Letter from the Editor

Job Talk

Recently, I attended a rather unusual lecture interview. The candidate's exposition was excellent: the general background of the subject was explained for nonspecialists, the history of the specific problem was covered in such a way that the importance of the candidate's own work was made clear, and finally there was enough detail in the statements of results and suggestions of proofs, that the audience could form a reasonable assessment of the candidate as a mathematician. Moreover, although the candidate's first language was not English, the presentation made it clear that the candidate should be an effective instructor. All in all, it was an exemplary lecture interview, better than many, but not differing in presentation from the several hundred or so others I've been to.

What made this one unusual was that the candidate was not an applicant for a job at my institution: this was an interview for a job at an institution ten time zones away. A video camera operator recorded the lecture on DVD for the hiring institution. We in the local audience were there for verisimilitude, or perhaps for moral support.

Maybe interviews via video recording are now routine, but this one was a novelty for me, and it got me to thinking about how such presentations could affect the job application process. Job candidates wouldn't need to wait for invitations to prepare their prerecorded lectures. Indeed, video files could be imbedded in online vitae or in electronic applications. Or perhaps not: with several hundred applicants for the typical job, a massive video file included with each application could overwhelm many department systems. There's also the issue of production values. The single amateur camera operator in the case I witnessed copied the raw footage on DVD, but in principle the candidate could have hired a professional video production company to record from multiple cameras with multiple takes. And then professional editing and special effects could be added. I'm afraid this escalation in production quality would quickly become the expected norm, just as projected TeX slideshows have replaced handwritten slides or chalkboard presentations.

In any event, from my observations of recent job searches, hiring institutions do not expect, and applicants are not submitting, video lecture interviews. I also believe that many job candidates, especially new and recent Ph.D.s, are still routinely contributing ten-minute talks on their work to the Society's annual meeting and inviting potential employers to attend. Such invitations are often included in job application cover letters (including emails). This is a useful practice. As a former department chair, and search committee chair or member, I often tried to attend, or have someone attend, such talks by applicants we were interested in. And one could judge the competition by the other department heads one saw in the audience.

I think it should be simple to make a video of a ten-minute talk—a few long shots to show the speaker, but mostly show the speaker's slides and voice—in fairly low resolution, and post it online at YouTube or a similar service. This is no substitute for actually hearing a ten-minute talk, and no excuse for new Ph.D.'s to skip presenting at AMS meetings, but it seems such a useful supplement that I'm surprised that messages from job applicants don't regularly point to such videos.

It was forty years ago this fall that, as a finishing doctoral student, I sent out my first job applications. In those post-Sputnik pre-Mansfield Amendment days, research opportunities were everyone's expectations. Most of us sought postdoctoral positions (or "named instructorships") at prestigious institutions. Then, as now, lecture interviews were not part of the process. In one case, I was invited to visit and give a talk after the position had been offered but before the acceptance deadline had arrived, a nice gesture and one that helped me decide to go there. If that practice is not typical, it should be.

Another feature shaping job searches then, at least for male U.S. citizens, was the Vietnam War and the draft. Students, including Ph.D. students under the age of 26, were eligible for draft deferments. But these ended upon receipt of the terminal degree (any terminal degree, which is why we didn't take Master's degrees). An accelerated doctoral program, therefore, produced draftable graduates. Teachers, including university teachers in some venues, also received deferments. So pure research postdocs, like those offered by the Institute for Advanced Study, were risky, but postdocs with some teaching, like most of the named instructorships, in the right places, were safe. Students, naturally, were well informed of the intricacies of draft deferments, although faculty usually weren't, so this was one aspect of the job application process where faculty couldn't help much. I believe the situation today regarding visa status for international students is analogous.

Fortunately, in most aspects of the job application process, advice is readily available. An article about the job application process in general appeared in the October 2006, *Notices*. An article specifically about how to give a lecture interview is in preparation and should appear in the *Notices* in early 2009.

—Andy Magid