The Role of the Interview in the Admissions Process
(A Handbook for Alumni Recruiting Network Volunteers)

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So You’re Interviewing a Prospective Student…

On behalf of the entire Admissions Office team, thank you very much for volunteering some time to meet with and speak with a prospective student. The time you spend with this student can make or break their interest in attending Oberlin College. The friendliness of the interview, the interest you show in their answers, the vibe they get, the passion you show for your alma mater, the – all of this is extremely important.

For the 2011-2012 Admissions cycle, there were 1206 requests for an alumni interview from students who lived in an area where we have an alumni volunteer. Only 890 (or 73.8%) of these students actually had an interview. While this number may seem high, we would like it to be higher. We want all of these students to have an interview because this may be the only contact the students have with a representative of the Admissions Office. And while fancy publications and emails are a fine way to communicate with students, face-to-face contact is much more effective.

The purpose of this short handbook is threefold:

1. To provide a refresher on how to conduct the interview: where to meet, what sorts of questions to ask, the write-up, etc.
2. To explain how the interview fits with the rest of the application materials we receive
3. To clarify how we use an interview write-up when we make decisions
How to Conduct an Interview

When a student from your area requests an interview, we process the request and send you the student's contact information. We ask that you contact the student to start the conversation about finding a time to meet. If you’re traveling for work and can’t meet immediately, that’s fine – please contact the student anyway to let them know that you’d like to meet when it’s mutually convenient.

If you ever receive a request and will not be able to meet with the student, please let us know immediately so that we can ask another alum volunteer to contact the student. This is critical.

To make sure that the student is comfortable, we ask that you find a neutral location to meet. Your home is off-limits. An office space is better, so long as you meet during traditional business hours. Best is a public space like a coffee shop, a bookstore, a library, or a park if the weather is nice.

So that you give the student the best opportunity to have a successful interview, here are some tips (provided by Admissions staff and interns):

• **Put the student at ease.** Introduce yourself and talk about what you do. Talk about when you graduated from Oberlin and what you studied. Don’t jump right into the interview. The atmosphere will be more casual and the student will feel more comfortable.

• **Think of the interview as a conversation, not a formal interview.** This is a chance for the student to highlight some of their accomplishments or to speak about their love of a particular subject or their commitment to service. Go with the flow and ask follow-up questions to the student’s responses. Don’t feel that you must ask certain questions.

• **Lay off the heavy stuff.** The fact that a student expresses an interest in Sociology does not mean you should ask questions about race theory or gender theory. A student interested in Latin may not feel comfortable speaking about *The Aeneid*. Go easy on the students please – after all, they’re only 17 or 18 years old.

• **Be friendly.** Show an interest in the student’s responses to your questions. You’re a representative of Oberlin College – if you have a bored look on your face as the student discusses her passion for sustainability, she may think that Oberlin isn’t the place for her.

• **Be careful what you say.** You never want to say anything disparaging about Oberlin because you never know who’s sitting across from you. If you say something negative about athletics, the prized recruit you’re interviewing might immediately cross Oberlin off his list. It’s better to say, “I really can’t speak to that topic. You might want to contact the Admissions Office for more information.”
Sample Interview Questions

Admissions Office staff and student interns are not handed a list of questions and told, “Ask students these questions.” We are given the freedom to let the interview run its course. We want alumni interviewers to do the same.

However, if you find that you need some prompting, here are some questions that we often ask students when the interview on campus:

• How did you first hear about Oberlin?
• What interests you about Oberlin?
• What distinguishes Oberlin from the other colleges you are considering?
• Are there areas of study that you are passionate about? Why those areas?
• Are there areas of study that you look forward to sampling in college? What are they?
• Are there a couple of classes that you would consider your favorites from high school? Why those classes?
• Is there a teacher you enjoyed? What made that person a good teacher?
• What do you do outside of school and schoolwork, whether in terms of extracurricular activities or things simply for fun?
• Let’s pretend I was speaking with your friends and asked them to describe you; what do you think they would say?
• What is something that you would not include on a resume that still makes you who you are?
• What are you reading right now?
• Is there a piece of your application that you would like to elaborate on for the Admissions Committee? (This is a chance for a student to talk about a low grade or a poor semester and to offer an explanation for what happened)
• The interview is as much for me to learn about you as it is for you to share who you are. Is there anything you have not talked about that you would like to share?
• Are there questions you have for me, as an alum and a representative of Oberlin?

