

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

An art history major is interested in a career as a museum curator. An urban studies minor wants to learn about education policy research to clarify grad school plans. Informational interviewing may be the answer.

**Informational interviewing is talking to people about their work and career path** and hearing their advice on getting started in a field. It's a great way to learn about careers and begin to build a network.

**It works! Most people enjoy talking about themselves and offering advice.** They may tell you about openings in their organization or offer to circulate your resume, although you should never request this. Informational interviewing centers on learning about someone's experience, not asking for a job.

**Smith alums willing to offer advice and information about their careers** are listed in AlumNet binders at the CDO. Alums are often very willing to offer advice to Smith students and hear the latest campus news.

**You can contact any organization that interests you to arrange an informational interview**, even if there are no alums working there. Write to the person by name who heads your *specific* interest area. The more well-researched your letter, the more it may persuade the recipient to meet with you.

## Arranging and Preparing for an Informational Interview

√ **Email, write, or phone to set up an informational interview.** If possible, meet in person and at someone's workplace. If this is impractical, suggest speaking by phone.

√ **Research the field, organization, and person you'll be speaking with beforehand** so you can ask focused questions. Review the website of the organization where your contact works—s/he may have a bio there—and use Google or LexisNexis 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 observe professional etiquette.** Stand for introductions, shake hands firmly, and smile. Maintain eye contact and listen attentively. Informational interviews are often 20-30 minutes to an hour max, so don't overstay your welcome. Always send a thank you note afterward.

## Informational Interview Questions

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

- Can you describe a typical day or week?
- What do you like most about your job and/or your field? Least?
- How did you learn how to do your work? If you were starting out now, would you train in the same way?
- What makes someone successful in your field?
- How would you describe the culture at your organization?
- As you look back, is there anything you wish you'd known or that you would do differently?
- What are your field's key professional associations?
- 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 or internship search strategies to share with me?
- Can you suggest one or two other people I might contact? May I use your name when I contact them?

**During your meeting observe the work setting and interactions between co-workers.** Do they seem to be engaged and enjoying their work and co-workers? How diverse is the staff? What is the organization's culture like? How were you treated when you arrived? Can you see yourself working there?

## **Developing a Network**

**Networking is an ongoing process of building relationships and staying in touch with those you've met**, during informational interviews and other venues. Networking is not about asking for a job or internship, in fact, it's best to begin networking before you're actually in the market for an opportunity.

### **Potential networking connections may be found through:**

- Professional association meetings/conferences.
- Former supervisors and internship sponsors.
- Alumnae campus events, Smith Clubs in your hometown or wherever you'd like to relocate.
- Faculty members, whether or not you've had them for a course.
- Lectures you've attended, books or articles you've read.
- Family, friends, other students, and acquaintances. Tap into their networks and share your own.

√ **Be ready at all times with a brief personal introduction.** This might include your name, school, major, minor, and a concise summary of your interests. Adapt your introduction to the setting.

√ **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.

√ **If you're uncertain about networking, practice!** With a friend, family member, or CDO advisor. Get into the habit of initiating conversations at lectures, meetings, conferences, or while traveling. Create your own networking (aka business) card and ask people you meet for theirs.

√ **Every person you speak to can lead you to others**, expanding your network. By some estimates, nearly 80% of jobs and internships are found through networking.

## **After Your Informational Interview or Networking Meeting**

√ **Write a thank you note within two days.** Mention how the conversation 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 to send a thank you email.

√ **Keep track of your informational interviews and 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. For example, send a link to an interesting news article or notice of a conference that may appeal to your contact. Keep your networking connections updated on your progress. 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, 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 Department of Decorative Arts, and I would enjoy meeting with you for a brief informational interview to discuss your experience in the field and hear your advice on choosing graduate programs.

I see from your online bio that you attended the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture before getting your PhD from Boston University in the American and New England Studies Program. As an art history major minoring in American studies, your background is especially interesting to me given my research experience at Smith and this past summer at the Flynt Center of Early New England Art in Deerfield, Massachusetts, where I assisted with an exhibition on the material culture of literacy. I have attached my resume to give you more information about my background.

I will be in the DC area January 5-9 and 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 '11  
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 learn 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 PhD programs you recommended. I am excited to look into the museum studies certificate programs and the one-year museum fellowships you suggested to help me gain more experience in the field before deciding on further study.

It was wonderful to have the opportunity to go behind the scenes in the Department of Decorative Arts and to meet your associate director. With the peek we took at the new Early American furniture exhibition, the visit was unforgettable.

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 '11  
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, 2009

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, 2009 paper on the Chicago public school system. As graduate of the Chicago schools, I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you when I am on break this January. I am especially interested in your views on Mayor Daley's "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 for two or three years, and I am considering 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 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 policy field. I have enclosed a resume to give you more information about my background.

I will be in Washington from January 4 - 22, 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,

← **Note: If postal mailing, sign here in dark ink. For email, double space before name.**

Meera Visnan