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 to meet with and speak with a prospective student. The time you spend with this student can truly increase 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 – all of this is extremely important.

For the 2017-2018 Admissions cycle, alumni volunteers conducted interviews with approximately 1000 prospective students. We would like this number to be higher because an interview may be the only contact the students have with a representative of the Admissions Office. And while publications and emails are a fine way to communicate with students, face-to-face contact is much more effective. You can bring Oberlin to life in a way that print materials simply cannot.

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. Please contact the student to start a conversation about finding a time to meet. If you’re traveling for work and can’t meet immediately, that’s fine – 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 alumni volunteer. This is critical – a delay in letting us know that you’re not able to meet with the student means they may lose interest in completing an application for admission.

If you email a student to set up a time to meet and the student either does not respond or informs you that s/he is no longer interested in having the interview, please let us know immediately.

To make sure that the student is comfortable, we ask that you find a neutral location to meet. Private locations such as your home or your office space are off-limits. The best option is a public space like a coffee shop, a bookstore, a library, or a park.

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.** So that the student feels more comfortable, it is important to start off slowly. 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 with “Why are you interested in Oberlin?” Maybe start by asking how the student first heard about Oberlin or if they know someone who’s attended Oberlin.

- **Think of the interview as a conversation, not a formal interview.** The interview is not a make-or-break piece of the application. It is rare that something happens during the interview that will make the admissions committee dramatically change their opinion of the student. The interview is an opportunity for the student to highlight some of their accomplishments or to speak about their love of a particular subject or their commitment to something outside the classroom. 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. A student who says that they want to go into medicine may not know about recent technological advances. A student interested in Latin may not feel comfortable speaking about *The Aeneid*. Please remember that they are 17 or 18 years old and may not be prepared to answer questions in the way that a professional job candidate will.

- **Avoid certain topics.** Some topics should never be brought up; they include but are not limited to: Use of drugs or alcohol, a student’s sexual preferences or significant others, a student’s socioeconomic status, disabilities. If
student asks about drug/alcohol use on campus, you can answer that question honestly but you should not ask a student if they have a history of drug or alcohol use. It is possible that a student may act in ways that are consistent with someone who is autistic but you should not ask a student if they are autistic. If a student tells you that they are autistic or are from a lower socioeconomic stratum or were suspected from school for alcohol use, you can certain make note of this in your write-up but please be very careful about following up on that topic. However, as you are completing your write-up, please keep this information in mind.

- **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.** Never say anything disparaging about Oberlin because you never know who’s sitting across from you. If you say something negative about athletics, the 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.” If you’re asked questions about the campus climate today, you can speak from experience but speaking for the entire community is not ideal.
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 we 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?
- What areas of study do you look forward to trying in college?
- Are there 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?
- How would your friends describe you?
- 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 upcoming elections. But don’t ask questions about intricate details of someone’s policy – that’s probably too much.

There are some questions that are not permitted. While we are pretty confident that alumni volunteers are not asking them, we do want to make sure to share them.

- Have you ever been suspected or expelled for drug or alcohol use?
- Have you ever tried drugs or alcohol?
- Tell me about your boyfriend/girlfriend.
- Do you have any disabilities that the Admissions Committee should know about?
- What do your parents do? How much money do your parents make?
- To what other colleges are you applying? (This question is not permitted by NACAC, the National Association of College Admissions Counselors)
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. If the student writes back to you, please forward the email to the Alumni Recruiting Network (arn@oberlin.edu) so that we can include the thank you in the student’s application.

Second, we need you to complete an online write-up of the interview and to provide a numeric rating (whole numbers only, from 1 to 5) for the student. We prefer that the write-ups be submitted online at https://connect.oberlin.edu/register/aluminterviewform. This makes it easier for the write-up to be added to the rest of the student’s application materials in a timely manner.

Some things to consider about your write-up:

- It 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 liked to say, “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 academics 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 the interview is just one piece of the application. It is important that the decisions we reach on applications make sense to the high schools. Denying a student simply because the student and alum interviewer did not click is difficult to explain and may result in fewer applications from that student’s high school in the future.

Once the admissions cycle is complete, we will share with you the outcome of the applications for the students you interviewed. If you are confused about our decision, please email us at arn@oberlin.edu. We will do what we can to explain the rationale behind the decision that the student received.