

# OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

## INTERVIEWS

*Taken from the 2017 WSCUC guide for Reaffirmation*

### Interviews

Interviews are small meetings, usually between one or two faculty members or one or two students. Many of the principles of focus groups pertain to interviews. Here are some ways to make the interview as productive as possible:

1. Provide an informed consent.
2. Plan what you would like to get out of the interview.
3. Prepare a set of questions.
4. Start with the easier questions to break the ice; work up to more challenging, uncomfortable ones.
5. In a rough parallel to Bloom's taxonomy, you can formulate questions that elicit information (descriptive questions), stimulate analysis (cause-and-effect questions), or require evaluative judgments (normative questions). For example:
  - Descriptive questions: "How do you fulfill general education requirements?"
  - Cause-and-effect: "Why do some students do well and others have such problems with general education outcomes?"
  - Normative questions: "How well do students meet the expectations for program outcomes?"
6. Beware of the typical pitfalls of interviewing
  - Avoid binary, yes/no questions when possible.
  - Avoid "all" or "none" questions: Instead of "Are all students exposed to diversity in the curriculum?" it's more informative to ask: "What percentage of courses did you take with diversity content?"
  - Avoid leading questions: "So when did you finally learn how to think critically?"
  - Avoid putting words in the interviewee's mouth: "Taking this class was a nightmare, wasn't it?"

- Avoid double-barreled questions; they produce one answer to two questions: “Did you participate in service learning projects and become much more committed to civic values?”
  - Avoid language that suggests a socially acceptable or unacceptable answer: “Just about every student drinks on the weekends, don’t they? How about you?”
7. Follow the plan for the interview, but not slavishly: if the question isn’t understood, paraphrase; if a new topic comes up that may be relevant, pursue it.
  8. Let the interviewee do the talking; don’t interrupt except for quick clarifications.
  9. Feel free to steer the conversation back to the topic if the interviewee is wandering.
  10. Avoid the temptation to act as a consultant and give advice.
  11. Do ask the “debriefing” question at the end: “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”
  12. Remain friendly and attentive but neutral.
  13. Be aware of your own body language and your interviewee’s.
  14. Take good notes.

#### Tips for Effective Interview Questions

- **Open, not closed:** Open questions are designed to encourage narrative on the part of the interviewee and conversation. Closed questions typically result in a precise answer, such as “Yes” or “No.”
  - *Example:* (to students) “What are the qualities of your program that you like best and why?” versus “Do you like your program?”
- **Phrased to understand, not to judge:** Most often you will be seeking to learn more about the curriculum. Questions phrased to illicit explanation versus those that hint or state pre-conceived judgments may result in more useful and meaningful information.
  - *Example:* “Tell me about how the...”
- **Focused and rigorous, versus “beating around the bush”:** If there is specific information you are seeking, be focused in your questions versus hoping that participants can guess what you’re trying to learn.
  - *Example:* “Please explain how you...”
- **Ask for concrete examples:** Concrete examples will provide you with a glimpse into the specific practices of the institution (what they do, which may be different from what they say they do).
  - *Example:* (to students) “What are some specific experiences you have had with your advisor that have helped you succeed?” and “Please walk us through the orientation you had as a new student.”
  - *Example:* (to faculty) “What are some specific learning assessment activities that you’ve participated in? What did you do?” and “Tell me about...”