the running. If it's just the
theoretical approach of one of the committee members, then chances are the other members of the
committee are simply indulging the person and won't let that issue be the deciding factor in the
interview. If, however, you get a rejection letter after the interview, what do you do if you suspect
the college of stacking the deck? You probably won't be able to litigate and successfully prove
you should've been hired, but there are some positive steps you might undertake to ensure that the
institution does not engage in these shenanigans again. I'll explain this issue more in my next
column, when I discuss what happens while you're waiting to hear from the committee.

If you get to choose the topic of your demonstration, don't assume you'll be interviewing in a
room with state-of-the-art technology. Make sure you ask about this. If technology is available,
great, but you need to have a backup plan just in case the institution's server is down, or the
equipment malfunctions.

Questions and Answers

Beyond the teaching demonstration, the committee will ask you tons of questions about your
academic background, teaching experience, ability to serve on committees, and so forth. Listen
carefully! This may seem obvious, but often when candidates get nervous, they miss some key
nuance contained within a question. And don't be afraid to ask someone to repeat a question or
clarify something you don't understand.

You may be asked a question like, "If your students could tell us something about you, what
would they say?" It's a good idea to emphasize your ability to be fair, compassionate, clear, and
consistent. I would discourage applicants from emphasizing how tough and rigorous they are and
what high standards they set for themselves and their students. I always find such declarations
pompous and puzzling, and wonder if the person is the kind of instructor who measures the
margins of students' papers and counts off 50 points if they aren't precisely one inch.

Of course, having high standards is a good thing. However, most committee members have been
around long enough to know that just about everybody brags about being tough. But if we're all
so tough, who are the teachers we hear about who are inflating grades so dramatically? (Not me,
certainly!) I respect candidates much more for being honest, for acknowledging how difficult it is
to strike a balance between having reasonable standards and not alienating our grade-conscious
students.

How to Present Yourself

Let me just preface these next remarks by saying that I expect to get some angry e-mails after
this section because I'm going to talk about gender differences. In my defense, I'm merely
reporting my observations, I don't pretend they're scientific.

When many men get nervous, they tend to overproject their voices and wind up speaking so
loudly that they can be truly unpleasant to listen to. If you're a man, be aware of the tone and
level of your voice to make sure you are not inadvertently shouting at the committee. Nervous
male applicants also sometimes answer questions with short, clipped answers and fail to elaborate
when asked. While the "strong, silent type" may be a desirable hero in a movie, the institution
isn't looking to hire Clint Eastwood or Russell Crowe. Try to show that you're friendly and approachable.

In the interest of equal opportunity, I will now turn to the problems I've seen with nervous female applicants in the interview. They tend to exhibit more outward manifestations of nervousness than the men, like shaky hands. You might try to keep your hands in your lap if they're shaking so convulsively that it becomes a serious distraction. Of course shaky hands can be quite noticeable during a teaching demonstration. All I can suggest is that you try to do something -- yoga, deep breathing, whatever -- to relax you before the interview. I used to carry a book of Far Side cartoons with me to interviews, and I'd look at a few of my favorites right before I went in. It certainly helped me keep the interviews in perspective.

The matter of voice projection is also an issue for some women, except that the problem is that they speak too softly. I've sometimes had to strain to hear a soft talker if I am sitting at the opposite end of the table from the applicant. Some women overproject their voices as well. You don't want to sound as though you are shrieking at the committee.

Whatever your particular interview quirks, the point is to practice beforehand with people who will honestly tell you how you sound.

A final point about how to dress for a community-college interview: You should be neat of course, but you don't have to dress like a CEO. A female candidate we recently hired for a history slot wore khaki pants and a nice blouse, and looked appropriately professional. Most of the men wore khaki pants with casual blazers and ties. They, too, looked fine. One applicant wore a dark business suit, and he seemed overdressed. I wouldn't recommend jeans or sneakers, even if they're brand new.

Let me emphasize one thing in closing that I hope will ease some of the stress you may feel as you prepare to interview at a community college. Keep in mind that the primary function of a community-college instructor is to teach students who, more often than not, lack confidence in themselves. Most members of the hiring committee are sensitive people who are not out to humiliate you. They want you to do well, and, like most good teachers, feel uncomfortable when the process makes candidates so nervous that they don't do their best. So try to relax and give your best effort. That's all you can ask of yourself.

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