

INTERVIEWS 2020

Admissions interviews are an excellent way for you to show not only your academic and extracurricular interests and personality, but also your interest in a particular college. **Although not all colleges offer interviews, we strongly encourage you to take advantage of any such opportunities, particularly during this time when students have fewer opportunities to visit campuses.**

The goal of the interview is for your interviewer to learn as much about you as possible and for both of you to determine whether you and the college will be a good match.

So you need to become comfortable talking about your achievements and interests without bragging.

Some colleges have admissions officers conducting interviews. Others have current students conduct them, and still others have trained alumni in your hometown who will interview you after you have submitted your applications. Some interviews are “informational,” meaning that the intent is to provide you with additional information about the school. However, it is best to treat all interviews seriously, whether it is with an admissions officer, current student, or alumnus. Almost all interactions with colleges are evaluative on one level or another so it is best to approach every contact you have with a college as an opportunity to create an advocate for your application.

It is also likely that most of your interviews this application season will be conducted virtually.

How important are interviews?

A strong interview cannot make up for a weak application or academic record but the right interview with the right person—if you are a serious contender academically—could become a pivotal factor.

We have known of colleges telling the public that interviews are not important and not evaluative. We have also known these same colleges to count it against students for not showing up on campus for an interview. **Always interview if you have the opportunity.**

How can you prepare for interviews?

Understand what your interviewers are most interested in learning about you and be sure to practice ahead of time. One way to practice is to jot down notes about yourself which address the major themes and practice saying your answers before the interviews. If possible, do not schedule an interview at your favorite college first as you will generally improve with practice.

Preparing for virtual interviews:

Prepare your interview space well in advance and build on the best practices you discovered while learning remotely. Find a place where there is not a lot of activity and where you will get good WiFi reception. Consider your background carefully and make sure there is nothing inappropriate or distracting behind you—create a virtual background if necessary. Make sure you have downloaded any software you might need (Skype? Zoom?) and consider using headphones or earbuds. Experiment with lighting, making sure your face is illuminated and that you are not backlit. It can be helpful to interview from a space where your computer can be plugged into a power source as using video software can draw down a battery quickly.

When should you interview?

The answer largely depends on the specific college. Some like to begin interviewing juniors towards the end of the school year; others prefer to wait until they receive your application. If you want an interview with a college that offers them on campus or virtually, you will need to take the initiative and request an appointment online well in advance. Some colleges have earlier application deadlines for students who want to request interviews.

How should you dress?

Dress respectfully. Boys do not have to show up in a jacket and tie but a shirt with a collar is a good idea; similarly, girls don't have to wear dresses or skirts but should present themselves appropriately. While it is tempting to wear shorts for a video interview, resist the temptation just in case more of you ends up on camera than you planned. And remember to think about the impression you want to make.

Whether you interview in-person or virtually, make good eye contact when you meet and throughout the interview.

If you meet in-person, please consider and discuss with your parents whether or not to shake hands or wear a mask while the pandemic is still active.

Major themes

There are three major areas of interest to a college admissions interviewer:

- 1 | Academic interests**—remember your audience! This is an academic institution and ultimately they are looking for students who will be interested in their courses, and enthusiastic contributors in their classrooms. Be prepared to discuss your favorite classes, your favorite book, and/or your favorite teacher and to explain why. Expect to be asked what you want to study in college; it is acceptable to have an open mind or to be unsure, but give your interviewer some possibilities of subjects for which you can show enthusiasm. You don't have to know your expected major, but you are expected to show genuine interest in an academic field.

- 2| **Contribution to school or community**—What you do during high school will indicate to colleges what you may become involved in during college. Since colleges want students who will contribute their talents and interests to student life, be prepared to discuss how you contribute to your current school through your extracurricular activities, and through your participation in classroom discussions. Ideal class participation does not dominate but includes listening well and trying to involve classmates who may hold back. If this is not true of you yet, then it is time to change, as letters of recommendation from your teachers are likely to address this issue.
- 3| **Awareness of and genuine interest in important issues beyond yourself or your community**—Be prepared to discuss larger issues of social consequence or newsworthy events. You should be able to say what you think about issues larger than your family, school, or community. Reading *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, or *The Economist* is good preparation for these discussions, as is catching up with the news on television or the internet.

You should be able to show that you think about issues that affect humanity as a whole, not just you and your friends or family. It's even better if you have actively engaged with one of these issues (as a volunteer, fundraiser, etc.) or have researched and expressed opinions on them in a debate, in a school paper, or in the classroom. Don't be afraid to express your own views but be sure to show openness toward dissenting opinions. Colleges want students who assert themselves and their own ideas, but they also value tolerance. Be able to demonstrate that you can see both sides of social or political issues.

