

INTRODUCING INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING INTO CURRICULUM

Abdullah Al-Ani, Nick Zabinyakov & Derrick Rancourt

Most universities do not adequately present students with an understanding of program specific career opportunities beyond graduation¹. Many students feel that they are ill prepared to approach career from a networking perspective². To help address this issue, we have been using the informational interview as an experiential learning approach in both our undergraduate and graduate teaching to encourage students to explore career mapping. Traditionally the informational interview involves talking with people who are currently working in a career interest area to gain a better understanding of a career path or industry. It can help the interviewer to seek ideas and advice from others about career opportunities and what they need to do to get themselves ready. It can be thought of as a form of networking that helps one build a network of contacts in a specific professional area. Typically, questions are asked in four general areas: Personal, Qualifications, Landscape, and Leads. Importantly, the interviewer does not ask for employment, although an informational interview may lead to an offer.

Personal	Qualifications	Landscape	Leads
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe the work you do? What is a typical day like? • What parts of the job do you find most challenging? Most enjoyable? • What is it like to work in this career? • How did you get started doing this type of work? • What surprised you the most when you started working in this field? • What is the typical salary range? What is the long-term salary potential? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the skills you most use in your work? • How does one get hired into this part of the organization? • What education, experience, and skills are needed? • What connections would be most helpful to get hired here? • What are employers typically looking for when hiring people in this line of work? • How do my qualifications compare with employer's expectations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the opportunities in this career path? • What is the typical career path for people in this field? • How do you see this industry developing in the future? How is your industry changing? • Why do people leave this field? • What advice would you give to someone who wants to get started in this industry? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May I have your business card? • Could I follow you on LinkedIn? • Can you suggest one or two other people I could talk to about my career development? • Is there anything else you think I need to know?

We use the informational interview in our biomedical engineering core course to help students understand the employment landscape beyond academia. We assign various career paths for students to research and to present to the rest of the class. Most of these appear in the top 20 non-academic careers (cheekyscientist.com/phd-jobs). Part of the students' research includes identifying individuals who work in their assigned career. To assist with their networking, we introduce them to using LinkedIn as a networking tool. They are encouraged to "play the student card" and to leverage the kindness of strangers who are asked to help³. Response to this exercise has been overwhelmingly positive and has led to job and internship offers

(<https://wcm.ucalgary.ca/gse/professional-development/informational-interview-delivers-lucky-break>).

As an experiential learning process, informational interviews are meaningful because they are motivating⁴. It has been widely reported that students tend to pay more attention while participating in an activity rather than reading about it. Experiential learning activates both sides of the brain. It appeals to multiple intelligences and creates episodic memory. Students' personal associations form the basis for remembering and understanding.

We believe that the traditional Informational interviews should be applied more broadly than graduate school. We have learned anecdotally that medical students could benefit from the landscape analysis that informational interview can provide. In North America, many sub-disciplines of Medicine are saturated⁵. Yet many medical students naively pursue sub-specialities without doing prior landscape analysis. Often their decisions are based upon glamour and geography instead of anticipating the market and then find themselves stranded when looking for a job. Although we are only aware of this problem in Medicine, it could also occur in other professions such as law, which are changing dramatically because of globalization.

We suggest that undergraduate students can benefit from the experience of informational interviewing. We have introduced informational interviewing into a biotechnology undergraduate course that serves students who are interested in knowing what careers are available to them beyond Medicine and Research. Many students who have abandoned the pursuit of graduate education often learn that higher education may be necessary to pursue careers that they may be interested in.

Finally, we would like to suggest that informational interviewing be use more broadly in curriculum beyond career mapping. Many students find informational interviews especially challenging, because their comfort zone often lies in independent studies and not networked problem solving. However, we believe that it is crucial to constantly push our students out of their comfort zone and encourage them to interact with people within and outside of their disciplines. The university is rich with expertise that students often neglect. Moreover, networked problem solving can help significantly with community engagement. By pushing students outside of their comfort zone, they will grow as peers and as people⁵.

References

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