Networking and the Informational Interview

Networking is what you do everyday on campus. When you ask people in your residence hall the best Italian restaurant to take your family for dinner, you are networking. **Networking is creating relationships and tapping into your connections for helpful information and advice.** In terms of jobs, if you ask someone in your history class whether the Outback is still hiring and whom you should contact about working there, you just started networking.

Networking is regarded as one of the most effective career exploration and job search tools, especially in a challenging economy. How do you begin?

1. **What are you looking for?** A specific position? A particular organization? Answers to a general question about opportunities in communication? Research positions, fields, and/or organizations using resources in the Career Resource Library, the Internet, and field specific publications so you have a strong sense of what you are talking about. Practice describing your interests to a friend.

2. **Who can help you?** Using the “communication” example from above, the list may contain names of specific faculty in the Media & Communication Department at Muhlenberg, the Vice President of Public Relations, the Manager of WMUH, and the family friend working at a newspaper. Set a goal of having at least 25 names on the list to start.

3. **Think about your activities, hobbies, and sports.** Add another 25 people to your networking list based on those you know through activities, community service, etc. They don’t necessarily have to be working in your field of interest.

4. **Where else can you find people to help you?** Expand your list to at least 75 names by using:
   - Directories of organizations related to your field of interest (e.g., Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook available in Trexler Library).
   - Professional organizations in your career field (e.g., American Communication Association).
   - Geographic-based directories (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce directory for your targeted city), etc.
   - Consider using networking sites on the Internet. There are sites that are more professionally oriented rather than social (see page 40 for information on how best to use your social networking site). Check out LinkedIn.com, an online network of 70 million experienced professionals where you can connect with colleagues, and link to their contacts. Also use the “Experience Connections” section of your Career Connections account (see additional sections in this guide for information on Career Connections). There you can search for others with similar career interests.
   - Join an organization such as The Network of Young Professionals (www.netyp.org), a Lehigh Valley organization which can connect you with other young professionals in the area. The organization fosters awareness of employment possibilities, supports community organizations, provides professional development opportunities and engages in social networking.

5. **Leave yourself open to chance.** Take opportunities to discuss your interests with acquaintances or people you meet for the first time. People generally like to talk about themselves, so you can use lines like “What do you do for a living?” or “Tell me how things are in your line of work” to get you started. Variations of this also work at social events if you run out of things to say.

6. **Start networking!** Informational interviews can be informal (letting your uncle know you would love to learn more about his job at Merrill Lynch), or they might be quite formal (spending the day with an alumna who does marketing for New York magazine through the Muhlenberg Shadow Program). You can really turn any situation into a networking opportunity!

Setting up a formal networking meeting can be done by phone, mail, or e-mail but should always be done professionally.

**By PHONE:**
The advantage of calling first is that it is fast. The disadvantage is that if the person you are calling doesn't recognize your name, he or she may not take the call; or if you happen to call at a busy time, the person may rush you or decline your request. (See Sample A in this guide.)

If you ask to schedule a time to talk further on voice mail, be as clear and specific as possible. Be sure to include your name, reason for calling, a number where you can be reached and the best time to call; repeat all the information clearly to make sure the recipient has all the information before hanging up. If you are calling an alum, be sure to mention you are a Muhlenberg student. Practice what you want to say before you actually make the call.
By MAIL or E-MAIL:
The advantage of writing to your targeted person is that you can carefully craft your request. You can enclose a resume to give the person more information about yourself. It is usually best to follow the letter with a phone call about a week or two after the letter was sent. (See Sample B in this guide.) When you follow up on the phone, you can begin with “Have you received my letter/email?” If so, the person will have a clear sense of why you are calling and may be better prepared to help you. If not, you can always explain your request verbally. This method is slower, but tends to make students more confident with their requests and it sends a sense of seriousness and professionalism to the recipient. (See Sample C in this guide.)

THE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW
A common networking request would be for a 20-30 minute informational interview. The informational interview can be conducted by phone at a mutually agreeable future time (although you should be prepared if the person wants to talk immediately) or in person at the interviewee’s place of work (or public place such as a restaurant or coffee shop.) In either case, remember that YOU are the INTERVIEWER. You will be asking the questions and you will watch the clock. If the person is willing to spend more time than you requested, or if they offer to give you an office tour, consider it a bonus. Be prepared to end the interview at the predetermined time limit by saying something like, "I know you are busy and our 20 minutes is almost over." You could then ask your last question. Take the host’s lead from there. If the person encourages you to stay longer, great. Dress appropriately, remember, you want to make a professional impression!

The following is a list of sample questions you may want to ask during an informational interview or networking meeting. Be prepared with more questions than you think you will have time for. Ask industry- or organizational-specific questions as well.

