

SMITH COLLEGE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING AND THE ART OF NETWORKING



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Informational Interviewing: What it is and How it Works (and What it has to do With You!)

An art history major is interested in the “inside scoop” on museum work. An urban studies minor wants to get established in education policy research in order to fine-tune her grad school aspirations. They—and you—have a powerful technique at their finger tips: the informational interview.

Informational interviewing is talking to people about their work and career decisions—among other topics—and hearing their advice on getting started in a field. Through this invaluable process, you can build relationships and often get the names of others to talk to (yes, it’s networking!). This is a great way to learn about careers from the inside out.

It works! Most people enjoy talking about themselves and offering advice. As a bonus, they may tell you about openings in their organization or elsewhere, or even offer to circulate your resume, although you should never request this. Networking is developing relationships, not asking for a job.

The How-to’s of Informational Interviewing

- √ **You may write, email, or phone to arrange an informational interview.** If possible, meet in person and at someone’s workplace. If this is impractical, you can suggest conducting the meeting by phone.
- √ **Research the field, organization, and person you’ll be meeting with before your meeting** so you can ask focused questions. Scour the website of the organization where your contact works—s/he may have a bio there—and use a Google or LexisNexis search to look up press releases, annual reports, and other details on the organization. Solid research demonstrates your initiative and interest in the field.
- √ **Dress appropriately for the field and practice your best professional etiquette.** Stand for introductions, shake hands firmly, and smile. Maintain eye contact and listen attentively. Informational interviews are often short—20-30 minutes to an hour max—so don’t overstay your welcome.
- √ **Through networking, you can find out about practically anything**—housing, graduate and professional schools, reputable temp agencies, or the best restaurant or bookstore around. Effective networking is an important life skill to cultivate.
- √ **Every person you speak to can lead you to others**, expanding your network. By some estimates, nearly 80% of jobs and internships are found this way.
- √ **If you’re uncertain about networking, practice.** With a friend, family member, or CDO advisor. Get into the habit of striking up conversations while traveling, at lectures, or meetings. Create your own networking (aka business) card and ask people you meet for theirs.
- √ **Be ready at all times with a brief personal introduction.** For a conference: “Hello, my name is Dana Brown, and I’m a Smith College junior majoring in government and biology. I’m interested in how government regulations affect health care issues such as stem cell research. I’d like to hear about your experience as a policy maker in Washington.” Adapt your introduction to the setting.

Potential networking contacts are everywhere. Some possibilities:

- **Alumnae contacts** are in E-Access (“Mentors”) and in our library. Alums may use the Alumnae Association database.
- **Professional association meetings and conferences** are excellent networking venues. Use a search engine, field-specific resources, or the *Encyclopedia of Associations* in Neilson to locate them.
- **Former supervisors and internship sponsors** may be willing to suggest contacts in their field.
- **Faculty members** often have connections beyond Smith. Discuss your search with them.
- **Have you attended a lecture or read an article by someone whose work you admire?** Contact the person for further information.

- **Tell family, friends, other students, and acquaintances about your career interests.** Tap into their networks and share your own.
- **You can contact any organization that interests you to arrange an informational interview,** even if there are no alum or other connections. Write to the person who heads your specific interest area. The more well-researched your letter, the more it may persuade the recipient to meet with you.

Informational Interview Questions

Add more focused questions to these general ones based on your background research:

- Can you describe a typical day or week? Does your work change during the year?
- What do you like best about your job and/or your field? Least?
- How did you learn how to do your work? On the job? At a previous job? Through formal training? If you were starting out in your field now, would you train in the same way?
- What makes someone successful in your work? (Listen carefully for the skill words in their answers. You'll need those terms for your resume.)
- As you look back, is there anything you wish you'd known or that you would do differently?
- Do people in your field belong to professional associations or organizations? Is there a local chapter? Do you think it would make sense for me to attend a meeting?
- How do you keep current in your field? What should I be reading?
- What advice do you have for someone starting out?
- Do you have any job search strategies you'd like to share with me?
- Can you suggest one or two other people I might contact? May I use your name if I contact them, just to explain how I got their name?

