

Informational Interviewing

One of the best ways to explore career options and plan your job search is to talk directly with people who work in fields that interest you. This process, called informational interviewing, adds a dynamic, personalized dimension to your career research. When combined with reading and experiential learning, such as internships and field work, informational interviewing can help you to feel more knowledgeable and thus more comfortable with career decisions. Whether you are a sophomore trying to make the connection between careers and academic majors, a senior planning to look for a job in an unfamiliar city, or an alum anticipating a career change, informational interviewing is a helpful tool. Use an informational interview to:

- Obtain job information on the issues that matter most to you.
- Confirm your interest in specific career fields, and decide which ones to rule out.
- Meet people who share your enthusiasms, have similar talents, and are putting those factors to use in their careers.
- Begin creating a professional network of contacts for internships and full-time positions.

- Learn about hiring and employment practices for certain industries and organizations.
- Gain experience, confidence, and skill in communicating with employers.

How do you identify people for informational interviews?

Vassar alumnae/i are a wonderful resource. Through the Career Advisory Program (CAP) database, you can access names and contact information for nearly 8000 alumnae/i who have agreed to talk with students and other alums about their work. Some alums have also indicated that they can provide assistance with jobs and internships. You can search the database by occupation, employer name, graduate school, city, and several other fields.

Also tap into your personal network of family, friends, and acquaintances. Friends of parents, parents of classmates, former teachers, and neighbors all are people you could turn to for assistance. Even if they don't share your career interests, they may be able to refer you to someone who does.

You can contact a potential interviewee by phone, mail, or e-mail. (If you introduce yourself in writing, however, plan to follow

up with a phone call.) Make it clear that you are not interested in a job interview, but simply in gathering information. Set up a specific meeting time (a half-hour to an hour should be sufficient), if possible at the interviewee's workplace. If getting together in person is not feasible, you might arrange a phone interview.

As you prepare for your meeting, think about the sorts of questions you will want to ask. Make a list, if you like, to take along with you. Do some advance research on the career field or organization so you will have a better sense of how to direct the conversation.

Your interests, values, and personal style will dictate what topics you will want to address. For instance, if you are a highly creative person, you may want to find out about job independence, the degree to which innovation is prized, or the amount of flexibility in scheduling office time. If high achievement and prestige motivate you, you might want to focus on questions regarding leadership opportunities, requirements for advancement, or the degree of competition among people in the field.

Your stage in the career development process also will determine what sorts of questions to ask. Located on the back of this

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handout are sample questions for people at both the exploration and job search stages.

Courtesy and professionalism should be your guides throughout the informational interview process. Remember that although they are willing to help, your interviewees are busy people. Most will empathize and feel flattered you sought them out for advice; however, they may have periods of time when it simply is not convenient to talk with you.

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It is important to dress neatly, call if you must cancel an appointment, and follow up each interview with a thank-you letter. You also should let your interviewees know when you've decided on a career field or accepted a job offer.

A word about networking is also in order. Each time you conduct an informational interview, you have the opportunity to expand your list of contacts. Try not to leave an interview without the name of at least one more potential interviewee. Follow up with that person, ask for additional names, follow up with those people and...you get the picture.

If you are still unsure about informational interviewing, you might talk with a career staff member or intern. They have been through this process themselves, and will gladly share their experiences.

Sample career exploration questions

- How do you spend a typical day or week? What functions do you perform? How much variety/routine is there in your job?
 - How did you get into this line of work? Was yours a typical career path?
 - What do you think are the most important skills/qualifications for someone in this job?
 - What are the most/least interesting aspects of your work?
 - What type of environment is this to work in? How would you describe others in this field?
 - What kind of work schedule does this career require? (overtime, weekends, freelancing, travel, 9-5, etc.)?
 - What is a typical entry-level position? What about starting salaries?
 - Can you think of other jobs that would enable me to combine my skills in _____ and interests in _____?
 - What professional organizations are active in this field? What trade or professional journals do you read?
 - What advancement opportunities exist beyond the entry level?
- What advice would you have for me if I chose to pursue a career in this area?

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Sample job search questions

- How are job openings publicized in this field?
 - What departments in this organization might have jobs that would use the skills and interests I've shared with you?
 - I'm interested in relocating to _____. Do you know of anyone in your industry that I could talk to there?
 - How do most people get hired into this organization? Are some methods more effective than others?
 - Are there opportunities for part-time or freelance work here?
 - Does this organization require application forms or exams?
 - How competitive is the entry-level job market in this geographic area?
 - What is the turnover rate for this type of position? Do you anticipate any vacancies in the near future?
 - Who has final hiring power here?
 - What are other organizations in this field to which I might apply?
 - Have you heard of any vacancies that might be appropriate for me?
- Can you provide me with feedback on my resume?
 - May I leave a copy of my resume with you?