

The College Interview

Why Try to Interview?

Competitive colleges pay attention to whether applicants have demonstrated genuine interest in their college. In addition, if you're applying to a selective college that offers private interviews, this is a wonderful opportunity to stand out among the others in the applicant pool. It is a conversation with those who may actually be involved in the decision to admit you. What better chance could you possibly have to shine? If the college grants you an interview, then they want to get to know you. If you are prepared, you can put yourself in a very favorable light. If you're NOT prepared, well, you can guess what happens then. Follow the tips contained in this manual to get all the interviews you possibly can and to ace them all.

Obtaining the Interview

Fewer and fewer colleges and universities are offering private on-campus interviews. However, if they do, take advantage of this opportunity to make a positive impression. You may have to pursue the interview, because it most likely won't be offered to you. We experienced a case where the interview reservation system was put on the internet but with no announcement. If you were lucky enough to find it (it wasn't obvious), the ID number you had been given didn't work properly to reserve the interview. It was almost as if it was a tenacity test! Successful applicants had to call the office and be given yet another ID number that worked. We never determined if it was truly a test, but the persistent students were rewarded with coveted personal interviews.

If there are no on-campus interviews, the next best thing is one offered at your high school or in your area. Sometimes alumni will interview in your area for the colleges they represent. These opportunities should be on the college website, but call if they aren't. Keep in mind the perspective of the interviewer. It's quite different to interview with a member of the admissions committee than with an alumni.

Some colleges will not offer any individual interview opportunity at all; typically the public schools do not. The important thing is to take advantage of those that do.

Questions to Ask When Scheduling the Interview

It is wise to check to see if the interview is evaluative, that is, whether or not it's used as a factor in admissions or simply informational. Knowing this ahead of time will help you prepare. Don't worry – even if it's evaluative, it's seldom a major factor in admissions decisions so relax!

Preparing for the Interview

Below is a list of actual questions that were asked on interviews. Go over them, and think about an answer for each. Many are similar, as the same concept can be covered in many ways. Design your answers to be 2-3 significant sentences. One-word answers are too short, but rambling on about a single question is equally poor. The interviewer will dig for more detail if they want it, so be moderate in your response length. Practice answering these questions out loud, either to a parent or to yourself. Better yet, have a parent or counselor conduct a mock interview with you. Also, be prepared for the occasional "weird" question such as, "If you were a tree, what kind would you be and why?" Don't laugh, we've seen it!

Sample Interview Questions

Why do you want to attend our school?
What is your strongest/weakest point?
What have you done to prepare for college?
What has been your most awful experience/moment you can think of?
What has been your greatest experience in high school?
What do you want to do in the future?
Tell me about yourself. (You should focus on about three things.)
Tell me about your interests.
Tell me about your involvement in extracurricular activities.
What do you think about the election? Did you watch the debates?
What is your favorite book? Who is your favorite author?
Which of your accomplishments are you the most proud of?
If you could meet any important figure in the past or present, who would it be and what would you talk about?
If you could be any animal what would you be? Why?
Why are you considering this college?
How did you come to include us among your choices?
What makes you think this college and you are right for each other?
Where else are you applying and why?
Which is your first choice? Why?
What do you hope to major in? Why?
What are your plans for the future? What do you expect to be doing years from now?
What have you liked or disliked about your high school?
If you were the principal of your school, what would you change?
What would you like to tell us about yourself?
What newspapers and magazines do you read? How often?
What books (not required by your courses) have you read recently?
What television shows do you watch?
Tell us about your family.
How do you spend a typical afternoon after school? Evening? Weekend?
How do you spend your vacations?
What extracurricular activities have you found most satisfying?
Do you have any heroes, contemporary or historical?
How would your best friend describe you?
If you could talk with any living person, who would it be and why?
What events have been crucial in your life?
What is the most significant contribution you have made to your school or community?
What is the most important thing you have learned in high school?
What historical event do you feel has had the most impact on the 20th century?
Tell us about your innermost fears.
What do you want to get out of your college experience?
Why should we accept you?
What would you say to an admissions officer if one were standing right here, as to why they should admit you?
What are the three most important possessions in your room?

Questions for You to Ask

Generally the interviewer will allow time for you to ask questions. Even if you don't really have any, find three to ask. Use this opportunity to demonstrate that you know something about the college. Do your research first! Here are some ideas:

How are fraternities or sororities perceived on this campus?
I've heard _____ about your _____. Could you comment on that?
Are there ways to become involved with sports?
Do most kids leave the campus on the weekends?
How is campus security?
Are students allowed to live off campus?

