

Faculty Interviews: The Chalk Talk

Advice from Prof. Jillian Goldfarb, Cornell University (and friends...)

*The Chalk Talk is essentially your Application Packet, brought to life. For an R1 university, the balance (70-80% of the talk) is on your **future** research plans. For a teaching-focused institution, you'll want to be creative to integrate your **future** research, teaching, and mentoring efforts.*

The Chalk Talk – a closed meeting with you and the faculty of the Department to which you apply – is a make-or-break hour of your career. You must be laser-focused on your message while fielding interruptions and questions without getting flustered or showing irritation.

*The overarching message of a Chalk Talk: This is **who I WILL be** when I get to your institution. Here's **how I will be successful** in achieving my vision.*

Goals of the Chalk Talk

1. (Echoing my research statement advice): Convince the faculty that you are either:
 - a. ready to launch your independent career with your own ideas (if you are applying to your first job) or
 - b. that you are ready to transition your established independent research program to their institution (if you are looking to move, especially to move up in terms of institution).
2. Demonstrate that you are prepared to wear the multiple hats a professor wears as a researcher, mentor, fundraiser, teacher, member of a scientific community, etc.

The Mistake (Almost) Every First Time Interviewee Makes

You will prepare way too many slides and – unfortunately (and potentially hurting your chances at being hired) – leave the most impactful and important slides for last. Why?

- Because you **incorrectly** think that you need to tell a full story (like a research talk) that focuses first on motivation, then on methods, potential results, then on impact.
- Because you focus on minutia – you don't need to convince everyone that you can physically do what you propose. You need to convince them of your intellectual capabilities, not the step-by-step pathway.

Then you'll try to rush through the last 10 slides in 4 minutes because you prepared too much, couldn't control the room, and now didn't get to deliver your message.

→ So, how do you plan accordingly? (Read on...)

Format, Style and Approach

The Chalk Talk is usually scheduled for 50-75 minutes. **DO NOT** plan to talk for this entire time. Prepare about 20-25 minutes of material. Anticipate (seed) questions within your presentation to invite questions and engagement.

Only Departmental faculty (and search committee members from other Departments) are allowed in the room. Here's what will happen:

1. You will be introduced by the chair of search committee or department chair.
2. You will thank the committee and faculty for being there, and tell them how eager you are to engage in dialogue during this talk ("please stop and interrupt me with questions").
3. You will have ~ 5 minutes to convince everyone they should listen to you – this audience tunes out quickly. Use your first 2 slides to introduce your BIG idea.
4. If you've captured your audience's interest, you will start getting interrupted with questions. Some of these questions might be difficult – the faculty are probing your ideas and who you will be as a colleague. This is what you want to happen – if the room is quiet, you've likely lost your audience's interest.

There is no one prescribed style or approach, but there are few things I've seen over the years that are necessary and not-so-good.

Things you MUST include in your Chalk Talk:

- A vision for your research program. What is the major theme/goal and an example of 1-2 projects that fall into this theme.
- How will you fund your research program? Give us a concrete example of who you will apply to for funding and what that proposal would look like (the proposal's objectives, research questions, hypotheses, overarching method, and potential impact).
- Proof that you are a fit for the institution. Maybe this is how you will develop a collaborative project across the Department, College or Centers by leveraging synergies. Maybe you'll talk about a teaching initiative you read about on campus and how you want to engage in it.
- Your plans "outside of the lab" – even for an R1, you need to go to the Department's website, figure out what courses you could teach and talk about them (this should include both required courses and an elective that you would develop that's not currently offered).

Poor ways to start your Chalk Talk:

- A trite statement like "I am passionate about research" or "My research will save the world." This is about who YOU are as a scientist... be concise and laser focused on YOU.
- Pictures of you and talking about your hobbies, your personal journey, your family. This is a job talk – no one has any right to know about your life, nor (frankly) do they want to at this point in your relationship. Keep it professional.
- Infotainment graphics or animations. Focus quickly on your science and work.
- General background slides to talk about your motivation as a scientist and the world's problems that you want to solve. Go to your research quickly.

The point? Jump right into who you are as a scientist. Forgo the personal anecdotes and pictures.

Haphazard ways to end your Chalk Talk:

- Rush through 10 slides in 4 minutes because you prepared too much, couldn't control the room, and now didn't get to deliver your message.

→ **How do you avoid this? Back-up slides.** I said above that you'll prepare too much. When you're done preparing, move 50% of what you've done – the nitty-gritty details, the lists of courses, the methods – to supplemental slides after the last one in the presentation to reference when you get a question. You'll thank me for this.

Through your Chalk Talk, you should address the following questions/ideas:

1. Who are YOU in the field? What is your **specific overarching motivation and your specific expertise**?
2. **If you are successful** with your research program, **what will you change about the world as we know it today?** How and why?
3. How does your **past work translate to future success**?
 - a. This is where many talks fail– they talk only about past, but forget that past must inform future. I do not talk about past projects specifically, rather I talk about future projects but maybe include a figure from past work that guides my future work.
 - b. How did you approach the problem in the past? No, I don't mean the experiments that you ran, but rather the scientific method that you followed, the hypotheses you tested, the research questions you answered. How do you translate that success to future?
4. What is your **future research agenda**? What will your tenure letter writers say about your work?

5. How does your Research Program align with the Department and Institution's goals? With whom will you collaborate at the school?

Key Things to Keep in Mind as you Craft your Chalk Talk:

- This is about the future. It is prospective, leveraging prior experience to demonstrate you will have future success. **Past work should be <10% of your talk.**
- **Do NOT talk about every project** you imagine – give an idea of where you will start on Day 1, and where you will be in Year 5.
- **Do NOT overwhelm your audience with data.** Have a strong, illustrative figure for each project that gives people a sense of what you want to do. Do not pile on past data (it's old, done), but 1 figure that shows upon what you're building your hypotheses can be powerful.
- **Generate enthusiasm** for your work by discussing **why your work matters.**
- **Use slides sparingly.** The slides here are visual aids to engage people in your ideas. The goal is to have a real conversation. If you find yourself talking AT the audience rather than WITH them, you're in trouble.