

What Not to Say in a Job Interview at a Two-Year College

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Image: Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

Every March, as faculty interview season gets underway at two-year colleges, I find myself thinking back on some of the memorable train wrecks I've witnessed.

There was the extremely promising — not to mention sharply dressed — candidate who, when asked why he was interested in this particular job, replied, "If you're implying that I don't really want to teach at a community college, I assure you, you're mistaken. I'm not wearing this Brooks Brothers suit for nothing."

Then there was the candidate who asked us about her research budget and how many graduate assistants she would be able to hire. We politely explained that, at a community college, there are no graduate assistants — for the simple reason that there are no graduate students. She blanched and gave a perfunctory performance for the remainder of the interview. Whether her suit also came from Brooks Brothers, we never learned.

In both cases, the candidates in question were guilty of self-sabotage, owing perhaps more to ignorance than arrogance. They illustrate a key point about faculty job interviews: As important as it is to say smart things (as I've noted in previous columns), it's just as important not to say dumb ones.

If you have an interview this spring for a full-time faculty position at a two-year college, here are seven verbal pitfalls to avoid. The first three are things you shouldn't say to a community-college search committee, and the rest are comments best avoided during job interviews at any type of institution.

"In my research ..." Fresh from a Ph.D. program, you may not know much about community colleges. For example, you might be surprised to learn that many of our faculty members — including, most likely, some of the people on the hiring committee interviewing you — do not hold terminal degrees in their fields. Historically, most faculty members at community colleges have held master's degrees, not doctorates. Accrediting standards do not require a Ph.D. to teach at the two-year level.

It's only recently that two-year colleges began hiring more candidates with doctorates — due largely to the glut of Ph.D.s on the academic market. Some community colleges, in an attempt to boost their prestige, have responded to the oversupply by pursuing Ph.D.s rather aggressively.

Your doctorate may well be one of the main reasons you got this interview. However, a community college is still not a university. The vast majority of two-year institutions hire faculty to teach, not to do research. We want to know about your classroom techniques, not your publishing prospects.

Your research — unless it relates specifically to community-college students or to issues that affect our students, like retention or developmental learning — just isn't that relevant to the hiring-committee members. And frankly, they probably don't want to hear you go on at length (or at all) about your dissertation or your scholarly agenda.

"So how many classes will I be teaching?" That question displays — in spectacular fashion — complete ignorance of community colleges and is the sound of your candidacy dying right in the interview.

Since you've made it this far into the column, I'll share the answer: The norm at most two-year colleges is a course load of five classes each semester (two or three of the five might be

different sections of the same course).

Any candidates who go into a community-college interview not already in possession of that information clearly haven't done their homework. Asking about the teaching load simply draws attention to that failure. The only worse way to put it is, "So how many classes will I *have* to teach?" (Hint: Assuming you want to be hired, you should try to avoid characterizing teaching as a burden.)

Having served on roughly two dozen search committees, I can tell you what most of us are thinking when you ask about the course load: "If you don't want to teach that many classes, we get it. It's not for everyone. But we like our work, and you're the one who applied to a community college. You knew this was the deal going in — and if not, why didn't you know?"

"I'm looking forward to working with disadvantaged/underrepresented/marginalized students." It's an admirable pronouncement, but it raises two concerns. First, it sounds a little too canned — the community-college interviewee's equivalent of wishing for world peace. The second concern: It seems to imply that you believe all of our students are disadvantaged/underrepresented/marginalized, which not only isn't true, but also is rather condescending.

There's no question that, in teaching at a two-year college, you'll work with plenty of students from underprivileged economic backgrounds and from marginalized or underrepresented groups. But you also will teach a wide variety of students who aren't any of those things. Demographically, today's typical community-college student looks a lot more like the average student at a regional university than like the stereotypical unmotivated, academically-challenged junior-college "loser" of yesteryear (if indeed that person ever existed).

If, in your case, the above statement happens to be true — and let's hope it is, or else you have no business being in that interview in the first place — you will probably have an opportunity to make your point more organically and concretely in answer to a question about your experiences with diverse populations. Just be careful to avoid giving the impression that you think community-college students are somehow inferior to their four-year counterparts or that you see yourself in the role of savior.

Now let me turn to four remarks you probably should avoid during a faculty interview at any type of institution.

"One of the other places I'm applying to ..." Look, everybody in the room knows you've applied elsewhere. You'd be foolish if you hadn't (unless you're tied to a certain location). Perhaps you even have other interviews.

None of that matters during the interview. At that moment, the thing you want most in the world is not just *a* teaching job — but *this* teaching job. Or at least, that's how you have to

approach it, and how you should try to make the committee members feel, without appearing overly sycophantic. They must be able to willingly suspend disbelief and convince themselves that your fondest desire is to become their colleague. Do not burst their bubble.

"My husband/wife/partner/child was saying the other day ..." In training faculty members before a search, the folks in human resources emphasize all of the subjects we're not allowed to raise in a job interview — things like age, religion, marital status, children, sexuality. Which is fine with me, because such personal matters are none of the committee's business.

No one, however, seems to have told job candidates that they don't have to volunteer that information — and probably shouldn't.

I understand that mentioning a spouse or a child is a way of humanizing yourself for the committee, gauging how family friendly the place is, or even establishing a rapport with other married people or parents in the room. But it can easily backfire.

The fact is: You don't know the biases of the people on the committee — and even if you did, they may or may not represent the culture of the place. Will any of them be less likely to want to hire you because you're married or single? Because you have children or intend to have them? I would hope not, but you never know. It's your call, of course, but it seems wiser to keep that information private during the hiring process, and maintain a strictly professional persona.

"That's a good question." Whenever I hear a job candidate say that in response to something I've asked, I think, "Thank you. I thought of it myself."

Of course, saying "that's a good question" is usually just a stall tactic. You're buying time to gather your thoughts before answering. But that's why you shouldn't say it. It signals to us that you were unprepared for the question, and now you're trying to cover for that with false praise.

We've all been there. The only real way to avoid that moment of panic is to do some research on the types of questions you might be asked

and then formulate cogent responses in advance. Build into your answers enough flexibility to allow for different foci or phrasing. If your department doesn't offer mock job interviews for its graduate students, ask a friend, colleague, or adviser to conduct one and help you practice thinking on your feet (especially if this is your first rodeo).

"Do you know the starting salary for this position?" I understand that you're concerned about money. Who isn't? Nevertheless, this simply is not an appropriate question for a job interview — at least not in the academic world. If you're offered the job, then you can ask about salary, benefits, and other perks. (Pro tip: At a community college, there aren't any other perks.)

Meanwhile, if you're willing to do some internet sleuthing, you can probably track down some salary and benefit information online. You might be able to find a salary schedule on the college's website, or on a state-government site if the campus is part of a state system. You should also be able to access information about benefits on the college's HR page. (Before you blame the messenger, let me take this opportunity to agree: It's shameful when college administrators don't publish salary ranges in the job ad. Why expect someone to consider moving across the country for a position without any idea of what it pays?)

If this column has an overarching theme, it is this: Do your homework. Then you won't sabotage your candidacy with an awkward comment or with a question that puts you in a bad light. Because ultimately, in any job interview, what you don't say is probably every bit as important as what you do say.