*How is dorm preference determined?
How are roommates selected?
Tell me about the _____ program. (your major) Is there an honors program?
I notice that you offer _____. Could you tell me a little more about that program?
How large are most classes?
Are classes taught by professors or teaching assistants? What percent TA's?
Are there research opportunities available?
Are there internship opportunities available?
Are there opportunities to study abroad?
What percentage of the student body returns after freshman year?
What percent graduate in four years?*

Try to make your questions specific enough such that the interviewer knows they relate to that college alone. Demonstrate that you've done your homework.

How to Dress

The proper term for interview attire would be "nicer casual." Avoid old jeans, T-shirts, sandals, short skirts, fancy outfits, gaudy attire, torn or ripped clothing, clothing with slogans (or worse) written on it, etc. Females should wear nice pants or moderate skirts with a conservative sweater or blouse. Males should wear nice pants with a collared shirt; even sporty golf-type shirts with collars are acceptable.

Be on Time

Always allow extra time to get to your interview, because something will inevitably go wrong. Traffic will be horrible, you'll get lost, or you'll have trouble parking. Double the expected amount of time and you should be okay. Aim to arrive about twenty minutes early, because often you are given a form to fill out first. You can also relax a bit. If using MapQuest or other internet directions, try to find a way to verify them.

Don't Bring Your Parents

It is unlikely that the interviewer will want your parents to be with you. They prefer to get to know you alone. Having your parents sit in with you can indicate insecurity or immaturity and you don't want to show either of those traits, do you? The interviewer may wish to address the parents afterward, but they should wait in the waiting area if they are there at all. The safest approach is probably to go alone.

Be Honest

Everyone has strong and weak points, and it's better to be honest about weaknesses. You don't need to go out of your way to bring them up, but be forthright about them if asked. It doesn't sound truthful or realistic to imply that you don't have any.

Bring Your Resume

Remember all that work you did on your resume? Well, here's another chance to use it. Print it on professional, quality paper. (no borders or cute colors). Have it with you, and when you are greeted simply hand it to the interviewer saying "I brought a resume in case it would be helpful to you." (or something to that effect). Don't be concerned if they don't use it. You scored your points by being so well prepared and organized.

Get the Name or Card of the Interviewer

As you depart, the interviewer may hand you a business card. Don't lose it! If they don't offer one, ask if they have one. If they don't, confirm the name and address of the interviewer with correct spelling. This is for the thank you note that you will send next.

Send a Thank You Note

Soon after your interview (one or two days), write a thank you note to your interviewer letting him/her know that you appreciate their taking the time to meet with you. Add a couple of sentences regarding how it helped you, and perhaps hoping that they learned a little more about you. If that college is your first choice, say so in closing. Sign the note with a closing such as Sincerely, Thanks Again or Yours Truly and your full name. If you have a small picture that reflects positively on you, enclose it with the note. It can't hurt!

Don't Think it Went Well?

Don't ever write off a college simply because you didn't feel the interview went as well as you'd hoped. Interviewers have off days too, and it may not even be significant in your case. Just move on and prepare for the next one.

The following page contains a checklist for your college interview preparation. Good luck obtaining and acing your college interviews!

Checklist for Your College Interview

- Find out if your potential college offers private one-on-one interviews.
- If offered, try to make an appointment early. They are not generally unlimited.
- If you will be interviewing at multiple schools, try to schedule your first choice last so you will have some practice before that one.
- Get a map of the campus and directions to exactly where your interview is conducted.
- Research your college thoroughly before the interview. It may help show that you've done your homework and are specifically interested in that school.
- Have parents or other adult friends conduct a mock interview with you beforehand.
- Practice answering likely questions such as:
 - Why do you want to attend this school?
 - Why should we admit you? What will you contribute to our incoming class?
 - How would you describe yourself to a stranger?
 - What is your greatest accomplishment? Your greatest weakness?
 - Tell me about your family?
 - Who is your hero and why?
 - What do you see yourself doing in the future?
 - What is the most significant contribution you've made to your school or community?
 - What are your most valuable possessions and why?
 - What would you do with a million dollars and why?
 - What extracurricular activities might you pursue in college?
 - How would friends describe you?
 - (develop other questions on your own)
- Come up with at least 3 questions to ask them that aren't obvious from brochures, such as:
 - What do you think is unique about this school?
 - How would you describe the atmosphere here?
 - Do you have any advice for me?
- Be sure you are rested and nicely/conservatively dressed. Nice casual attire is fine.
- Be on time! Allow more time to get there than you think you need. Traffic, or something else, will always be worse than you expect.
- Be alert, focused, enthusiastic (appropriately), confident and honest at all times.
- Get the interviewers business card (if not available, their address) and thank them.
- Write a thank you note to the interviewer within a couple of days.