

# Job Talks and Interviews: How to Stand Out and Fit In: A Report from the American Society of Preventive Oncology Junior Members Interest Group

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The mission of the American Society of Preventive Oncology (ASPO) includes fostering the continuing professional development of its members. One major activity of ASPO is to prepare the next generation of cancer prevention and control researchers for successful careers. The process of applying for faculty or research positions could be described as long, intense, and somewhat elusive. The 2015 Annual Meeting of ASPO included an interactive session to provide junior members with guidance on how to successfully prepare for job talks and academic interviews. The organizing committee (K.W. Reeves, P. Tehranifar, T.E. Crane, and L.K. Ko) assembled a diverse panel of cancer researchers in the early years of a tenure-track faculty position (J.G. Hamilton and P.L. Reiter) and those with established careers and expertise in mentoring and recruiting junior investigators (C. Cameron, J.G. Hamilton, J.A. Lavigne, C.A. Thomson). Panelists shared their thoughts on all facets of the interview and hiring process and critiqued slides from two anonymous, previously solicited ASPO junior investigator job talks. Here, we report the primary themes and key pieces of advice from the session.

## Preparation Is Key, and be Prepared for Anything

A critical first step in preparing for a job interview and application is to thoroughly research the institution, department, and geographic location. Applicants should understand the institution's mission, as well as its key collaborators (e.g., nearby cancer centers, hospitals, community organizations). It is also important to gain knowledge of institutional centers of excellence that could influence the candidate's future research support and trajectory. For example, if the research requires access to shared resources (e.g., genomics, proteomics, imaging, behavioral measurements), are these available locally? Learning about the department itself

(e.g., standing within the institution, interdepartmental collaborations, support of junior faculty and under-represented minorities) and the specific research interests of the faculty is also useful. More broadly, understanding the demographics of the community outside of the institution, including its burden of cancer and ongoing cancer control and prevention programs, is key. Overall, this background research will help candidates learn about the priorities and opportunities within the institution as well as how they might fit within the existing research and education activities.

On a more logistical level, preparing a lay language "elevator speech" will provide a polished, clear, and concise description of one's research that is ready to share with faculty, administrators, and students. Although candidates are typically provided with a schedule of activities beforehand, last minute changes often occur and candidates should remain flexible. Candidates should ask about the logistics of their visit, particularly as they relate to their presentation, including whether a computer will be provided or if a personal laptop can be used. Having back-up access to presentation slides is advised.

## Use the "Job Talk" to Tell the Story of Your Research: Past, Present, and Future

The job talk presentation is the central piece of the campus visit. Candidates should ask ahead of time about expectations for the job talk, such as the appropriate balance among past, present, and future research and whether information on teaching philosophy and service goals should be included. Inquiring about the composition of the audience (e.g., clinicians, students, other scientists) is helpful, as this can affect the extent of the background information needed. Highly technical language and jargon should be avoided, as audiences typically come from diverse backgrounds. Candidates should present a clear, concise story about their research, selectively including the most salient aspects. Candidates should show the trajectory of their work as developed throughout their training. Search committees seek candidates who communicate readiness to be an independent researcher through demonstration of independence from their current and/or former mentors. Having federal funding at the time of interview is clearly a strength; however, showing potential to successfully obtain funding once in the faculty position also is important. Successful candidates are those who articulate clear and specific future directions that arise from their previous and ongoing work. To demonstrate their funding potential, candidates can describe the significance, innovation, and impact of these proposed works and their alignment with federal/foundation funding priorities. Candidates should specifically identify funding mechanisms (e.g., NIH K award) and provide detailed descriptions of planned grant submissions in their first year. Presenting future plans is also an opportunity to make

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links to ongoing work within the department and how the candidate's interests complement those of current faculty.

### **"How" You Present Is Just as Important as "What" You Present**

Content is only one component of the job talk; the visuals and manner of presenting can also make a strong and lasting impression. Dressing appropriately, typically in business attire, and adopting good posture convey maturity and confidence. Less is more when it comes to the presentation slides; slides that are too busy or difficult to read are a distraction from the message being conveyed. Including an outline or conceptual model provides a helpful overview of the talk and research area; returning to this slide intermittently reminds the audience of the larger story being told. Additional hidden slides in the presentation can be helpful for answering questions and providing greater detail as needed.

