

**Preparing for a First Round Faculty Interview**  
Advice from Prof. Jillian Goldfarb, Cornell University

*Most Faculty Search Committees narrow their applicant pool to 8-12 top candidates to invite for a 30-60 minute Virtual Interview. This is a make-or-break hour for you, and it requires substantial preparation.*

**Goals of the First-Round Interview (Committee’s Perspective)**

1. Narrow the field from 8-12 to 3-4 candidates to invite for full interviews.
2. Understand your alignment with the position and Department and your preparedness for position.
3. Expose any significant, obvious weaknesses or concerns (e.g., inability to communicate orally, lack of fit, disinterest or bad attitude, unpreparedness).

**What do you do if you get an Invitation to a First-Round Virtual Interview?**

- First, do a little celebration dance: your application rose to the top of the pile!
- Second, make sure that you can do the proposed time. What does this mean? You **MUST** be in a quiet location with good internet where you can have your video on continuously. Account for a buffer of the committee running 5-15 minutes late. Do not schedule anything at least 30 min prior to interview so that you can review your notes.
- Ask the person who invited you the following questions:
  - Will they provide questions ahead of time?
  - Who is on the search committee, who will be at the interview?
  - Should you prepare a formal presentation? (30-50% of the time you’ll be asked to prep a 5-10 minute talk to introduce yourself and your work beyond your application).
  - What is the format (see below) of the interview?

**Format of First-Round Virtual Interview**

There are several formats the search committee might use. Here we look at 3 common ones:

<b>Structured Interview</b>	<b>Semi-Structured Interview</b>	<b>Freeform Interview</b>
The committee has a set list of questions; every candidate will be asked the same questions and only these questions. The committee has little time or freedom to ask follow-on questions, so you need to “get” all your critical points into your one answer. This is sometimes considered to be a more equitable and fair approach but can be difficult to execute because of limitations on follow-up questions.	The committee has a list of questions prepared. They’ll ask these questions, but also have time and freedom to ask follow-on questions and explore your answers further.	Less common these days (particularly because of concerns over bias), this is meant to be more of a discussion about your application and candidacy. Be careful: it may seem informal, but that doesn’t mean it carries any less weight!

**What are some Common Questions you’ll be asked, and how do you prepare to answer them?**

**1. Tell us what interests you about this position.**

This sounds like an easy question. Yet so many candidates absolutely bomb it! They are NOT asking for your life story. This question is testing if you are serious about the position. How do you answer it? In 60 seconds or less (yes, you **MUST** be this concise), show the committee how you are aligned with their program and the advertised position. Knit together 1 part of your preparation to date with something specific about the program (a theme of the department’s, a critical need for them), and what you hope to do in the future that aligns with the first two items.

**2. How do you envision starting your research program?**

The committee is not asking you to repeat your Research Statement. This question is really asking: are you ready to hit the ground running? The best answer is a short one that **weaves together** (1) your core research idea; (2) the first grant you’ll go after; (3) the way you’ll mentor your student(s) to start the research; (4) how you will build your program.

### 3. What opportunities do you see for collaboration at \_\_\_\_ Department and \_\_\_\_ Institution?

This question is asking: Did you prepare for OUR interview? Look at every faculty member in the Department and identify 2-3 potential collaborators. Then, identify 1-2 outside the Department. This **MUST BE SPECIFIC**. (You might not discuss all of them but be prepared). Start with the person that is someone you could build a project with on Day 1. Have a specific example of how your collaboration could be mutually beneficial: Prof Z's group does "NAME SPECIFIC" here, which aligns with my idea to "DO THIS" because "EXPLAIN CONNECTION HERE." *The candidate who "wins" this question is the one who clearly and specifically makes connections.* Also: it's really embarrassing if someone asks: "Oh, Prof X in our Department does similar research, how do you think you could collaborate with them?" and you don't know who Prof X is. (See below for hints on how to organize this information.)

### 4. What courses are you interested in teaching?

This requires you to *know the curriculum of the program out* (see below for more). Note: this question can be a *potential trap* in two ways. First, they are NOT asking you to throw a list of 8 courses at them. They really do want to know how you will add value to their Program. If the job add has something specific in it about area, or you notice they are weak in an area from prowling the website, discuss 2 courses you can teach that would fill this gap. Second, *do NOT propose to teach a "special" course that is already being taught.* Most elective courses (especially at an R1) were developed by a specific faculty – and *faculty are territorial* and do not want you encroaching on their turf. You should be prepared to talk (briefly) about a course you would design that is new and compliments the Program. Be prepared to discuss what the course would cover, what level it would be taught at, how you could approach teaching it, and what value it would bring to the program.

