

Get Involved in Research: Interviewing a Researcher Instructor Guide

Description: In this session you are going to prepare your students to conduct meaningful interviews with a faculty member about their research. Students will learn how to plan interview questions that yield detailed answers. They will break into groups of two to brainstorm a series of questions and follow-up questions. Then they will test their questions in mock interviews with a new classmate. This practice will help them to prepare questions for their faculty interview assignment, which they will be given three weeks to complete.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this session, students should be able to...

- Connect with a classmate that they do not yet know well

- Create a series of interview questions to explore their curiosity about doing research

- Develop a framework for leading a valuable conversation with a faculty member

Instructor Tips:

Open the session by explaining that research is the means by which humanity gains new knowledge, and that the university system plays a critical role in generating and disseminating new knowledge throughout society. Some research results in knowledge that is made available freely, some results in new Intellectual Property that can be used to file for patents, form new companies, or develop new technologies to be marketed by existing companies. The process of conducting research and communicating the results helps individual people to increase their personal knowledge, skills, and abilities. While it is not exactly necessary for every engineering student to get involved in research in order to be hired after completing their degree, having some research experience will make them more appealing to hire. But research may also open up new opportunities that would otherwise not be available.

Activity:

Have your students write down a series of questions to ask a generic faculty member in an interview that get at the following benefits of research:

- What got them started doing research

- How research changed them as a person

- Opportunities that arose through research

- What research they do now

- Other aspects of research as well...

Encourage the students to phrase their questions to be engaging on a personal level. After some time preparing the questions, have them conduct mock interviews with their peers in class. Have

the peers do their best to assume the role of a faculty member when they sit as the interviewee. Give them a few minutes to conduct their mock interviews and then have them rotate roles.

After completing the exercise, debrief as a class. Ask the students to volunteer to share questions that they think worked well, write them on the screen, and discuss what made the questions effective.

Variations:

- After preparing questions for the faculty members, you could have the students conduct actual interviews with their peers, but instruct them to replace “research” with their peer’s favorite pastime activity (music, sports, gaming, etc.) to help them get to know one another. During debriefing, ask them if they think the questions would translate effectively for the context of a faculty interview.
- This exercise could easily be run as a Think-Pair-Share activity where students create the questions first by themselves, then as a team, and then share with the classroom. In this manner the exercise may be done without the mock interviews, which may be a good idea if there is not enough class time available.
- Another variation might be for a brave student or team of students to interview the class instructor in class after creating the interview questions, with a debriefing discussion held afterward.

Follow-up:

If you haven’t done so already, give them the faculty interview assignment. It would probably be a good idea to give them one week to simply arrange the interview, and then another week or two to conduct the interview. Finally, give them a week to write up and submit a summary of their findings.

Note:

The author of this exercise has found that conducting interviews of this nature can serve as an effective Independent Study course for students whose life circumstances preclude them from taking their freshman survey course. Have them prepare and conduct interviews with a handful (~5) faculty members in a semester and write ~600 word summaries of the interviews that highlight the faculty member and their professional work. The resulting write-ups can then be used by the department or college’s communications team to highlight the faculty interviewees, which can be a service credit for the instructor as well as the interviewees.