The importance of working with mentors to develop the talk and of practicing ahead of time cannot be overstated. Practice should include early review of content, quality, and organization, followed by a formal presentation in front of a diverse audience. Distracting mannerisms can detract from the content of the presentation (e.g., "um," pacing, looking at the floor/ceiling, uncontrolled use of laser pointers, use of slang). These can be identified by colleagues and effectively addressed by the candidate during the preparation phase. Candidates should think beyond the presentation itself and make sure to practice answering questions in a clear, concise manner. If the position includes teaching responsibilities, the search committee also evaluates the candidate on his or her potential to be a successful teacher. Overall, candidates need to convey enthusiasm for their work and demonstrate the unique qualities they have to offer as a potential faculty member.

### **The Intangible Qualities Make Important and Lasting Impressions**

Search committees weigh every aspect of the candidate's qualifications, his or her research portfolio (e.g., grants, published manuscripts, scientific presentations), and departmental/institutional needs and priorities. The search committee's charge is to select a candidate who will be both a successful researcher and a good colleague not only in terms of leading innovative research but also in the context of the department/institution. Candidates should be polite to everyone they encounter throughout the process, including administrative assistants and students, even during more relaxed moments such as walking from one meeting to another. Lack of energy or enthusiasm seriously damages the impression being made. Candidates often make comments that inadvertently communicate lack of interest in the position (e.g., "the commute here would be long," "the teaching requirement is more than I thought it would be"). Search committee members are listening throughout the interview day for these types of underlying conversations to help them differentiate among the highly talented candidates interviewed. The energy, attitude, and collegiality of the candidates play an important role in making final hiring decisions.

### **Not Every Position Will be a Good Fit for Every Person**

The campus visit is also an opportunity for candidates to learn about the department and institution. Being prepared with questions to ask of faculty is useful, and asking the same question of

multiple people will help determine if there is convergence or disagreement on various issues (e.g., teaching load, service expectations, tenure process). Meeting with junior faculty and/or recent hires, particularly those with common research areas and/or those who may be at similar life stages in terms of work-life balance is often helpful in gathering information about how well their expectations matched reality. Also, junior faculty tend to be more candid about sensitive issues, such as tenure expectations, parental leave policies, and morale. However, these types of questions may be best asked at a second campus visit or after an offer has been made to avoid any potential judgment associated with asking them. If a candidate feels that he or she is not a good fit for a certain position, informing the search committee is appreciated. It is important to consider each institution carefully, though, as candidates are sometimes surprised that a position initially lower on their list increases in stature after the campus visit.

### **It Is a Marathon, Not a Sprint**

A typical campus visit can last up to two full days, plus travel time. Maintaining energy and enthusiasm throughout the visit is extremely important; candidates should take advantage of breaks in the schedule to recharge and to make time for self-care (e.g., exercise, sleep, healthy diet).

The time between the campus visit and an offer will vary across institutions and can be quite long. While on campus, candidates can ask the search committee chair for a sense of the timeline. Following the visit, sending thank-you notes or emails is appropriate and appreciated, but avoid making frequent requests for updates. Current mentors can advise applicants about how and when to follow up if no feedback is received within the timeframe outlined at the visit.

It is not unusual for the entire process, from responding to the advertisement to accepting an offer, to take nine months to a year. The majority of positions are advertised in summer and early fall, with on campus interviews conducted late in the fall and into the winter. Offers are generally made in the spring, with new faculty in place for the beginning of the subsequent academic year.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of the workshop was to present an overview of the process and general advice related to job talks and interviews. Each candidate's experience will be unique. Also, the campus visit is only one step in the process of obtaining an independent research position. Candidates should seek advice from trusted mentors throughout the process, beginning with preparing their curriculum vitae and statements of research and teaching, all the way through negotiating the offer. Most candidates will have three or more interviews before finding the right position. Even visits that do not result in an offer can be useful for meeting potential collaborators and further defining one's own research and career goals. Ultimately, the job talk and interview are just the beginning of an exciting future as an independent investigator in cancer prevention and control.

### **Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest**

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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