INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

CDC CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER

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MACALESTER
How to Use this Guide
Informational interviewing is a brief discussion—not an actual job interview—with someone who works in a field or career that interests you. One specific tool within the skill of networking, informational interviews are intentional, qualitative research opportunities. This guide outlines how to prepare, execute and follow-up successfully in informational interviews.

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW?
Informational interviews are conversations lasting from 20 to 45 minutes and facilitate learning and relationship-building. You may request to interview someone that holds a job that appeals to you; alternatively, seek out someone who hires or supervises a position you would like to have. Regardless of who you choose to interview, be clear from the beginning that you are looking to gather advice information. Do not ask for a job.

HOW CAN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS BE HELPFUL?
Informational interviews give you the opportunity to:
- Access current and candid career information
- Learn about the kinds of positions available in the career field
- Build and strengthen your professional relationships
- Gain valuable networking and interviewing experience
- Explore careers and clarify your career goals
- Learn about potential employment opportunities that are not advertised
- Identify your professional strengths and weaknesses

WHO DO YOU ASK FOR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?

Family and Friends: Students often underestimate their existing network. Consider asking friends to interview members of their immediate and/or extended family.

Professors: Faculty can offer diverse information including specific disciplines they have encountered through research or outside interests.

Guest Speakers: By volunteering to speak in class, they’ve already expressed interest in students.

Supervisors & Colleagues: Current or prior supervisors and colleagues have a unique sense of your skills, work habits, and interests. They can be an invaluable resource for connecting you with others.

Professionals in Your Field of Interest: Through networking, obtain a personal introduction via existing contacts, or asking directly without an introduction.

Macalester Alumni: Alumni are truly excited to help students reach their personal and professional goals. Consult the “Connecting with Alumni” section for resources that are useful for identifying and meeting alumni.

Macalester Families: Many families give back to the Macalester community through volunteer work with the Career Development Center. Check out the “Connecting with Mac Families” section on our website for more information.
STEP 1. PREPARE FOR YOUR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW

Self-Assessment. Know what skills you have to offer, what your interests are, and possible career fields you would like to pursue. Utilize the CDC’s Job Search Skills Guide for assistance. Before getting started, consider the following questions:

- Can you concretely describe your interests and career goals?
- What are your personal and work values?
- What transferrable experiences and skills do you bring to this field?

Preparation. Though you won’t be seeking a job, prepare for a networking interview in the same way you would an actual job interview.

*Update your resume.* Sending your resume with an informational interview request helps the interviewee get a sense of how your interests and experiences could fit into his/her field. It also demonstrates your level of professionalism. Even if you don’t consider your resume impressive, be sure it’s free of errors.

*Create and practice an elevator speech.* An elevator speech is a short statement that describes your experiences and interests to a stranger the time of an elevator ride. Using the questions below, come up with a 10-20 second statement about yourself. Speak succinctly about your talents, skills, and goals. Specific points you could address:

- What is your desired goal?
- What strengths and skills do you want to use?
- What kind of people do you want to serve? Work with?
- What inspires you?

STEP 2: FIND CONTACTS FOR INFORMATIONALS INTERVIEWS

Connecting with Alumni

Connecting with alumni is one of the best ways to explore the wide variety of careers students pursue after graduation. This list compiles many of the resources available for contacting alumni, both through the CDC and other departments. *The CDC recommends using multiple methods to maximize your search.* For example, you may begin by submitting an Alumni Information Request. Before contacting any alumni on the list, you can verify that the information is up-to-date by searching for their LinkedIn profile.

CDC Resources to Connect with Alumni

*Alumni Information Requests.* Using the Alumni Information Request Form available on our website, students can search for alumni contacts by Macalester major, graduate school major, geographic location, graduate school, organization, and/or occupation. Contact the Career Development Center to submit the form.

*Macalester Career Connection (MC2) on LinkedIn:* MC2 (accessible via http://linkd.in/rmzYQn) is the Career Development Center’s LinkedIn presence, which provides a direct forum for alumni job postings, career discussion, and development-related articles. We encourage students to post questions and contribute to the dialogue!
Networking Events: Throughout the year, the Career Development Center offers a variety of networking events that introduce students and alumni. In general, they fall under one of the following categories:

Students/Alumni Connect: The goal of Students/Alumni Connect events is to encourage direct conversation between students and alumni. During these events, you are sure to meet impressive people! They can be organized as large “mix and mingle” events, small lunches, or anything in between.

Alumni Panels: Alumni panels gather alumni working in a particular field or who share a particular background—for example, recent graduates—to discuss their career paths. They are generally presentations—conducted in person or via Skype—that include a question-and-answer session for students.

MacConnect: CDC-facilitated trips for juniors and seniors to other cities including Washington D.C. and San Francisco to meet with alumni for informational interviews, shadowing opportunities and networking events. Occur annually with application process occurring in early winter.

Bus Out of the Bubble: Join CDC staff to visit alumni at work in the Twin Cities. In the past, counselors have led trips to Minnesota Public Radio and the Mayo Clinic Medical School and Transplant Center. These outings provide excellent insights about “life after Mac” through interactive tours.

