

## **Alumni Sharing Knowledge (ASK) Reference Guide**

When making career decisions, you should go beyond the paper and Internet research, beyond talking to career advisors, and expand your research to include speaking to professionals in the career fields you are considering. The ASK program provides contact information for many alumni who are willing to share this type of information with Laurier students and graduates through a technique called Informational Interviewing.

### ***What is Informational Interviewing?***

Informational Interviewing is a ‘personalized’ form of research which is an effective tool for gathering accurate, up-to-date information about possible career options and potential employer organizations. Informational interviewing enables you to make contacts with people who may be in positions to provide you with information, to offer you a job or suggest potential job leads. Conducting library and Internet research can be very helpful, but the most valuable information often comes from meeting with people who are in the particular career field, occupation or organization in which you are interested. In addition to gathering information, you are developing excellent network contacts for future reference.

During an Informational Interview, you can gather valuable information on:

- ✓ the working environment of an organization or a position
- ✓ the major advantages and disadvantages of the field
- ✓ personal opinions and observations about day-to-day activities
- ✓ inside ‘tips’ on how to get started in the field/occupation/organization
- ✓ the type of entry-level jobs available and where to find them
- ✓ accurate information regarding salaries and earning potential
- ✓ volunteer or summer opportunities to ‘try yourself out’ in various areas
- ✓ opportunities for advancement and/or lateral moves in the field
- ✓ factors influencing advancement in the field/organization
- ✓ the most up-to-date trends in the field

### ***The Meeting Request***

Calling or e-mailing a stranger to ask for information can be quite intimidating. However, this process is made much easier through the ASK program because the participating alumni have already agreed to connect with you. As well, if you are clear and specific about the kind of assistance or information you need, people generally *want* to be helpful. Keep in mind that you are complimenting them by expressing interest in their chosen line of work, as you are suggesting they are a valuable resource with the knowledge to help you make some very important decisions in your life.

The alumni participating in ASK have each indicated what type of information they are willing to provide and how they would prefer to have students contact them (i.e., through e-mail or by phone). The information below will discuss how to approach alumni both through phone contact and by e-mail. Regardless of whether you phone or e-mail the alumnus, be clear and concise with your request. You need to establish a rapport before you begin to ask questions and request assistance.

### ***Phone Contacts***

When you place a call requesting an informational interview, it is important to indicate to the person that you are ‘conducting research on potential careers’ and you would like to ask the alumnus a few questions. In this situation, you are not asking about employment opportunities.

## Sample Telephone Script

*NOTE: Prepare a script so that you have a clear idea of what you want to say when you make the telephone call. DO NOT read your script.*

“Good morning/afternoon, (Person’s Name). My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a student at Wilfrid Laurier University and I am currently conducting research on a variety of careers and found your contact information through the Alumni Sharing Knowledge program. One of the occupations of interest to me is \_\_\_\_\_. I am interested in talking to people like you who are knowledgeable in this field in order to learn more about my options. Would it be possible to set up an appointment to speak with you for 15 minutes so I could ask you a few questions about the \_\_\_\_\_ field?”

### ***E-mail Contacts***

When you e-mail an ASK alumnus to request information or assistance, keep the first contact brief. In the initial contact provide some background information about yourself and then ask for permission to follow up with further questions. Allow about one week (5 working days) to receive a response to your e-mail. If you do not hear from the alumnus within one week, try contacting him/her again to confirm that your e-mail was received.

If you receive no response to your follow-up e-mail, wait another 2-3 weeks and try again. The alumnus may be away on vacation or not checking e-mail regularly. It is acceptable to try a few times. If a phone number was provided, try calling the organization to confirm that the person is still in the same job and has the same e-mail address. If you discover that the information in ASK is not current, please contact Career Services and let us know so we can update our records.

