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The LEAD Colloquium

Informational Interview Assignment

Informational interviews are an excellent networking tool for job seekers. They allow you to gain practical insight into what it takes to be successful in a particular position or profession. They also allow you to build confidence in your ability to interact with professionals in a chosen field.

This two-stage assignment will give you the chance to practice and sharpen your skills and strategies for informational interviewing. You might also find the Informational Interview workshop offered by Career Services helpful.

Format, Expectations, and Evaluation (10% of final LEAD grade)

- A well-organized essay of at least 750-1000 words
- The strongest essays will articulate advice relevant to the career you desire and the kind of professional you would like to become

Stage 1: The Interview

First, identify and interview someone in a position you might like to have in an upcoming stage of your professional career. It is recommended that this need not be an executive-level professional. In fact, it is recommended that you select a professional that is midway through his/her career; someone that can identify and remember the position you are currently in. See the “Informational Interview Primer” on the following pages for more details.

Note: An important objective for this assignment is for you to expand your professional network. Accordingly, the following guidelines should be observed:

- You may **not** interview your internship supervisor or anyone in your internship organization, your evening course instructor, a family member, close friend, or LEAD Instructor.
- Interviews must be conducted in person; interviews via Skype, telephone, or email are not permitted.
- No “group interviews” will be allowed.
- Any arrangement deviating from these guidelines must be approved in advance by your LEAD Instructor.

Stage 2: Assignment Prompt

Second, write a reflection essay on your informational interview in which you examine and articulate what you learned from the interview. The goal of this assignment is to reflect on the experience through a personal lens that considers your future objectives, profession/career of choice, areas for professional growth, and existing skill sets. Use the following prompts as a guide:

- Identify and describe the person you interviewed, including name, title, organization, and how you chose this person (this section should take no more than a paragraph).
- What is a common leadership style in the field? How can you acclimate to an environment with this type of leadership style?
- What did you find most interesting or surprising about this person's career path or professional field?
- In what ways can you envision following a path similar to that of the person you interviewed? What would you do differently?
- What did you learn about best strategies for breaking into your field of choice?
- What skills do you need to develop further and what specific actions would you take to do so?
- Did this experience change the ways you perceive your immediate future?

TWC | Informational Interview Primer

A Sample Overview of the Informational Interview Process

I. Finding Interviewees

- a. **Cold Contact:** Don't be afraid of calling someone that you haven't met before directly. You could also explore LinkedIn to find someone (search for people who went to your university and then you'll have an automatic connection). The worst thing that can happen is that no one replies!
- b. **Supervisor:** Your supervisor is a great resource for you here. Ask if they know anyone that works in [your interest area] who might be willing to talk to you. Chances are good that they'll set up an introductory email, or at least put the recipient on the lookout for your message. Having someone "vouch" for you by being the link makes for smooth first contact.
- c. **Fellow Interns:** Do any of your friends work at organizations that you think are cool? Have them ask their supervisor or someone they work with if they'd be willing to participate in an informational interview with you!
- d. **School/University Contacts:** Many of your universities have alumni in the Washington D.C area. Don't hesitate to contact your career services department and ask if there is a school club or notable alums in the area.

II. First Contact

- a. **Email:** Keep it short. Don't write a whole novel – simply state that you're interested in their experience/path and that you'd like to chat over coffee if they have time.
- b. **Call:** Know what you want to say before you call and who you'd like to talk to (or what position you'd like to talk to). The same rules apply here: be able to state your case in simple terms.
- c. **Timing:** To get the ball rolling, include a sketch of when you're typically free or when you know you'll be free in the next week. Again, make sure you're keeping things brief. They'll respond saying they can meet at those times, or may suggest alternative times.
- d. **Remember:** People are busy. In an email, aim for three short paragraphs, maximum. Don't be afraid to follow-up at least twice (once within a week of emailing, the second follow-up within another week). Be conscious of the distance between your office and theirs, as well, since you'll have to build in some travel time. Be respectful and positive.

