

Overview

This resource is broken down into four sections to help you through the different phases of the interview process. Career Development highly encourages practicing your interview skills which you can do through *Big Interview* or practice interviews with Career Development Specialists.

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Section One: Preparing for the Interview

Types of interviews

There are many ways that organizations structure interviews. It is good to know about the different types of interviews to be best prepared for meeting with prospective organizations, graduate and professional schools, and service programs. You may experience multiple rounds of interviews with different or similar structures for the same position.

Phone Interviews

Oftentimes, interviews – especially first-time interviews – will take place over the phone as they can save time for both the interviewer and you. However, phone interviews do come with their own set of unique challenges. For example, you won't be able to see the other person's reactions and therefore must pay close attention to how you are coming across in the interview.

It is important to act your most professional during a telephone interview. Be mindful of your voice and word choice. Avoid the use of vocal crutches such as "Umm..." when you speak and be sure that your tone and inflection convey confidence and energy. Talk into the receiver and try to call from a small space with limited background noise.

In addition, phone interviews provide an opportunity for you to take and use notes. Before the interview make a list of topics you want to cover and any questions you might have for the interviewer. Be careful as to not create long lapses in the conversation with your note taking, and remember that it is okay to tell your interviewer that you are taking notes. Your interviewer is likely to also be taking notes. This is important to note especially when there are lapses in the conversation.

One-on-One Interview

There are many interviews where the structure will be you and one interviewer. A one-on-one interview is a great opportunity to build a friendly relationship and positive connection. It is unlikely that this will be the only type of interview you have. So do expect that you will have additional interviews in different formats.

Panel Interviews

More common than a one-on-one interview are panel interviews. Panel interviews could involve multiple members of the team or organization. The setting may be the group sitting around a table or you in front of a room with a group or the interviewers in a row facing you.

The question format could be either casual or very structured. The questions may come from multiple people or just one person. It is important to keep in mind that you need to look at and address each person in the room, not just the person asking the question.

Group Interviews

Organizations can structure group interviews in various ways. But the common theme in all group interviews is that there are multiple interviewees being interviewed at the same time, possibly in the same space. It is important that no matter what type of group interview you have to show respect to the other interviewees.

One type of group interview is where you are given a situation or case to solve with the other interviewees. The interviewers are observing and recording their impressions of your engagement, communication, teamwork, and problem solving abilities.

A second type of group interview is when multiple interviewees arrive at the same time, and proceed to individual or panel interviews. Interviewees would then be rotated between additional interview rooms.

The third type of group interview is structured where all interviewees and all interviewers are in one room. Interviewers ask questions that each interviewee is then asked to answer. Interviewees hear all other responses and must then work to differentiate their answers from the others in the room.

Job Fairs

The first type of interview that you may have at a job fair is a mini interview at the employer booth. When approaching the booth be prepared to introduce yourself and give a brief elevator speech. Be prepared to ask questions about opportunities and the company demonstrating that you have done research on the organization (see section Researching for the Interview). Have résumés available, but some may not accept paper copies and may ask that you submit through an online system. Recruiters talk to many candidates at the fair, so the conversation will be brief.

Some job fairs offer organizations separate space to conduct interviews. If you are offered an on-site interview, keep the recommendations in the above sections in mind as you prepare to

attend the job fair. The space may offer less privacy than you may find in other types of interviews and these are typically screening interviews.

Researching for the Interview

It is expected to research the company before you go into the interview. Research is for your personal benefit and to aid you in the interview process. Interviewers commonly ask questions like “What do you know about our organization?” and “Why do you want to work here?” or “How does this program fit in your career goals?”

Research the organization’s website or for graduate school look at both the program and the larger school. Use Glassdoor and Vault, provided by Gustavus Career Development, and your personal network to learn more about the organization and its culture. Connect with current graduate students or alumni of graduate programs, to find out more about the student experience. If the organization or program has an online social presence, make sure that you are following them through LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

Typical Interview Questions

Be familiar with questions that are typically asked in interviews.

