
EDUCATION

College Admissions: Succeeding in an Interview

March 31, 2018

Almost all job searches require **applicants** to meet with the people offering the job to answer questions about themselves.

Banks often require people asking for a loan to do the same.

And even meeting your romantic partner's parents for the first time can feel like an examination of your best and worst qualities.

Higher education has similar ways of **evaluating** applicants, David Kobel explains. He works in international student services at the University of Tulsa, a private research university in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Kobel says colleges and universities want to know as much as they can about students who want to join their **academic** programs. Schools get a lot of information about an applicant from their application materials. But there are some things that academic performance records and letters of support from former teachers do not demonstrate.

Many students can look similar on paper, Kobel says. So **interviews** are another method some schools use to learn more about an applicant.

Kobel notes that interviewing with a college or university admissions official is different from other interviews in several ways. First, Kobel says there are two kinds of interviews that a college or university applicant might face.

One is called an informational interview. Most colleges and universities in the United States do not require **undergraduate** applicants to complete an interview. But some offer applicants the choice of asking for such an interview.

The result of this interview is not a major part of the selection process, Kobel says. But an interview does give an applicant and their school of choice the chance to build a relationship. Admissions officials might ask some general questions, but they also expect students to ask questions, as well.

Kobel suggests that by asking questions of their own, a student shows their interest in attending that school. The more interest a student shows and the stronger a relationship they try to build with a school, the better. But Kobel adds that the kinds of questions a student asks are important.

“You wouldn’t want to ask, ‘How many international students do you have here at the university?’” he told VOA. “That’s a question you could go find on the website. You would want to ask something more like, ‘What do you feel that international students **contribute** to your ... community?’ ... That shows them that you’re really thinking, you’re really wanting to know ‘What you would value in me as a student?’”

Kobel adds that asking questions that are deeper and less general demonstrates greater interest. They also show that an applicant has researched the school.

Undergraduate students should try to make sure they are studying in a program that is the right fit for them. Gathering information about a certain program is the main goal of an informative interview.

Doing your research and knowing about a school are also important for the second kind of interview college applicants may face, Kobel says. This is called an evaluative interview.

Kobel notes that, although undergraduate programs may not require an interview, **graduate** study programs in the United States often do. Evaluative interviews are a chance for admissions officials to ask questions that examine an applicant’s qualities and decide if they will be a good fit for a given program.

He suggests applicants do research on the school they are applying to. One common and very important question interviewers may ask is, “Why do you want to study here?”

Kobel says admissions officials want applicants to show they know exactly what a program offers and why that matters to them. The greater detail an applicant can give as to why the program is right for them, the better.

“Look at the academic program that you want to study,” he said. “Look at the **faculty**. Look at the research that they’ve done and point out how that fits your goals ... They don’t want to know that you want to go there because it’s close to home or because of ... the **prestige**. They want to know that there’s a general interest in that.”

Thoughtful answers are important for all interview questions, Kobel says. After all, almost every college and university wants to admit as many different kinds of people as they can. Someone who gives general answers to questions about their strengths and weaknesses, for example, does not demonstrate to the officials how different or special the applicant may be.

“Saying, ‘Well, I’m good at English’ or ‘I’m good at math,’ those are too general,” said Kobel. “Try to get into what strengths you have and how have you used those to be academically strong. And then, with your weaknesses, be honest here. They don’t want you to say, ‘I don’t have any weaknesses.’ That will come across as **arrogant**. ... Come in with an explanation of what you’re doing to overcome those weaknesses.”

It is also important that international students understand the general rules of interviews in the United States, Kobel says.

For example, being on time to a meeting is extremely important in the U.S. So applicants should arrive at their interview no less than 10 minutes before the planned start time. Kobel adds that smiling, looking the interviewer in the eyes, and shaking their hand firmly when meeting can all be signs of confidence and honesty.

Finally, Kobel suggests that applicants should try to act natural and remember the interview is not the only thing that decides if they are admitted. Being calm can help ease the discussion and strengthen the connection between the interviewer and interviewee. And doing **practice** interviews with friends and family is a good way to feel **relaxed** during the real thing, he adds.

It is also a good idea to start the interview by making brief, informal conversation with the interviewer, Kobel says. This helps build the relationship between everyone involved.

However, avoid discussing topics like politics and religion. Americans usually do not talk about these subjects with people they do not know very well.

I'm Pete Musto.

And I'm Dorothy Gundy.

Pete Musto reported this story for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

We want to hear from you. What are some other important things to consider when going into an interview? How else do you think applicants should prepare? Write to us in the Comments Section or on our Facebook page.

QUIZ

Words in This Story

applicant(s) – *n.* someone who formally asks for something, such as a job or admission to a college

evaluating – *v.* judging the value or condition of (someone or something) in a careful and thoughtful way

academic – *adj.* of or relating to schools and education

interview(s) – *n.* a meeting at which people talk to each other in order to ask questions and get information

undergraduate – *adj.* describing a degree that is given to a student by a college or university usually after four years of study

contribute – *v.* to give something such as money, goods, or time to help or improve a person, group, cause, or organization

graduate – *adj.* describing a degree that is given to a student by a college or university usually after about two or more years of additional study following an undergraduate degree

faculty – *n.* the group of teachers in a school or college

prestige – *n.* the respect and admiration that someone or something gets for being successful or important

arrogant – *adj.* having or showing the insulting attitude of people who believe that they are better, smarter, or more important than other people

practice – *adj.* something that is done again and again in order to become better at it

relaxed – *adj.* calm and free from stress, worry, or anxiety