### ***Some Tips for E-mailing ASK Alumni***

- ❖ Be professional and formal in the first e-mail
- ❖ Be polite and gracious
- ❖ Do not send attachments or copies of your résumé initially
- ❖ Do not request personal information
- ❖ Do not ask for a job
- ❖ Do not share the information you learned from your contact with anyone else without permission
- ❖ Do not try to sell things or forward attachments such as chain letters
- ❖ Do not use all capital letters or cute e-mail symbols such as :- ) until you know the person well enough to know these are acceptable.
- ❖ If you are responding to a question, include at least part of the original question in the e-mail as a reference. The e-mail may seem like a conversation, but hours and days can pass between responses and the flow or original question may be lost.
- ❖ Do not use abbreviations or net jargon
- ❖ Consider separating paragraphs by a blank line
- ❖ You can use bullets or numbers to delineate specific questions and pieces of information. That may make it easier for the person to respond in an organized manner
- ❖ Check for spelling and grammar errors. If you do not have a spell checker or grammar checker in your e-mail software, try typing your e-mail using word processing software first (such as Word or WordPerfect), then copy and paste your message into the e-mail
- ❖ Use a professional e-mail name and address (we recommend using some aspect of your real name). Avoid names such as partytime@lovelost.org
- ❖ When possible, try to respond to e-mails within 24-48 hours

## Sample E-mail

**Subject:** Career Information RE: WLU ASK program

Dear (First Name),

I am a current Laurier student and am interested in learning more about a career in \_\_\_\_\_. I found your name through the Laurier ASK program and would be very interested in an opportunity to discuss \_\_\_\_\_ with you.

I am in the process of completing my final year of study in \_\_\_\_\_ at Laurier. I have a background in \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ and I am interested in learning more about how to succeed in a career in \_\_\_\_\_.

If you have some time I would appreciate an opportunity to ask you some questions and hear what you have to say about \_\_\_\_\_ industry. Please let me know if you would be available for further e-mail contact or if you have time for a phone call.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Full Name

Full Phone number

### ***Sample Questions for Informational Interviewing***

Before you make the phone call/e-mail contact, gather some basic information about the career/organization within which the alumnus works. You should then prepare questions which address issues unique to the line of work in question. The following are suggestions to get you started.

- ✓ How did you decide to get into this field? What background do you have?
- ✓ What qualifications/education/training are required to get into this field?
- ✓ What would a typical day/week be like for you?
- ✓ What are some of the frustrations/difficulties you experience?
- ✓ What do you feel are the most important skills, interests and attitudes that would make a person happy/successful in this job?
- ✓ What type of personality is best suited for this work?
- ✓ What do you feel is the best training route leading to this position?
- ✓ Could you describe some other environments where a \_\_\_\_\_ might work?
- ✓ Are there similar or related occupations which require less/different training?
- ✓ Who might be able to give me information about similar or related fields?
- ✓ What do you see as future trends for this occupation?
- ✓ What work/volunteer experience would benefit me in targeting this career area?
- ✓ Are there any professional associations I could join? Which would you recommend?
- ✓ What else should I be doing to increase my chances for success in this area?
- ✓ Are there many opportunities for advancement in this field? Into what kinds of positions might one be promoted?

- ✓ What are the starting salary ranges and earning potential in this field?
- ✓ Is there anyone else you would recommend with whom I could speak in a similar or related area?

### ***The Option of Taking a Résumé***

Initially, you are not asking the ASK alumnus for a job, so do not begin by providing a résumé. Remember, your goal in contacting an ASK participant is to gather information and conduct research. However, you should have a résumé prepared in the event that the contact asks for a copy. If you are interested in working for the organization in the future, you could ask for feedback on your résumé once you have established a rapport with the ASK participant. After you incorporate the feedback and make adjustments, you could send the up-to-date résumé for his/her information.

At some point you may want to be more direct and ask the alumnus for assistance in passing along your résumé to other people. However, this should come only after you have built a connection and are serious about your job search. The goal of informational interviewing is to build networks and establish relationships until the timing is right to locate a job opportunity.

If you are asked for a résumé and do not have a targeted or current one with you, you could say that you do not have a current résumé with you but you would be pleased to drop one off. Going back with your résumé may give you a second opportunity, however brief, to make another contact with a potential employer.

### ***Potential Benefits of Contacting Alumni Through the ASK Program***

- ❖ get the most up-to-date information about a career field which interests you
- ❖ get 'inside' information about the field or organization (drawbacks/advantages)
- ❖ learn how to break into the field or organization
- ❖ put yourself, your skills and personality in front of people who are in a position to help
- ❖ observe first-hand working environments
- ❖ demonstrate keen interest and initiative to potential employers

### ***Professional Follow-up***

Always send a brief letter thanking the people with whom you have met for the time they spent with you and the information they were able to provide. Mention something of particular interest from the interview (something you learned or found interesting) so that your letter does not have a 'form letter' appearance.