Early Career Members

Surviving the Interview and Your First Year in Academic Research

Every year, the Early Career Member Committee hosts the “Surviving and Thriving Your First Year” session at the Annual Meeting with the Graduate Student Committee and the Consulting Soil Scientist Division. The session is an important opportunity for all early career members to seek advice on being successful during their first year on the job. This month, I will finish my first year as an assistant professor with research and teaching appointments. The past year has been filled with exciting opportunities, great collaborations, and numerous challenges, all of which have been essential for a successful and enjoyable first year. In this article, I will give a few basic approaches that will hopefully ease the transition for other early career academic research professionals to have a successful first year on the job. The advice presented comes from a combination of my own experiences and observations from numerous other early career scientists who I have the pleasure of calling my colleagues and friends. But before your first year on the job, how do you survive the interview?

Surviving the Interview

In the last year, I survived my own interview and served on a hiring committee for an assistant professor of research in another department. This rare opportunity to find myself on both sides of the table within a year was very enlightening. Through these experiences, I have found that once you are academically qualified and a good fit for the research position, the rest boils down the following: Attention to details and being yourself.

Sweat the details on everything from your seminars to the mission of the university and department. Some basic things you should absolutely know prior to your interview is what the missions and needs are of the university, the department, and the position and what makes you the best scientist for them to invest their time and resources.

viewpoints used in the application to attract students and funding should take the time to have a basic understanding of the university and its administrative and academic structure. Most people tend to remember the awkward moments better than your most impressive moments. One of the best ways to be the top candidate for the position after all of the interviews are completed is to be the candidate with the least number of awkward moments. Limit these moments by doing your homework on the institute, the department, and the individuals you will be meeting.

If an institute is hiring, it is because they have a need for an expert in that field. Given this, you will likely be the leading expert on campus during your interview and everyone that will be solicited for input to the institute’s final decision will be looking for details that show your experience, creativity, confidence, personality, and ability to communicate clearly. Remember, you are competing against other expert candidates who are likely just as good of a fit for the job description. Those interviewing you will use these details for deciding whether you or someone else is the right expert to invest in and represent the department.

Many of us are better at performing research than marketing our abilities. Even an appropriate level of self-promotion comes very natural and is a skill very marketable. Whereas, others should ask themselves, “Do I come off sounding too strong or even arrogant?” Remember, these people want to hire you for a career, so they will be constantly asking themselves, “Can I rely on and tolerate this person as a resource for the next one to three decades?” Your ability to recall details on your experiences, the specified need of the department better than any other candidate who is applying for the position.

Aaron Daigh
Assistant Professor of Soil Physics, Soil Science Department, North Dakota State University
aaron.daigh@ndsu.edu

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