A few general points to remember:

- **Try to relax and have a good two-way conversation.** Most interviewers will not try to give you a hard time nor will they try to ask you tricky questions. Avoid one-word answers and strive to develop your responses. Most of the questions will be open-ended to give you room to talk about yourself.
- **Try to get right to your academics.** Your interview is not a social visit and your application is based on your performance in school. So the question “Tell me about yourself” should lead right into what you are interested in academically and what you are studying now, as well as what you hope to study in college, as opposed to describing where you were born.
- **Resist the temptation or even invitation to dwell on the negative.** If you are asked “What is your least favorite subject?,” answer honestly but move quickly to a positive angle. “I found Trigonometry really hard this fall, but **interesting**, and I've been doing some extra work with my teacher and finding that with hard work, it's coming along.” **DO NOT blame a teacher or school administrator for weak grades!** Avoid dwelling on grades altogether; in contrast, it is essential to show your interest in your subjects. You do not need to have a specific area of study in mind, but show enthusiasm and interest in as many subject areas as you sincerely can.

- **Learn about the college before your interview.** Have a good answer for “Why are you interested in the College?” beyond the college’s excellent reputation. What do you like about it? A good place to start is their student body. What attracts you to their particular student community?

It is likely that your interviewer may ask how the coronavirus has affected you and your family. Remember that your interviewer may be from an entirely different part of the country and may have had a very different experience than you. So start by explaining your context—how long have you been at home? How frequently have you left your home? Have you or other family members been ill or worse? How effective was your spring semester online? What are your plans for the summer? Try not to focus on what has been cancelled; if you can, share what you have been doing with any extra time you have had this spring and your plans for the summer.

Common interview questions include:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in our college (or why are you applying to our college)?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses as a student?
- How would your friends describe you?
- Do you like your high school? How would you improve it?
- What has been your most positive experience in high school?
- Describe your favorite teacher and why he or she is your favorite.
- What is your favorite class?
- What kind of books do you enjoy?
- Tell me about a class assignment that you found particularly stimulating.
- Tell me about a time when you were faced with a challenge and overcame it.
- If you could make a difference in the world, what would you do and why?
- What do you want to study in college and why?
- How do you spend your free time?
- Which of your extracurricular activities has been most satisfying?
- What did you do last summer?
- How do you contribute to your school or community?
- What are some of the criteria you are considering in selecting a college?

Occasionally, an interviewer will ask a question that seems to come out of the blue—if you were an animal (or tree or kitchen implement), what would you be? One effective way to approach a response is to step back and think about what you want your interviewer to

learn about you from this conversation. Do you want them to think of you as a leader—then maybe you'd be a lion. Flexible and adaptable? Then maybe you'd be a willow tree. Good at bringing different kinds of people together? Maybe you'd be a blender.

Consider how you would respond to each of these questions. Try not to be negative; stress your positive feelings and your generosity in your attitude toward your school, teachers, courses, and any person whom you mention.

Finally, it is fine to buy yourself some time to think about your answer by initially saying “That is a good question—let me think about that.” And then take a few moments to think about how you want to respond in full.

Questions to ask interviewers:

Since you will almost certainly be asked if you have any questions, be sure to have some prepared (otherwise you may appear disinterested). Try to make sure you're asking questions that couldn't be easily answered on the college's website or by browsing through their literature. A question relating to your academic interests would be helpful, and you should explain why you're asking (e.g., “I've really enjoyed my summer research opportunities. Are there a lot of research opportunities for undergraduates?”). Some other questions, that you might want to put in your own words, include:

- What types of students seem to fit in and do well at your college? Would you describe the student body as conservative, liberal or a blend?
- Which events bring everyone together? Which events are most popular? Do students attend games and each other's performances?
- What goes on during a typical weekend?
- Did you attend this college? If so, what was the best part of going here? If you could change one thing about your experience here, what would it be?
- Are there opportunities for undergraduates to do research?
- I'm interested in (student club/organization/activity); could you tell me more about it? Are there many students involved in it?
- Where do most students study?
- How easy is it for students to get the classes they want?
- Who does freshman academic advising and how are advisors assigned?
- How easy is it to transfer from one school to another within the university?
- What sets this college apart from other similar colleges?
- What are your college's plans for this fall?

Follow up your interviews with a thank you note. It is another chance to reflect on your campus visit and express your sincere interest in the college.