III. Pre-Interview Research

- a. **LinkedIn & company pages, Glass Door:** Do your homework about the person you're interviewing before you meet them; you don't want to spend the first 20 minutes of your time asking where they went to school, what their major was... they'll feel like you're wasting their time, since you could probably have found that information elsewhere. Knowing a little something about them shows that you're serious about the interview and genuinely interested. Be ready to ask some questions tailored to their experience.
- b. **Read over the assignment rubric:** A good reflection relies on good content to reflect upon. Reviewing the assignment rubric will provide you with guidance on what components should be included in your reflection. Ask questions that provide you the content you need to write a good reflection.
- c. **Questions:** There are some great resources online for this, lists and lists of questions to ask. Just do a search for "Informational Interview" questions, and pull out the ones you want. Memorize a few before walking into the interview so you can always fall back on them if your mind blanks. What questions you choose will depend on who you're interviewing and why you chose them, but make sure that you're getting useful information for yourself. This can include:

- i. Industry-specific advice/thoughts about the future of the field
- ii. Company-specific advice/information on the company culture, what universities are preferred, what traits are valued etc.
- iii. Position-specific advice/What are the daily activities of that job, what skills help someone succeed in such a position, what are some challenges/surprises involved with the job
- iv. General advice/this could be focused on general things like living happily or structured around general career searching advice

IV. **The Interview**

- a. **Structured vs. Flowing vs. Blended:** Everyone has a different style for how they conduct their interviews, you and the interviewee. Some people bring along a notebook filled with questions, while other people bring nothing and let the interview flow as a free-form conversation. Both styles are right; just be conscious of how the interviewee is responding (ie, make sure you're not interrupting them to ask questions before they finish a thought, or going off on your own tangents while they wait patiently for another question).
- b. **Beware:** Sometimes these interviews can veer into "I'm just going to tell you personal stories" land. Those stories can be absolutely fascinating, but they're less useful to you than the answers to your questions. You might have to nudge your interviewee back on track now and again. Do so gently, but remember – this interview is for your benefit. Make sure you get what you need out of it.
- c. **Be ready:** To talk about yourself! They're going to want to hear about what you're interested in and what you're hoping to do, so make sure you're working on your elevator speech.

V. **Follow Up**

- a. **Thank You:** Make sure that you send a thank you email or a handwritten thank you note (or both!) within a day or two of your interview. These are often overlooked, but are highly appreciated and make you stand out in the interviewee's mind.
- b. **Follow-Up:** When possible, find other ways to keep that connection strong. If something relevant happens in the news or you come across an article that is relevant to their work, send them a quick note sharing it! Congratulate them on work accomplishments, etc. Do so sparingly, though (perhaps every few months); you don't want to be thought of as a stalker.
- c. **Reflect:** Take a moment, now that you're all done, to think about how you did. Were you comfortable in the meeting? Did you come across as competent? Did you do a good amount of background research beforehand? What would you do differently in the future?

VI. **...No One's Responding...**

- a. **Send a Nudge:** If you haven't already, send a follow-up email. Sometimes friendly invitations get lost in all of the emails that professionals get.
- b. **Widen Your Net:** For example, instead of only looking for human rights lawyers who work for the Department of State, try talking with some human rights lawyers that work at non-profits, or talk to lawyers who work on other topics at State.
- c. **Review Your Email:** Perhaps there's something off-putting in the way you craft your email. Ask a friend to read it over and share their thoughts, or forward it to your LEAD Instructor for a look over. Don't be afraid to ask for help: it's good to know what you might be doing wrong so you can fix it.

VII. **And Remember: Informational Interviews are Common in DC!** What you're doing isn't strange at all; the person you're contacting won't think you strange or offensive. On the contrary, they'll probably be impressed by the initiative you've taken in reaching out to them! If you feel super uncomfortable, you can blame it on TWC, since it's an assignment!