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# When, How and Why to Conduct Informational Interviews

A common misperception is that you should only pursue them when you are actively seeking a new position or making a career transition, writes Brandy L. Simula.

// January 28, 2021



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Informational interviews can help you [explore career fields and paths](#)

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[. \(https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/03/23/how-network-while-you-are-social-distancing-home-opinion\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/03/23/how-network-while-you-are-social-distancing-home-opinion).

## When to Conduct Informational Interviews

One of the common misperceptions about informational interviews is that you should only pursue them when you are actively seeking a new position or making a career transition. Instead, informational interviews should be a regular, ongoing part of your professional development and [career exploration](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/05/21/graduate-students-should-explore-potential-careers-early-and-systematically)

[. \(https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/05/21/graduate-students-should-explore-potential-careers-early-and-systematically\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/05/21/graduate-students-should-explore-potential-careers-early-and-systematically). Informational interviews are an important source of information about the field

you're currently in and can [help you learn more about career fields](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/27/scientific-way-phd-students-can-frame-their-career-explorations-opinion)

[. \(https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/27/scientific-way-phd-students-can-frame-their-career-explorations-opinion\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/27/scientific-way-phd-students-can-frame-their-career-explorations-opinion) to explore. They can help you learn about a wide range of career paths -- including those

for [faculty](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/01/given-uncertainty-about-faculty-hiring-fall-job-seekers-should-actively-seek) [. \(https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/01/given-uncertainty-about-faculty-hiring-fall-job-seekers-should-actively-seek\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/01/given-uncertainty-about-faculty-hiring-fall-job-seekers-should-actively-seek) members and [higher ed administrators](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/08/05/phd-students-should-consider-careers-higher-education-administration-opinion)

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[. \(https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/10/10/advice-determining-if-its-time-leave-academe-opinion\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/10/10/advice-determining-if-its-time-leave-academe-opinion). Like reading journals and newsletters and attending conferences in your academic or professional field,

informational interviews should be a regular part of your career development.

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## Identifying Potential Invitees

Start with people with whom you already have a connection: mentors, people you've met at conferences or professional networking events and the like. If you're interested in approaching someone you don't yet know, find a point of connection: Did you graduate from the same institution? Are you members of the same academic or professional organization?



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person will be to have time to meet with you and the less likely they'll have detailed information to share about a particular career field. For instance, if you're interested in getting into user experience, you should seek interviews with UX researchers who engage with UX as the main part of their job, rather than with a VP or CEO whose portfolio includes supervising the UX unit.

It's also useful to explicitly seek information about the experiences and career paths of people who share identities that are important to you. What is it like working at Elite Private University as a person of color? What is the climate like in Tech Start-up Firm for queer employees? What are the norms around parental leave in the field of educational consulting?

### **Making the Ask**

Make your ask specific and brief. Indicate how you are connected -- alums of the same institution, members of the same professional organization, friends of the person who suggested you contact them -- and make an explicit request for a short conversation, providing some possible times while also leaving plenty of flexibility for their schedule. Do not attach your bio or CV or go into extensive detail about your work, education or accomplishments. You can provide more information about your background and experience as part of your interview conversation. Here's a sample note:

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*Dear Jelisa,*

*I'm a third-year graduate student at State U and am interested in learning more about career paths in nonprofits focused on sustainability. I see from your LinkedIn profile that you also attended State U and have worked for several sustainability nonprofits. If you have time, I'd appreciate the opportunity to learn more about the work you're currently doing and suggestions you might have for someone interested in entering the field. If you're available for a 30-minute phone or video chat in the next few weeks, would you let me know when would be convenient for you? I'm generally available Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays after 12 p.m. EST.*

*Best,*

*DeSean*

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### **Getting the Most Out of the Interview: Questions and Topics**



After succinctly describing your background and experience, move into the [questions you've prepared in advance \(https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2015/03/04/30-questions-to-ask-in-an-informational-interview/#19fc2d29215f\)](https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2015/03/04/30-questions-to-ask-in-an-informational-interview/#19fc2d29215f). It's useful to [develop a standard set \(https://www.imaginephd.com/general-content/ImaginePhD-informational-interviewing.pdf\)](https://www.imaginephd.com/general-content/ImaginePhD-informational-interviewing.pdf), which you can then tailor to each individual you meet with based on your research about their experience and career path. Below are some questions I commonly use in informational interviews focused on learning about a career field.