- **Tell me about yourself** - this is not meant to be a trick question; focus more on your involvements and experiences as they relate to the position. This is not the time to tell really personal information (siblings, where you grew up, favorite color, pets, etc.)
- **What do you know about our organization AND/OR Why did you apply for this position** - see research section above. You need to have specific answers for these questions; don’t be vague.
- **What are your goals** - the question could be framed as short term or long term goals.
- **What are your strengths AND/OR What are your weaknesses** - don’t just give a list, give some explanation. When asked about weaknesses, give an actual weakness or something you need to work on; don’t give a cliched answer (e.g. I’m a perfectionist)
 - A Different Version: **What are your strong points and how have they helped you succeed?**
- **How do you maintain effective working relationships with your coworkers or peers** - talk about communication styles, how you deal with conflict, etc.
- **How would your supervisor describe you** - try to keep it positive, but be realistic.
- **What has been your most significant accomplishment** - accomplishments are simply things you are proud of. Your answer should include an explanation of why or how it is significant to you.
- **Why should we hire you** - Tell them why; don’t beat around the bush. Avoid vague qualities (e.g. I’m a great communicator, I work well with others, etc.), instead give 2 or 3 examples of how you think you will contribute and how your past experience will be helpful.
 - A Different Version: **What will you bring that other candidates do not?**

Besides typical interview questions, there are other styles of questions you will want to understand before going into an interview. Many organizations are using behavioral interview questions. This style of questioning is geared towards learning more about your past experiences and how you handle situations. Instead of speaking in general, you will need to have very specific examples that come from your past work, extracurriculars, courses/projects, volunteer/service, or other types of relevant experiences.

Behavioral interview questions typically start with "Tell me a time when..." "Describe a situation where..." "Give an example of..."

To respond to these questions use the STARR technique: This stands for

Situation or Task - the event or circumstances or goal you were working toward - provide the jist of it, not a history. Aim for a positive example, unless specifically asked otherwise.

Action taken - focus on your specific role even in group settings, your answer should highlight you.

Result - what happened AND how it relates to the question asked.

Relate - how it relates to the question asked

Here is an example to see how the technique can be effectively used:

Question: Tell me about a time when you took on a leadership role where you were responsible for managing a significant project.

Response:

Situation or Task - In my Junior year I was selected to be a Wellbeing Be U Peer Coach. One of the first projects Peer Coaches took on was the creation of peer-based group coaching sessions.

Action taken - This was my first time trying to engage my peers in work outside of a classroom setting so I wasn't sure exactly where to start. In the previous year I had participated in one of these groups so I looked to my former peer leader for advice on what worked well and what didn't to get students involved. I also thought about what I wanted this group to focus on and what the goals should be. Once I had my group focus I created flyers for the residence halls, engaged Collegiate Fellows (RA's) to ask them to reach out to students they thought might benefit, and talked with leaders of various social groups on campus to get recommendations.

Result and Relate- After this outreach I had 6 students who were highly committed to the group. Throughout the semester we had weekly peer-based and confidential wellbeing group coaching sessions. The success of this project was important for the continued success of the campus Wellbeing initiative.

Gustavus provides resources to help you practice. Examples of interview questions can be found through Vault and you can practice your interviewing technique through Big Interview. Schedule an appointment to meet with a Career Development Specialist for a practice interview.

Section two: Making a good impression

What to Wear

If you get specific instructions from the interviewer or the organization or program on what to wear for an interview, follow those instructions. If your jacket or skirt has long thread in an X shape holding a slit or vent together, that should be cut and removed before wearing. If the jacket has a tag on the sleeve remove it carefully.

For Men

A dark colored business suit is traditional mens wear for interviewing. Pair with a light or neutral-colored long-sleeved shirt and coordinating tie. Depending on the formality of the organization a full suit may not be necessary; dress pants, dress shirt, and tie could be acceptable. Your clothes should fit you and be clean and pressed. If you need to borrow a suit, try to find someone who is close to your actual size.

