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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. The authors would like to express their gratitude to Rob Benedetto, David Cox, Jordan Ellenberg, Erica Flapan, Sharon Garthwaite, Bryna Kra, Steven J. Miller, and Steve Strogatz for numerous thoughtful comments that improved an earlier draft.



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Tips for the Employment Center

Katelynn D. Kochalski

Many people who have been on the academic job market have a story to tell about the Employment Center. What exactly is the Employment Center, and how can you set your best foot forward while you are there?

What Is It?

Before deciding whom to invite for an on-campus visit, many schools conduct preliminary interviews at the Joint Mathematics Meetings, and many of these take place at the Employment Center. If you apply for a position at one of the institutions that does interview at the Employment Center, then most often someone from the hiring committee will contact you, likely by email, to schedule a conversation. Other interviews with potential employers will take place over the phone or Skype. Similar to phone or Skype interviews, these Employment Center interviews usually run between 20 and 30 minutes.

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti1973>

The Employment Center itself is usually located in one of the large rooms at the conference center. It is partitioned into smaller sections: one is designated as the waiting area, while another area, populated by tables and chairs, is where the actual meetings between applicants and representatives from hiring committees take place. The interview room or rooms have an open layout, generally with no dividers between the tables. In particular, your meeting may occur in close proximity to a number of other sessions between people who are talking with representatives from different schools. This of course can be distracting, and it is important to stay focused on your own interview. Stay poised and concentrate on what you have prepared.

Preparing

You may have a number of different interviews in the same day. But remember that every job is different. Make sure to research each institution so you can ask and answer questions thoughtfully. It's a good idea to look for details about the institution you are applying to, their location, and the job ad. Record your findings in a notebook or on flashcards to keep handy and refresh your memory right before the interview. You can learn a lot from their department website. For instance, the college mission statement may help you find a meaningful answer that resonates with both you and the interviewer when asked why you want to work there. Showing that you are knowledgeable about the location, the school, their students, and the type of institution can support the persona you put forward in your application materials so that your narrative is consistent. While schools interviewing at the JMM tend to be more teaching-focused, you should definitely be prepared to answer questions about your research and how you intend to balance your teaching and research responsibilities. But keep in mind that you will likely be talking to people outside your field. Your answers should be tailored to nonexperts.

If you've done your research you've got a lot of information to keep straight, which is an important challenge. Start the research process early. It isn't enough to make the flashcards or write out some facts in a notebook and then forget about it until the day of the interview. Spend additional time preparing and studying the information. Bring your resources along with you when you run errands, and look them over while you wait in line or get your oil changed. If possible, put a bit of a buffer between interviews so you have time to reflect and make notes about each one and can look over your notes about the next institution.

Not all interview questions are designed to showcase you at your best. No matter how difficult the question is to answer, you want to be honest and answer the question that was asked. Use it as an opportunity to show the committee how your unique experiences have helped you grow. For instance, what do you say when an interviewer asks you about a teaching experience that didn't go well and how you overcame it? It's hard to admit to such a thing during

an interview, but remember that no one expects you to be perfect. No matter how good you are in the classroom, there is always room for improvement. What interviewers want to see is that you noticed something went awry and you are thoughtful and intentional about the changes you plan to make as a result. This question and others like it come up frequently. You'll be at an advantage if you've given questions like this some thought beforehand. Check with people in your department, friends who have been through the interview process, or the career center at your institution to see if they have a list of common questions asked by interviewers. Spend time thinking about how you would answer these. You don't want your answers to sound rehearsed, but thinking critically about and reflecting on your teaching and career goals will put you in a better position to handle tough questions that you weren't expecting.

At the end of each interview you will typically be given time to ask questions of the interviewer. This is another opportunity to show interest in the position and to make a positive impression. Have a number of questions ready that are applicable to all jobs, but also try to have at least one question that is specific to the institution at the interview. You may get ideas for specific questions in advance by looking at the website: Do they have an interesting senior seminar? Do they have a club or program you want to work with? Great! Then ask about those to show that you want to get their job, not just a job.

Handling the Psychological Pressure

No matter how much you prepare for specific questions or research each institution, you'll still need to be ready for the emotional stress of interviewing at the JMM. It's a wholly different experience from Skype or phone interviews and it can be exhausting. Try to give yourself space between interviews; take a walk, bring some snacks, and break the process up for yourself so that you can approach each one with renewed focus and energy. Try not to compare yourself to other people on the job market, and avoid asking people how many interviews they have set up. You may find out that someone has 20 interviews and be crushed because you only have 3. No good can come from dwelling on others, so don't let this weigh on you. Who knows, maybe that person applied nationwide whereas you restricted yourself to a certain geographic region or maybe their field had a lot of openings this year. Focus on yourself and treat each interview like that position is your top pick. You may have a rocky interview; that's okay. Learn from it! Did a question you weren't expecting throw you? When you have time, think about how you might answer it differently if asked again. In the moment you want to shake it off and move on. Try not to let the rest of the interview get derailed and, most importantly, don't carry your anxiety into the next interview. It's easier said than done, but remember that each interview is a fresh (and precious) opportunity to show a potential employer why you are a good fit for them.

During and After the Interview

Dress and act professionally. Be confident, be yourself, and be sincere. Preparing for the interview beforehand will let your answers come across as genuine. After the interview, send a thank you email to the people who interviewed you. Be sure to mention something specific from your interview to express your excitement. Share something you are looking forward to learning more about. Hopefully, you'll hear from them again soon inviting you to an on-campus interview. Good luck!



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Credits

Author photo is courtesy of the author.

Embracing the Job Search

Nicola Tarasca

This piece is addressed to those who are currently applying for jobs. The ambitious goal is to instill some positivity while waiting to hear about your job applications. I have started writing this while actually waiting to hear the results of my job search. After all, who could better represent the situation than someone who is currently involved in the search in the first line? So I am writing this piece in the hope that it will cheer me up as well.

With the complexities of the job search gradually unfolding, I found myself learning some lessons that I would like to share here. Securing a new job is no small feat, and I can easily find many reasons to be worried: the uncertainty of the future is daunting! The good news is that most accomplished professionals have walked in these shoes too. So the best we can do is to embrace the process and use our scientific skills to make the most of it.

It is certainly very helpful to discuss your job application with your mentors and senior colleagues. Hearing about past experiences could help to have a better picture of the process: grasp what is sought-after by the hiring managers and search committees, and anticipate questions from

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti1972>