### 5. How will you contribute to our learning community/our diversity?

This combined question requires *two answers in one*, and you should make it clear that you are addressing it in two ways. First, you should *talk about your values in terms of being part of a scholarly community* (address strengths of program/institution, be it in terms of research or education or both). Second, you need to address *how you will add to and support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts.* Again, do not regurgitate your DEI statement, but add something focused and new to the discussion.

### 6. What questions do you have for the search committee?

This question is not optional. Over 70% of candidates I've interviewed that say "I have no questions" do not get invited to a campus interview. Why? Because it shows you are unprepared and disinterested. You also need to **avoid transactional questions** (e.g., what does the tenure process look like, how are start-up funds disbursed, how many courses do you teach, etc.). You must *prepare 3-4 questions that show you have learned about the program* and are interested in knowing more, and bonus points if you are able to combine your work and their program. I suggest preparing several different questions (in case one is answered in the interview, or you sense it's a clear priority for them). One question should concern the Program's curriculum, teaching activities or support for new faculty in the classroom. Another should tackle something about research, from forming new collaborations to support for new faculty grant writing, etc. Others should be more specific to the program/school. Be thoughtful.

#### *How do I portray myself as an ideal colleague?*

- **Generate shared enthusiasm.** The committee members will all have read your application, and time is short, so the key is to convey **why your work matters** quickly and graciously.
- Do NOT say anything negative about anyone. **Do not be overly critical of past research** (identifying gaps is okay). Be positive and **keep the focus on you and your work.**
- **Listen to each question** before answering. **Repeat part of the question in your answer.** This serves two purposes: (1) it gives you time to think and ensures you answer the question they ask and (2) it shows the committee that you are engaged in their questions. DO NOT jump straight into a fast-paced answer – show consideration and thought.

- **Be brief** with your answers. Think about how you “tune out” in a Zoom meeting. The goal is to share highlights of who you are and why you are a fit, not to tell them everything. **Talking too quickly** and adding too many details is a recipe for FAILURE. **Be in control of your speech.**

***How and what do I prepare for the first-round interview?***

Here is what I would prepare for every institution at which I interview (assuming you get an on-campus interview, you will expand more on this work) to keep track of my conversations

Program and Institution Faculty Expertise Table

Name of Institution \_\_\_\_\_  
 Program \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Zoom Interview \_\_\_\_\_  
 Interviewers \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty	Department	Research Areas	Recent Publications	Potential Collaboration
*		Specific enough to be able to mention briefly/ have an idea; fill out in more detail for on-campus interview	Skim 1-2 recent publications aligned with your interests to have knowledge	Connect this person’s research to yours using specific examples (when possible)

\* I fill this out for everyone in each department (if it’s < 20 people), if more, I do the 10 most closely related and everyone on the Search Committee (expand to everyone for on-campus interview), then I do at least 3 people outside Department

Program Curriculum

It’s critical that you know what the Program/Department teaches, how the courses progress/feed into one another, and how you could fit within them. Note: I do this only for courses taught in Program.

Course	Year/Prereq	Description Notes	My Ability to Teach	My Expertise
	When does this fall in progression?	What does course do? What is unique about it?	Could I step into this class if needed? What justification supports that claim?	If relevant, what makes me ideal to teach this class?

Introductory Presentation

Even if it’s not requested, I always have a set of about 5 slides prepared (more if I’ve been requested to do something specific) to Introduce myself as a potential colleague, no more than 5 minutes (HARD STOP). If it’s not requested, I am NOT pushy about giving the presentation, but if given the opportunity (e.g., tell us about yourself question), I offer to pull up a few slides. If they say no, don’t push it. Here’s what each of my slides would contain. (Note: I don’t use these titles, they’re just the idea behind the slide!)

**Slide 1:** Overarching motivation. I’m prepared to tell a 30 second story about what motivates me to do my research (in a scientific challenge sense, not a personal sense) with a cool graphic to draw in audience.

**Slide 2:** “Hot of the Press.” Here’s a 30-45 second overview of the coolest, newest research thing I’ve done – hopefully so new it wasn’t even in my application – that I’m going to tell you about that shows (1) how I put my motivation into action in my research and (2) why I’m aligned with your advertised position.

**Slide 3:** Bigger Picture Research. Here’s how I fit that cool result/publication from Slide 2 into the bigger picture of my research (future/proposed research for current grad student/postdoc, current research for an established faculty member).

**Slide 4:** Primed for Future. I’m going to tell people part of my next big idea that comes out of Big Picture so you can see that I’m ready to apply for funding for this and bring it to your school.

**Slide 5:** In the Classroom. What’s a unique approach I have in terms of teaching? Have I published in pedagogy? What do I do to ensure that my students are learning?

\*Note: for teaching-intensive job, I would combine Slides 3 and 4 to make a second slide on Teaching Innovations.