



How to Prepare for the College Interview

The interview is but one step in the college matchmaking process. It provides a first-hand opportunity to meet with an admissions officer on a college campus or with a campus alumnus near your home. From the admissions perspective, the interview is seen against the background of the entire application and can either confirm or contradict the student profile that is presented in the rest of the application.

Overview

- Few schools require interviews; most have replaced them with group information sessions. Those that do require interviews tend to be the very competitive colleges.
- For some colleges the interview is strictly informational, whereas for others it is used in making admission decisions.
- Some schools require interviews and suggest that if you live within 200 miles of the college you should make the effort to arrange an interview. If you are distant from the college, you may be able to arrange an interview with an alumnus who lives near you, or a phone interview with an admission officer.
- Even if an interview is not required, you may be able to arrange an interview if you:
 - Feel that your application needs a personal explanation of your academic strengths;
 - Want an opportunity to convince them that you are a good fit; or
 - Want to confirm for yourself that the college is right for you.
- If it is an option, an interview is strongly recommended by competitive colleges, to demonstrate your interest in the college. The most competitive schools are looking for intellectual curiosity and something unique about you. They want to:
 - See preparation, maturity, self-confidence, enthusiasm, honesty, and sincerity; and
 - Hear clear and thoughtful questions and answers.
- Contact the colleges that interest you during spring of junior year to determine best dates to visit, and to make an appointment for an interview, if applicable. Give the admissions office at least 6 weeks' notice before you visit. You may call or write the college or, in some cases, sign up online for a tour and/ or interview. If you are planning an on-campus interview, schedule it when school is in session to get the best sense of what the school is like.
- Practice your interview technique in a role-play, then at colleges that are far down on your list. The goal is to be prepared, but not so thoroughly prepared that the interview appears to be canned. Do enough preparation to boost your confidence, then go forth and be yourself.
- And if you feel that your interview did not go well? Rarely are admission chances ruined as a result of an awkward or uncomfortable interview, so do not despair.

Types of Interviews

On campus, one-on-one interview:

- An on-campus session will be the most predictable of the one-on-one interviews, and you can expect the admissions officer to be professional.
- The procedure may be more formal and less like a conversation. Typically, it may last 30 to 60 minutes.
- Plan a campus interview if you need more convincing evidence to decide if this is the school for you.

Off campus, one-on-one interview:

- A local alumnus often conducts these. Frequently they occur during winter break and

are conducted at the home of the alumnus, at a coffee shop, or on the Fairview campus.

- They tend to be more relaxed and may run longer. It is not unusual for the interview to last 1 ½ to 2 hours.
- If it has been many years since the alumnus graduated from the campus, s/he may not be able to paint the most current picture of the college. Occasionally, an alumnus does a lot of talking about his/her experience on campus and you may feel that you were not able to give any information about yourself. In extreme cases, you may call the admissions office and ask for another interviewer but talk the situation over with your counselor before contacting the college.

Group interview or informational meeting:

- An admission officer or a current student may conduct these, when they are on-campus.
- A representative of the college may come to your high school.
- This is an opportunity for you to ask questions that go beyond the material in the college view book.

On Campus meeting with a professor:

- This is an opportunity for you to show your interest and talent, and get a sense of a particular department at a college.

Preparing for the Interview

There are three general areas of the interview for which you can prepare. If you are preparing for a one-on-one interview, all three areas are applicable. If, however, you are preparing for a group interview or informational meeting, it may well be that only the first area is applicable.

- Knowledge of the school
 - Read the college literature; then prepare some questions of your own that demonstrate knowledge of the school and, in particular, programs in your area(s) of interest.
 - Be sure that your questions are not answered in the college's literature.
 - See "Questions You Might Ask," below.
 - Come armed with at least one or two good questions.
- Knowledge of yourself
 - Know your strengths but also know your weaknesses. Give some thought to your personal areas of interest. What are your passions?
 - Consider how, in thirty minutes to an hour, you can communicate that you are unique, interesting, and a good fit for their college.
- Anticipation of questions
 - Rehearse answering tough questions that might come up. (See "Questions you may be asked," below).
 - Since it is not what you say but what the other person hears, hold mock interviews so that you can improve how you communicate.
 - Do not memorize potential answers on a word-for-word basis; do plan what you wish to convey generally so that you are prepared, but sound natural, not rehearsed and not robotic.
 - Remember, you can't have a passionate answer for every question.

TIP - Practice your interview technique in a role-play with a counselor, close friend, older sibling or parent, then at the colleges that are far down on your list. Avoid slang and "you know," "um," and "like." The mock interview is great for catching these habits, as well as for helping you avoid any primate grooming behaviors. This is also a good time to practice a solid handshake – not too mushy and not too crushing- and good eye contact. Throughout your preparation, ask yourself how you would like your interviewer to remember you.

Day of the Interview

- Get a good night's rest and start with a healthy meal.
- Take a notebook, a pen, and your questions. Taking notes is okay.
- Have copies of your grades, SAT and/or ACT scores, and a list of extra-curricular activities. (Many interviewers do not require this, but if you are unsure, bring them along just in case.)
- Even though your parents or other family members should not accompany you into the interview, they can give reactions and provide insights from walking around the campus with you. It is wise to consider their opinions since they most likely have your best interests at heart.
- Make sure you know how to get to your appointment location and where to park.
- Arrive early enough to give yourself time to check-in and compose yourself.
- Wear comfortable but nice clothing -- nothing distracting.
- Nervousness is entirely normal, and the person on the other side of the desk wants to put you at ease. Think of the interview as a friendly conversation, not an interrogation.

