

Informational Interviewing and the Art of Networking

- What is Informational Interviewing?
- Arranging and Preparing for an Informational Interview
- Good Questions to Ask
- Developing a Network
- After Your Informational Interview
- Informational Interview Request: Sample Email
- Thank You / Follow Up: Sample Email



Smith College Lazarus Center for Career Development

www.smith.edu/lazaruscenter

413-585-2582

lazarus@smith.edu

What is Informational Interviewing?

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 to begin building a network.

It is not intrusive: people often enjoy talking about themselves, offering advice, and being helpful. They may tell you about openings in their organization or offer to circulate your resume. Informational interviewing centers on learning about someone's experience, not asking for a job.

Smith alumnae with whom to connect are listed in the [Office of Alumnae Relations](#) online community, can be found on [LinkedIn](#), or may be recommended by faculty. Alumnae usually enjoy offering advice to Smithies and hearing the latest campus news. **You can contact any organization that interests you to arrange an informational interview**, even if there are no alumnae 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 speak 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 or Skype.

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 search for her/him on LinkedIn. Use Google or LexisNexis to look up press releases, annual reports, and other details on the organization. Research demonstrates 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.

Good Questions to Ask

- Can you describe a typical week? What do you like most about your job and/or your field?
- 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 groups? How do you keep current? 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?

It is never appropriate to contact alumnae to ask for a job, internship, housing, or funding.

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 maintaining relationships with those you've met during informational interviews and other venues. Networking is not about asking for a job or internship. 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.
- Social networking websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

Be ready at all times to give a brief personal introduction. This might include your name, school, field(s) of study 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, and more.

If you're uncertain about networking, practice! With a friend, family member, or career 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.

When making networking connections online, always use a professional tone and language style in your communications. Make sure your online profile is free of inappropriate content or photos.

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

After an Informational Interview

Send a thank you note by the end of the following day. 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 alumna, a handwritten note on a Smith note card may be appropriate; 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!

Informational Interview Request: Sample Email

Subject line: Smith student seeking your career advice

Dear Ms. Gould:

I found your name in Smith College's online alumnae directory and am very interested in learning about your work as a curator at the National Gallery of Art. Might you be available for an information interview some time during the week of January 6-10? I will be in the DC area those dates and would love to meet with you at your convenience to hear your advice about getting started in the museum field.

Your graduate work in American material culture at Winterthur and Boston University is especially interesting to me because I am majoring in American Studies and assisted with an exhibition on the material culture of literacy last summer at Historic Deerfield.

I look forward to hearing from you, and I hope to see you in January.

Sincerely,
Allison Klein '17
413-555-1212

Thank You / Follow Up: Sample Email

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. Given how busy your days are, I appreciate even more the time you so graciously spent with me.

Hearing how you got from Smith to a curatorial position at a major museum has inspired me to research the museum studies and PhD programs you recommended. I appreciate your advice on the value of gaining experience in the museum field before deciding on further study.

It was very exciting to go behind the scenes in the Department of Decorative Arts and to meet your associate curator. Viewing the Early American furniture exhibition before it opens made for an unforgettable visit.

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

Sincerely,
Allison Klein '17
413-555-1212

Informational Interview Request: Sample Email

Subject line: Smith College student researching urban schools

Dear Ms. Denzel-Lopez:

I am a senior government major at Smith College writing to see if I could meet with you briefly during my January break for an informational interview. I have found your policy briefs very helpful for my senior thesis research on the budget crisis in inner city schools, especially your July 2013 paper on the Chicago system. As a graduate of the Chicago schools, I'm interested in your views on the Mayor's "Modern Schools Across Chicago" initiative and your perspective as Research Director for the Education Division of Urban Issues.

As an urban studies minor, I've taken courses in government, economics, history, and education and studied the problems of inner city schools from different perspectives. I want to begin my career in public policy after Smith and would appreciate your advice on gaining related experience before graduate school. I notice you earned your master's from the Harvard Kennedy School, a program that is very interesting to me. I've attached a resume to give you more information about my background.

I will be in Washington from January 6-24, and would be happy to meet with you at your convenience. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Meera Visnan
Smith College
Class of 2016