Conducting Informational Interviews

Students in the Human Services Program have many opportunities to conduct informational interviews for the purposes of practicum or internship placements and/or general career planning purposes. Informational interviews are not job interviews, and inquiries about paid opportunities at the agency should never be solicited. Rather, informational interviews are an opportunity for students to collect information about specific careers and agencies that can be used for field placement purposes to assist students in determining career interests.

The Process of Conducting an Informational Interview

Informational interviews are arranged in advance with the Agency and should be face to face. When used for the purpose of investigating practicum/internship placements, students should request to talk with a staff member who oversees interns, and indicate that they are students in Western Washington University’s Human Services Program. Because of the busy nature of most human services agencies, if an interview is granted, a student cannot expect the interview to last for more than 30 minutes. Students should make sure to bring an extra copy of their résumé to the interview.

In addition to the formal questions and answers that take place during an informational interview, this interview is also a good opportunity for students to take a look at the working environment at the agency. Students should arrive several minutes ahead of the appointed interview time. This provides an opportunity to assess employee dress, office arrangements, mood in the agency (i.e., humor, stress), etc.

When attending an informational interview, students should dress and act professionally, greeting the interviewee with a firm handshake. At the beginning of the
interview students should state (or restate) the purpose of the informational interview. If the purpose is to seek a field placement, the interviewee should be aware of this fact right away. At the conclusion of the interview, a plan should be in place as to whether or not the student is interested in pursuing further discussions about a practicum/internship placement with the agency. If a student is interested, but plans to interview with other agencies, this should be indicated. If the student learned through the interview process that the agency would not be a good match, this information should also be shared in a courteous manner. Regardless of whether the student plans to pursue a placement with the agency, a formal thank you note should be sent to the interviewee following the interview. It is important to provide closure to any placement decisions. If a student decides not to pursue a placement at the agency, then he/she should make this information known to the interviewee as soon as possible following the informational interview.

**Questions During Informational Interviews**

Most placements require an on-site interview with an agency representative. While phone interviews are sometimes necessary, it is always preferable to visit the agency in person. It is essential that students carefully prepare for the informational interview by reviewing materials about the agency’s mission, client base, and ongoing activities. This can be done by talking with previous interns and carefully examining the agency’s website if available.

The best questions to ask reflect motivation to learn and interest in finding a placement that is a good match for both the student and the agency. It is important to avoid asking questions that are too personal or that imply that a student could be demanding or complaining. The following list of questions emphasizes questions that could be asked at an
interview for the purposes of securing a field placement. For students who are conducting informational interviews for other purposes, see:

http://www.quintcareers.com/information_interview.html

**Suggested questions to ask during an informational interview:**

- What is a typical career path for someone in this field?
- What are some unique features of this agency?
- What skills or talents are most important for interns to possess when working here?
- What kinds of activities are interns typically involved in?
- Is it possible to talk with a current intern?
- Have past interns found jobs available in this area after internship?
- What are the strengths and limitations of being an intern at this agency?
- What are the expected hours?
- What type of quarterly commitment does your agency request?
- Who else do you suggest I talk to about a field experience in this area of human services?
- What are the opportunities for a paid internship?

**Questions to avoid asking:**

- Persistent questions about moving into a paid position at the agency.
- Questions about an interest area that is unrelated.
- Questions indicating that students would promote a personal agenda that is unrelated to the mission of the agency.
Questions that students should be prepared to answer:

- What are your interests in the field of human services?
- What experiences and skills could you bring to the placement?
- What are you looking for in a practicum placement/internship?
- Describe your experiences working with clients from diverse backgrounds.
- What are your future career plans and goals?

By the time students leave the informational interview, they should have a basic understanding of the following:

- Purpose and goals of the organization.
- General duties and responsibilities of practicum students/interns.
- Whether or not this might be a suitable placement.