If you are interviewing a student who is passionate about something, please feel free to ask questions about that topic. For the student who loves politics and wants to go into politics, go ahead and ask about the 2012 Presidential election. But don’t ask questions about intricate details of someone’s policy – that’s probably too much.
After the Interview is Complete

When you’re done with the interview, please do two things. First, please send the student a thank you note via email. Something very simple is fine – please thank them for meeting with you and tell them that you enjoyed the chance to learn more about them and their interest in Oberlin.

Second, we need you to complete a narrative write-up of the interview and to provide a numeric rating (from 1 to 5) for the student. Some things to consider:

- The write-up does not need to be a comprehensive recounting of everything you discussed.
- What is most helpful to us is information about the student’s interest in Oberlin and the student’s fit with the Oberlin community. Did the student tell you that Oberlin is their top choice? Is this a student you would like to have in class with you or as a roommate?
- The numeric rating you assign MUST BE SUPPORTED by the narrative account. It’s fine to rate a student a 5 and tell us that this is the greatest student you’ve ever interviewed but you have to explain why. Has the student completely overhauled the recycling in the high school? Has the student devoted countless hours to service despite having little herself? Is this a student who has overcome serious obstacles (homelessness, poverty, a handicap, etc.) to get to where they are today? Similarly, if you tell us that a student is not right for Oberlin, please explain why.

It is important to keep in mind that this rating is subjective. What you think makes someone a “5” might be a “4” for another interviewer. That’s why the narrative is critical for us – it allows us to really understand why you’ve rated a student as you have.

Your ideal Oberlin student is going to be different from someone else’s. As one of our former interns recently told me, “The shy Midwesterner who likes to play the trumpet and doesn’t know what they want to study is just as great as the confident city kid who has already plotted out their Winter Terms as is the suburban bassist who modified his car to run on biodiesel.”

Think of it another way. Imagine you have a stack of index cards with adjectives printed on them. You have to select 3 adjectives that would describe your ideal candidate for Oberlin. What do you pick? Every interviewer will have a different answer – and that’s OK. We need every type of student on campus to make Oberlin the place that it is.
Interview Rating Guidelines

5 This is a student we want at Oberlin. Think of someone who has overcome tremendous odds and obstacles. Think of the student who has achieved remarkably well despite facing very difficult situations. Think of the student who has made a name for him/herself in some extracurricular or leadership area.

4 This is a very appealing candidate. The student is a good match for Oberlin and has achieved much in his/her community.

3 This is a very solid student who would fit in well at Oberlin but who might not really stand out from the rest of the wonderful applicants we see.

2 This is a student with some question marks. Perhaps they weren’t able to talk about much other than their single area of academic interest. Perhaps there is a question about commitment academics. Perhaps there is some social awkwardness.

1 This is a student who is not right for Oberlin and who you think would really struggle with the academic and extracurricular community on campus.
The Interview and Its Role in the Application Process

When we review an application for admission, we engage in holistic review – every document submitted by the student or in support of the student is considered. Some of the documents carry more weight – the high school transcript, for example – but everything is important.

How does an interview write-up fit in? More than any single document in the application, the interview write-up gives us a sense of the student’s personality, values, and fit with Oberlin. We rely on you to give us an unbiased picture of the student and their match with Oberlin.

But the interview write-up is not the first thing we look at. We need to know that the student can handle the academic community at Oberlin. If we are not convinced that the student can succeed academically, we are not likely to admit the student. Below you can see a high school transcript for an applicant in 2012. This student had an interview and the alum LOVED him. Given the grades that you see, do you think he could handle Oberlin?

A great interview does not guarantee admission to Oberlin because there is so much more to the application.
At the same time, you may interview a student who does not impress you. If this is the case, please be sure to explain why. We will talk about this in our Admissions Committee. But please remember that there are other parts to an application. How would it look if we denied a student who is the valedictorian of the top private school in New York City simply because you and he did not click? What if the student is being recruited to play a sport? These are situations that we encounter on a daily basis – the simple fact that a student did not impress you is important to note and is taken into consideration but we also have to look at the larger picture.