Campus Resources

Department Resources: Your department coordinator and professors will often be the best source for directly connecting to alumni that work in your field of interest. The alumni section of your department’s website generally provides a list of several students and their recent endeavors. Ask your department coordinators if they have alumni’s contact information on file.

Additionally, some departments facilitate student-alumni interaction through networking events or other activities. Departments often have a Facebook group or other social media presence where students and alumni can introduce one another and share opportunities.

Campus Networking Groups: A variety of campus groups exist to promote awareness and student-alumni connections. Among these, the Macalester College Public Policy Group, Macalester Queer Professionals Network and Macalester Legal Professionals all maintain active presence on campus, in the community, and online via Facebook and/or LinkedIn.

LinkedIn Communities: LinkedIn is often the best way to find up-to-date information on the activities of alumni and make professional connections. Many campus groups have a LinkedIn presence, including Macalester College Public Policy. Other field-specific groups, such as Macalester College Finance Alumni, are also valuable resources.

While the two previously mentioned networks constitute their own groups, some organizations are listed as subgroups of the umbrella group Macalester College. These subgroups include MC2, the Macalester Legal Network, and Macalester Sustainability Network. To gain access to alumni members in these fields, you must first be part of the Macalester College group.
**MacDirect:** MacDirect is an online community for Macalester's alumni. Students can register beginning their junior year and search over 25,000 alumni profiles, post photos, write class notes, comment on other people's activities, and more.

**Alumni Chapters and Groups:** Connect with alumni across the globe by joining one of the many location- or interest-based alumni groups. Check a chapter's Facebook group to research active participants. You can also join one of the many active Alumni Networks—the Alumni of Color Collective, Ambassadors for Friendship Network, Scots Pride, or Young Macalester Alumni Connect—to find alumni that share your interests and experiences.

**STEP 3. ARRANGE AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW.**
Once you have identified a contact, and done some background research on your potential interview, use the following guidelines to write your e-mail.

- Introduce yourself using elements of your elevator speech.
- Explain why you are writing to this particular person.
- If you've been given permission, state who suggested you talk to him/her.
- Clearly explain that you would like advice and information.
- Continue the letter with an explanation of your current situation and what you would ideally like him/her to do. For example, if you're applying for a position with his/her company, describe where you are in the process and that you hope he/she could provide you advice on your resume and interviewing skills, as well as information about his/her position and organization.
- Demonstrate your willingness to accommodate his/her schedule, location preference, etc. Request a brief meeting and be flexible. Meeting at their office is usually convenient for them and useful for you.

**SAMPLE EMAIL:**

Dear Ms. Constant,
Greetings from Macalester! Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Sam Riley, a rising Macalester senior studying Environmental Science and Philosophy. Professor Cross recommended that I might get in touch with you to learn more about your work at Cairn Research & Design, and the broader fields of landscape design, architecture and sustainable design. I am clarifying my interests in these fields, and plan to apply to summer internships in the field of landscape design. Would you be free to briefly confer for an informational interview? I appreciate you're quite busy. If you’d have 15-30 minutes to briefly confer, I’d greatly appreciate your time. Depending on your preference, we could meet in person, or via phone/skype. I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks for your time.
Regards,
Sam Riley
DURING THE INTERVIEW

Do your best to make the interview a conversation that flows naturally. Begin by asking questions that are open-ended but specific. “Please tell me about your industry” is vague; “what do you like about working in your industry” gives the interviewee more information about what aspect of his work interests you.

Sample Questions for an Informational Interview

- How did you get into this area of work?
- What is your background and training?
- How much of your background relates to your present job?
- What are your main duties and responsibilities?
- What is a typical day like for you?
- What characteristics and skills are needed to effectively do your job?
- What qualifications are needed for entrance into the field?
- Are there alternative methods to gain entrance into the field?
- What do you enjoy most/least about your job/career/area?
- What is the future of the field in terms of expanding opportunities?
- What would be your advice for searching for a job in this field?
- What kinds of advancement opportunities are available?
- Does your career field offer job security?
- Are there other organizations or people that you suggest I contact?

ESSENTIAL TIPS:

No hidden agendas. An “I don’t want information; I really just want to ask for a job” attitude is inappropriate. Do not take advantage of contact people or put them on the defensive by asking for a job when you said you wanted information. However, do ask for additional networking leads and for information about openings in other companies.

Dress appropriately. Make a positive first impression by dressing to match the location of the interview and position of the interviewee. Wearing at least business casual attire demonstrates that you’re taking the meeting and your professional life seriously.

Thank them. No later than 1-2 days following the informational interview, send a personalized thank you via email or a personal card.

Follow up on any leads. If your contact suggests that you contact other people or organizations, follow up. If you have a rewarding experience, send a brief e-mail to your original contact to update them on your progress.

Stay in touch. If the informational interview yields an offer to stay in touch, do so every so often. Timing of how often you stay in touch is very subjective. You do not want to be perceived as contacting them too frequently. If you wait too long, you risk them forgetting the interview.
Notes:

Next Steps:

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All guides are available for download on the CDC Web site.

Need help? Questions?
• Scheduled 30- or 60-min. appointments
• Drop-in Appts: M-F: 2-4pm
• Appointments in person, phone & Skype.

Connect with CDC

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