During an in-person meeting, observe the following:

- How are people dressed (formally, informally, uniformly)?
- How diverse is the work setting (age, gender, ethnicity, race)?
- How do the staff members address each other? Is there a hierarchy?
- Is the atmosphere calm? Stressful? Fast-paced?
- How were you treated when you arrived?
- Do people appear to enjoy working there?
- Do your contacts talk with you freely or did they seem restricted?
- Was your session interrupted by phone calls or employees?
- Are the employees working in offices or cubicles or open spaces?
- What is the noise level? How is the lighting?
- What equipment do you see? Who is using it?

After Your Informational Interview

- ✓ **Think about what you saw and how you felt in the work setting.** Can you see yourself working there? Why or why not?
- ✓ **Write a thank you note within two days of your meeting.** Comment on how the meeting expanded your knowledge of the field or cite the follow-up steps you plan to take. For a meeting with an alum, a handwritten note on a Smith note card is a nice touch; for others, you may prefer an email or word-processed note.
- ✓ **Keep a record of your networking activities**—when your conversations took place, suggestions the contacts made, the dates you mailed your thank you notes, and any follow-up steps you took. If there's any information you can provide to your contact that might be helpful, do so.
- ✓ **Maintain your networking relationships** by emailing or phoning periodically, especially if you have good news to share. Networking is a skill for life. Learn and enjoy!

SAMPLE ALUMNAE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW EMAIL

Subject line: Smith student seeking your career advice

Dear Ms. Gould:

I obtained your name from the Smith College Career Development Office alumnae database, and I am writing because I am in the process of exploring museum careers. I am interested in your work as a curator in the National Gallery of Art East Asian Art Department, and I would enjoy meeting with you for a brief informational interview to discuss your experience in the field, your time permitting.

I am an art history major minoring in East Asian studies. This past summer, I interned at the Flynt Center of Early New England Art in Deerfield, Massachusetts, where I assisted with publicity for the September, 2006, exhibition, "The Canton Connection: A Symposium on the Decorative Arts of the China Trade." I am interested in learning more about the curatorial aspect of museum work, given my strong interest in research. I have attached my resume to provide you with more information on my background.

I will be in the DC area March 19-23, and I would welcome your thoughts and perspective on the museum field. Thank you in advance for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Allison Klein '07
413-555-1212

SAMPLE THANK YOU EMAIL FOR ALUMNAE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Subject line: Thank you for meeting with me yesterday

Dear Ms. Gould:

It was a pleasure to talk with you yesterday and hear about your career in the museum world. Now that I know how busy your days are as a curator, I appreciate even more the time you so generously spent with me.

Hearing about your path to a curatorial position at a major museum has inspired me to research the graduate programs you recommended. I am also eager to learn more about the museum studies programs you suggested and investigate the one-year museum internships that would serve as a prelude to further study.

A highlight of the visit was the tour you gave me of the new exhibition on Chinese landscapes. The monumental "Summer Mountains" was without a doubt my favorite, as I have recently studied the Yan idiom.

Thank you again for giving your time and advice so graciously. I will keep in touch with you and update you on my search and relocation plans.

Sincerely,
Allison Klein '07
413-555-1212

SAMPLE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW REQUEST LETTER (NON-ALUM)

Smith College, Box 0000
Northampton, MA 01063
413-585-0000
mvisnan@smith.edu

December 15, 2006

Janiqua Denzel-Lopez
Research Director, Education Division
Urban Issues
6793 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 426
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Ms. Denzel-Lopez:

I am a senior government major at Smith College conducting thesis research on the budget crisis in inner city schools. Your policy briefs are proving very helpful in my research, in particular your July, 2006, paper on the Chicago public school system. A graduate of the Chicago schools, I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you when I am on break this January, your time permitting. I am especially interested in your views on Mayor Daley's latest "Modern Schools Across Chicago" initiative.

I see from your online bio that you received a Master's in Public Policy and Urban Planning from the Kennedy School for Government. I am considering applying to the MPP/UP program after working in the field for two or three years, and am also looking at the KSG Master's in Public Administration program. I would welcome your comments on the public policy/urban planning versus the public administration track, given your experience in the policy field.

As an urban studies minor, I have taken courses in government, economics, history, and education and have studied the processes and problems of inner city schools from a variety of perspectives. I want to begin my career in the not-for-profit sector upon graduation this May, and I would also appreciate any advice you might offer about gaining experience in the field in preparation for grad school. I have enclosed a resume to give you more information about my background.

I will be in Washington from January 8 - 26, and I will contact you next week to see if we can arrange a convenient time to meet. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
Meera Visnan

Meera Visnan

Enclosure: Resume