- Wear dark coordinating dress shoes (not casual or athletic).
- Hair whether short or long should be clean and neat and facial hair should be trimmed.
- Keep jewelry to a minimum.
- Avoid using any products that are heavily scented. Some organizations may be scent free or you may encounter those with sensitivities or allergies to strong scents.

For Women

For most interviews, a dark colored business suit (pants or skirt) should be worn. Suits should be paired with a solid colored or small print top with a conservative neckline. If you are not wearing a jacket with your suit or expect to take off your suit jacket during an interview, avoid sleeveless tops. If choosing to wear a skirt, it's length should be around the knee and the slit should be minimal. Your clothes should fit you and be clean and pressed. If you need to borrow a suit, try to find someone who is close to your actual size.

- Shoes should be business appropriate (i.e. no sparkles, no sandals, not strappy, etc.). Wear shoes that you will be comfortable walking in; it is recommended to wear flats or shoes with a low heel.
- If wearing a skirt, pair with neutral or black nylons
- Hair can be worn up or down as long as it is clean and neat.
- If you choose to wear makeup, keep it simple and natural-looking.
- Keep jewelry to a minimum.

- Avoid using any products that are heavily scented. Some organizations may be scent free or you may encounter those with sensitivities or allergies to strong scents.
- Choose a professional looking purse or bag to hold items you might need.

Notes on Garments Worn for Cultural or Religious Purposes

If a garment is worn for cultural or religious reasons there is no need to change that practice for an interview setting. Companies in the United States are not able to discriminate against candidates based on nationality or religion.

Self-Expression and Interviews

Self-expression is important. Tattoos, body piercings, hairstyle, and clothing are all ways we express our individuality. When interviewing, it may be best to be conservative, but this is why research before an interview is important to understand cultural expectations at an organization or in a program, so as to understand what may or may not be appropriate in an interview.

Interview Etiquette

- Have a professional voicemail set up on your phone. Setting up an interview will likely start with a phone call. Respond to emails professionally -- avoid short, text-like responses.
- When scheduling an interview, be sure to confirm when and where the interview will be conducted.
- Leave early for the interview. Be prepared for potential traffic and plan for parking. Wait to enter the interview location if you arrive more than 15 minutes early. Allow time to review your notes, practice what you plan to say and straighten your clothing or hair.
- Make sure to turn your phone off (not set to vibrate) before you enter the location.
- Shake hands with those you meet -- not too firm of a grip, but not loose.
- Wait to sit until you are directed to where you will be interviewed. Place any bags next to or under your chair.
- As interviewers introduce themselves, when possible write down names and titles or ask for business cards at the conclusion of the interview. This will make following up with thank you notes easier.
- Focus not only on what you will say, but also be aware of your nonverbal communication. Pay attention to your posture. Be sure to make eye contact with those interviewing you. If you are not sure who to look at, make eye contact with the person asking you the question, trying to stay engaged with the rest of the group.
- If someone new enters the room during the interview, stand and shake their hand when introduced.
- Show enthusiasm for the organization and the position. If your nervousness shows in your voice try to control your breathing and tone.

Prepare your own questions

Even if you think the position is a perfect fit, you will want to ask questions to make sure that your perception of the position and organization match the reality. So, what should you ask? Prior to the interview conduct research (see Section 1: Researching for the Interview). From this research you will have a basic understanding of the organization, so think about what else you would want to know.

Have a list of questions written and prepared with you during the interview. If you think of any questions during the interview, be sure to note them so you can ask at the appropriate time. There are some general questions you can ask, but try to create individualized questions that are more geared toward your situation and the position.

- What are you looking for in a candidate?
 - A different version: What would make someone successful in this position?
- What's the most rewarding thing about working here?
- What challenges do you see for someone in this position?
- What would you hope the person in this role would achieve in the first 6 months?
- What's the company/department culture?
- Are there things I haven't talked about that you want to know about?
- What are the next steps in this process?
 - A different version: What is your timeline for making a decision?