During the Interview

- Turn off your cell phone! Give the interviewer your undivided attention.
- When introduced, remember to make direct eye contact and offer a firm handshake. Say something like: "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Smith. Thank you for taking the time to meet me."
- Try to establish a bond and try to enjoy yourself. Smile.
- Wait for the cue from the interviewer as to whether s/he will begin or if you will be expected to start.
- Be yourself. Let your true interests and passion shine through.
- Be honest if you do not know the answer to a question and do not be afraid to ask for clarification.
- Be genuine and let your personality come out. Let your sense of humor show, but avoid sarcasm.
- You do not have to do all the talking, but be prepared to talk more than you listen.
- Demonstrate sincere interest in the school you are visiting.

TIP – If the interviewer asks you a rather standard question, show your skill in moving the conversation toward something that is meaningful to you.

Questions You May Be Asked

School Category:

- What are your academic interests, courses you have enjoyed most, courses you found most difficult?
- Are your academic records an accurate reflection of your ability and potential?
- Are there any outside circumstances that have interfered with your academic performance such as home responsibilities, illness, language issues, or course scheduling problems?
- What would you add to life at this college? What is the most significant contribution you have made to your school or community?
- What did you like/dislike about high school and what did you get out of it?
- What is the most important thing that you learned in high school?

Activities, Interests and College Selection Category:

- What books (newspapers, magazines) have you read lately that were not required? (This is a great opportunity for you to talk about something you are passionate about.)
- What factors do you think will be most important to you for your college selection?
- What living person would you like to talk to and why?
- In your free time, is there anything you would consider to be independent research?

- What are your most important activities and why are they valuable?
- If you woke up one day and had nothing you had to do, how would you spend that day?
- After a long hard day, what do you enjoy doing most?
- How did you spend your summer?

Personality and Relationships Category:

- How would someone who knows you well describe you?
- What are your finest qualities and your conspicuous shortcomings?
- Describe the groups in your school. Which ones do you feel you belong to?
- What kind of people do you associate with and admire?
- What do you expect of your peers in college?
- How do you respond to competition and pressure?
- How do you react to failure, disappointment, or criticism?
- How do you feel about making choices and decisions for yourself?
- What are the best decisions you have made recently?
- How much do you rely on direction, guidance, and advice from others?
- Have you ever chosen something because it was new or interesting?

The World Around You Category:

- How would you feel about being in a college community with people who are very different from you?
- How has your environment influenced your way of thinking?
- How have your interests and abilities been acknowledged by your school and home?
- What do your parents and friends expect of you? How have their expectations influenced the goals and standards you set for yourself?
- What has been the most controversial issue in your school community?
- What distresses you most about the world around you? Assuming the obligation and opportunity to change the world, where would you start?
- How do you feel about: nuclear power, the Iraq war, the use of drugs and alcohol, gun control?

Questions You Might Ask

- By asking questions you are trying to accomplish three things:
 - Demonstrate interest.
 - Show initiative and maturity by taking partial responsibility for the conversation.
 - Obtain answers that will help you decide if this is the school for you.

TIP - A solid format for framing the question is: make a statement about your interest ("Art is a very strong interest of mine"), add the relevant facts based on your knowledge of the school ("...and I read about the extensive art history courses you offer"), and end with your question ("Can you tell me more about the extracurricular field work that would be available to me?").

Sample Questions to Ask (If the Answers are NOT in the School's Literature):

If your interviewer is an admissions officer:

1. How many students apply and how many will you admit to the freshmen class this year?
2. What kinds of internships are available? Do you assist in finding internships in the area of academic interest?
3. What safety and security systems are in place?
4. What factors does the college consider for scholarships? (For example, are they need-based only? Merit only? Athletics-related?)

Whether your interviewer is an admissions officer or an alumnus:

1. How large are freshmen classes? Are classes primarily taught by professors or teaching assistants?

2. What does the institution do to promote student/faculty contact?
3. How do students receive help selecting classes? Does a student have the same advisor for all four years?
4. How and when are majors selected and can they be self-designed?
5. What kinds of leadership opportunities are available?
6. What kinds of special projects, seminars, or other experiences are offered or required?
7. How important an element is community service? Is it a focus of this college?
8. What opportunities are there to do research for faculty?
9. Do you encourage and help students find part-time jobs freshmen year?
10. How do students receive help with career plans and job placement?
11. Where do students live? Are there special communities such as honors dorms or theme floors?
12. What was your favorite memory or experience on campus?

After the Interview

- When you stand up, shake hands and thank the interviewer by name.
- Express that you learned valuable information and are appreciative.
- Ask for the interviewer's business card and attach it to your information packet.
- As soon as possible, send a sincere thank you note to the interviewer.
 - Help the interviewer remember who you are. Personalize the note by referring to something specific that you talked about and how it affected you such as, "I really appreciated your encouraging words on my volunteerism," or "I took your suggestion to repeat my SAT test very seriously and have registered for the next testing date."
 - Check your spelling and grammar.

References

- Berger, S. *Effective Interviews*. College Planning for Gifted Students, second edition. Reston, Virginia: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1994.
- Campus Tours and Interviews. The Guidance Information System. Riverside Publishing Company, 1992.
- Boyden, Richard F., *The Campus Visit and Interview: Making Them Pay Off*. Private Colleges, 1993. pp. 154+ 155.
- Charbonneau, Danielle, and Adrienne Cohen, eds. *The Guide to Getting In*. New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2002. pp. 171-190.
- Capararo, Anthony F. *Strategy for the College Interview*. The College Digest. pp. 1+2.
- Fiske, Edward. *How to Get Into the Right College*. New York: Times Books, pp. 92-98.
- Pugh, Mike. *The College Admissions Interview*. FastFocus @www.fastweb.com. pp. 1+2.
- Fairview Post Graduate Center materials.

Not surprisingly, a wealth of information also can be found about this topic by doing an Internet search.