- What skills do you think are most important to being successful in this field?
- What professional organizations should someone interested in this field explore?
- What does an average day or week look like for you?
- What do you most enjoy about the work you do, and what do you find frustrating?
- Have you found specific books or articles to be especially helpful in your work?
- What kinds of skills and experiences are important for someone interested in getting into this field?
- What aspects of your current position have surprised you?
- Are there other people in your field/organization whom you think I should talk to?

### **What to Avoid**

Be thoughtful about how you phrase questions. For instance, avoid asking, "Why did you leave your position at Toxic Labs?" and instead ask, "How have you decided when it was time to take the next step in your career?" Similarly, avoid asking, "What is the worst thing about your current job?" and instead ask, "What are some of the challenges and frustrations in the work you currently do?"

Also avoid framing questions in ways more appropriate to job interviews. For instance, a few months ago, I agreed to an informational interview with a grad student who asked questions like, "What are the three most important books in professional development and why?" Phrasing questions in ways that demand justifications is the wrong tone for an informational interview, but you can get at the same information with a question more appropriate to the informational interview setting such as, "What books have influenced your career path or been important for your development?" or "What books would you recommend to someone interested in learning about this field?"



challenging about that kind of work?" is appropriate.

Different fields have different norms concerning openness of conversations about compensation. I recommend avoiding asking someone about their personal salary or salary range and instead raising a question along the lines of, "Can you help me get an understanding of the salary range someone entering this field might expect?"

Finally, you should not ask people who make time to meet with you to do additional labor or commit additional time on your behalf: reviewing your CV or résumé, providing feedback on your writing, sending you job postings, making introductions and so forth. If someone offers to provide any of those things, it's appropriate to take them up on their offer. But they -- not you -- should initiate that discussion.

### **Following Up and Growing Your Network**

Be sure to thank the person you're speaking with at the end of the conversation. It's also appropriate to send a follow-up email or note. I send handwritten thank-you cards to people who make time to share their experiences and expertise with me and appreciate that thoughtfulness from others when I receive it.

You should also follow up to share how you've acted on their suggestions and/or to provide career updates. For example, letting someone know that you had a conversation with the colleague they referred you to is appropriate, as is sending them a note to tell them that their advice and expertise helped you land a position in the field. But you should avoid sending frequent, relatively content-free check-ins (e.g., "Just wanted to let you know I'm still looking for a job") or sending updates on professional accomplishments unrelated to your conversation. (For instance, if you had a conversation about project management careers, don't follow up to tell them you have an academic publication coming out on the mating habits of chinchillas.)

Through careful cultivation of a professional relationship by maintaining consistent, thoughtful, appropriate contact -- while also avoiding making demands or requests for additional labor or time -- you may find that a cold-call informational interview may develop into a mentoring relationship, an invitation to collaborate on a project or a referral to a newly created position. Remember throughout the process that it is as much about [building professional relationships \(https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/04/08/actions-you-can-take-improve-your-career-conversations-opinion\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/04/08/actions-you-can-take-improve-your-career-conversations-opinion) as it is about gathering information.

## Bio

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Read more by [Brandy L. Simula](#)



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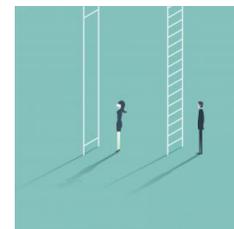
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