At the end of the interview, the interviewer will likely ask if you have any questions. This is a great time to ask your questions, but feel free to ask at other times during the interview as appropriate.

Section three: Managing difficult questions

In many interviews, you will likely be asked a question that you may not be prepared to answer. Difficult questions can come in different forms. Some may seem silly with no relation to the position (How many blades of grass are in a standard football field?) and others may be more directed but challenging to answer. Interviewers ask questions to get a better sense of who you are, your qualifications, and how you would approach the position. When you get a difficult question, the interviewer has specific reasons for asking.

When you get a difficult question, the best thing you can do is take a bit of time to think of your answer before responding. Some contemplative silence is really OK! Think about why the interviewer might be asking that question. Try to provide a response that is not negative or would show you in a bad light. If the question is about a mistake or other bad situation, make sure to include information on what you learned or how you grew from that experience.

Responses should show your ability to problem solve, recognize challenges, acknowledge mistakes and fix them, and how you work with others.

Inappropriate Questions

In the United States, employers are not allowed to ask certain questions in interviews. Inappropriate questions are those that are directed at learning marital and family status, sexual orientation, religion, disability and age. While employers cannot directly ask questions like this, there are legal questions related to these topics (e.g. Are you able to perform the duties of this position with or without accommodation? Are you authorized to work in the United States?). It's important to know the difference between legal and illegal versions of questions.

If you get a question and you aren't sure if it is illegal or legal, before responding, take some time to think about why the interviewer may be asking the question. Not all interviewers are experienced or knowledgeable about what would make a legal question illegal. Assume good will in an interview and do your best to answer the question you think they are trying to ask, ask for clarification, or inquire how the question is related to the position. You don't need to tell the interviewer the question is illegal.

Section four: After the Interview

Always follow-up with a thank you message to your interviewers. Traditional guidance has been that thank you messages should be handwritten cards mailed within two days. While handwritten cards are nice, email is appropriate and preferred for quick timelines or for organizations that are high technology. Unless initiated by the interviewer, thank you messages are not appropriate via text or social media. If you are in an interview process with multiple rounds of interviews, thank you messages can be sent after each round, but will be different (e.g. a brief email thank you after a phone screen followed by a more detailed thank you after an in-person interview).

If you are offered the position

That's great news!! Before accepting the position, make sure you have all of your questions answered and you know the expected timeline for making a decision on whether or not you accept or decline the offer. It is important to take time to think about the position/program, the organization/school, and your personal and professional goals to determine if this opportunity is a fit for you. Once you accept, you have committed to the terms presented and have forfeited the ability to negotiate.

When you receive a job offer it will likely come with information on salary, start date, and basics on benefits. When you receive an offer for graduate school, information on financial aid,

teaching or graduate assistantship information, and program specifics may come after acceptance or upon request before acceptance where possible.

Once you accept an offer, STOP INTERVIEWING FOR OTHER POSITIONS/PROGRAMS. If you accept an offer, it is unprofessional to continue an interview process for other roles in other organizations and you will likely burn a bridge for future opportunities. Contact the other organizations/programs to let them know you have accepted another offer and are withdrawing from their process.

If you decide to accept an offer do so within the established time frame. If you decide to decline an offer, do so via phone - do not do so via email or voicemail. When declining an offer it is important to remain positive and thank them for the opportunity. The interviewer may have questions about why you are declining the offer, so if asked, be honest but focus on it not being a fit for you.

If you are not offered the position

It's ok. Even if you feel that this was the perfect opportunity, it may not have been the right fit. Don't judge yourself harshly when you don't receive offers. When you receive the notification, take the opportunity to thank the interviewer and ask for feedback on how you could improve future applications. It is important to keep moving forward whether that means you continue to apply for other positions, wait a year to reapply for graduate programs, or re-evaluate your goals based on the feedback you receive.