

Answering the Last Interview Question

Editor's Note: *Even though this article is focused on the academic world. This advice applies to any industry.*

You've prepared for a phone or Skype interview. You've read about the department, printed copies of course descriptions, and are ready to talk about your teaching, research and engagement with service work. But have you prepared for the interview's final question?

Every search committee is likely to ask, "What questions do you have for us?" Some candidates fail to recognize how vital this question is to their success. In those final moments of the interview, you can make or break your chances of moving forward.

As Karen Kelsky explains, what you ask communicates your priorities and values. The end of the interview gives you the chance to show what you care about and demonstrate how your interests align with the department's.

What Not to Ask

Don't ask anything that implies you are more interested in learning what they can offer you than in continuing to demonstrate what you can offer them. And don't ask anything so general it could apply to any job at all.

Avoid questions such as:

Will I have medical insurance/retirement benefits/tuition reimbursement for myself or my dependents? Most search committee members won't have these answers, and you can probably find this information online.

What is the salary? If a salary range isn't listed in the job posting, the search committee won't have this answer. Wait until a campus visit or final interview to ask and direct this question to an administrator.

I know you're hiring someone for X, but will I be able to do Y? Search committees are looking for someone with genuine interest and investment in the area they're hiring for. A question indicating you hope to use a job to get your foot in a different door shows you aren't a strong candidate.

What do each of you like about working there? The first time a search committee gets this question and goes around the room to answer, we're delighted. The 10th time, we're very, very tired of answering.

Most important, when asked what questions you have, don't ever say, "I don't have any questions" or "I think I've learned everything I need to." Not asking anything tells committees you are: 1) overconfident in your knowledge of the workings of a place and 2) not at all curious to get to know the people who have just spent time getting to know you.

What to Ask

Craft questions that have a dual purpose: gathering information while demonstrating something important about who you are as a candidate.

Question Type 1: Determine how much teaching autonomy faculty have and showcase your flexibility.

Example: *"Since the colleague you hire will be one of several faculty teaching course X, I'd like to know what different approaches to this course look like. I shared earlier that my courses typically involve Y, but I'm ready to adapt to fit your students and departmental needs. What aspects of this course are standardized, and in what ways do faculty take distinct approaches?"*

Earlier in the interview, you'll have been given the chance to talk about your teaching -- but you probably won't hear anything from the committee to tell you if your methods align with department values or campus needs. For example, experiential learning opportunities that require students to purchase event tickets or attend activities on weekends may not be possible on a campus where students have little disposable income and full-time jobs and families.

A question about teaching autonomy lets you signal that your signature methods can be adjusted if needed and gives the committee the chance to indicate what they expect. Plus, you'll demonstrate that you're thinking about how to adjust your work to achieve a good fit with a department.

Question Type 2: Learn about the department's involvement with your areas of expertise and showcase your interest in becoming an engaged member of the campus community.

Example: *"I read on the university website about initiative Z, which connects with my research. Could you tell me about experiences you've had with this initiative and how the department is connected to it?"*

This question shows you've researched the university beyond reading the department's webpage and signals you're thinking about how to engage in service and community events. If the department is involved with initiative Z, the committee has an opportunity to showcase this work, and you'll get to learn about it. If such a relationship doesn't yet exist, the question shows you're a candidate who will pursue one.

Question Type 3: Find out if people actually like their jobs and showcase your desire to get to know your colleagues.

Example: *"I'm curious to know what work toward diversity and inclusion looks like on campus. What committees or initiatives have each of you served on in this vein, and what has your experience been like?"*

Consider what aspect of workplace culture is nonnegotiable for you -- perhaps a focus on student success, access to research support or an inclusive environment -- and make this the place where you ask a committee to go beyond talking points about a department in general to reveal their individual commitments or experiences.

That said, don't assume everyone in the room has a job that looks like the job you are being considered for. If you have access to committee members' names before an interview, research their positions to find out who engages in teaching, research or both. If you don't have access, use phrases like "working with students" instead of "teaching" or "for those of you who do X" to acknowledge your question may not apply to all committee members.

Question Type 4: Gauge the collegiality of a department and showcase how you work as a colleague.

Example: *“Working collaboratively has been a rewarding part of my research and teaching, and I see that [search committee member] has engaged in collaborative work on [a specific publication, course or event where this person collaborated with a campus colleague]. What does teaching or research collaboration look like in the department?”*

A question that asks everyone to weigh in is a good way to demonstrate your interest in committee members as specific people, not interchangeable representatives. Yet interview time constraints mean it isn't reasonable for everyone to share an answer to every question. A question like this one demonstrates the value you place on collaboration, shows you've researched what one instance of collaboration looks like for someone in the room and allows the committee to elaborate on the example you've named or give others.

Offer More -- but Only a Little

If you ask a question, receive an answer and have something more to offer, do so briefly. For example, if you've asked about the relationship between the department and a particular initiative on campus, and committee members have been excited to describe that relationship, you might mention work you've done to foster a similar relationship on your campus. But don't speak for too long or expect a conversation to unfold. Doing so may prevent you from having time to ask another question or strain the time the committee has allotted to your interview.

Prepare at least five to six questions and plan to ask three or four of them -- some of what you plan to ask is likely to be addressed in the interview. Plan the order you'll ask questions in, since time constraints can mean a strong first question and an extended committee response results in no time for further questions. In deciding which question to ask first, consider which one best demonstrates what you value.

The bottom line? Even a strong interview can go south at the end, so use every minute you're offered to showcase your strengths.

Credit: <https://www.insidehighered.com>