Possible Informational Interview Questions:

- Can you describe a typical day in your job?
- What background is most common for people in your field?
- What is your educational and professional background?
- If you were in college today, what would you do to best prepare yourself for a job in your field?
- What do you think is the most important thing someone starting out could do to be successful in your field?
- What are the normal work hours? Are weekends/holidays required? What about overtime?
- Describe a typical career path in this field.
- If you would move up from your current position, what is a logical next step?
- What courses are most important for someone entering this field?
- What types of organizations would hire people to do what you do?
- In addition to my education, what should I be doing to prepare for a career in this field?
- What is the job outlook in this field?
- What are the most significant challenges facing your field/organization today?
- Is advanced education beneficial in this field? Is it necessary? What degrees are most helpful?
- What would be an example of an entry-level position/entry-level job titles in this field?
- What skills would you be looking for in a candidate for an entry-level position?
- Are there professional publications or organizations that I should be familiar with if I want to enter this field?
- What other job opportunities are open to someone with your experience?
- What would be an average starting salary in this field? (General salary questions are fine, but questions about the host’s own salary are inappropriate.)
- Can you recommend additional people for me to speak with?

If you end each networking contact with the last question above, your list of 75 contacts will quickly grow. Have a database or file system to track whom you meet. There is no right or wrong way to organize your contacts, as long as you keep them organized. (See a sample in this guide.)

Remember, your objective is to gather information about the individual’s job, career path, field of work, and organization while sharing enough information about yourself for the host to help you. It would be fine to explain that you would like advice in identifying summer internships or job opportunities in this field, or to ask for comments on your resume. It is NOT appropriate to ask for a job. The fastest way to lose a networking contact is to abuse a networking contact!

Follow-Up
Always follow up your interview with a thank you letter whether you spoke on the phone or met in person. If you spend a significant amount of time with more than one person during an office visit, each person should receive a separate letter. With that in mind, don’t forget to ask for business cards from the people you meet. (Look in this guide for an article on follow-up.)

Keep in touch with your contacts and remember to report back when you follow their advice, when you get in touch with someone to whom you were referred, or when you are successful in obtaining a job or internship. It is always nice to let people know how they helped and that you are willing to help them should the occasion arise.
TELEPHONE OPENING (Sample A)

When somebody in the organization answers the phone,

"Hello, may I please speak to Ms. Alumna?" or "Hello, this is __________ calling from Muhlenberg College. Is Ms. Alumna available?"

Once you reach the person with whom you would like to meet, be prepared to quickly explain why you are calling and how she can help you.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Alumna. My name is __________ and I am a Muhlenberg College student considering a career in advertising. I got your name from the Muhlenberg Career Center as someone who volunteered to help students. Would you be willing to meet with me for 20 or 30 minutes for an informational interview so I can learn more about your position as Account Executive?"

TELEPHONE OPENING FOLLOWING A LETTER (Sample B)

"Good afternoon, Ms. Alumna. My name is __________ and I am a Muhlenberg College student considering a career in advertising. I am calling to follow up on my recent letter requesting about a half hour of your time to learn more about your position as an Account Executive with Ogilvy & Mather. Have you received my letter?"

When making the arrangements for the visit, be as flexible as possible.

"Although I do not live in New York, I can make arrangements to be available at your convenience. Is there a date and time that would be best for you?"

If you will only be in the area for a short time, suggest possible dates, but be understanding if the person is unavailable at that time.

"Although I live in Miami, I will be in New York City for my sister’s graduation during the week of May 15. Would it be possible to meet that week?"

WRITTEN REQUEST FOR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW (Sample C)

832 West Pond Road
Milton, NJ 91000
September 3, 2013

Mr. Chris Jachimowicz
Director, Student Leadership Development and Greek Affairs
Muhlenberg College
2400 Chew Street
Allentown, PA 18104

Dear Mr. Jachimowicz:

Recently I heard about the innovative programs and student focus that have made Muhlenberg College so competitive among liberal arts colleges. A friend of mine, Justin Block, attends Muhlenberg and told me that you are one of the most respected administrators at the College. My career goal is to become a College Administrator. I am in the process of investigating this career field and I would like to speak with you about your position. Would you be willing to meet with me for a brief informational interview?

While at Shippensburg University, I have been integrally involved in the administration of the college by serving as Treasurer of Student Government and as Class President. My biggest accomplishment was researching and modifying the college policy that regulates fraternity events on campus. My enclosed resume highlights some of my other achievements and skills.

Working to improve the college environment is challenging and rewarding, and I think it would be an exciting career field. I look forward to the opportunity to meet with you and talk about your career. I will call you in the next week to discuss this and, hopefully, set up an appointment.

Sincerely,

Joe Q. Student

Joe Q. Student

Enclosure