Research Experience Pre-Interview Guide and Worksheet

Soon, you will interview for research experiences (projects) associated with natural sciences, engineering, medicine, as well as social science or the humanities. Read this document, and then complete the targeted Worksheet. If you have questions, contact the Career and Internship Center. In addition to general individualized counseling, we offer specialized services, guidance and coaching, including role-play interviews, for students focusing on finding research experiences. Below is a list of potential questions. Attempting to memorize answers can do more harm than good, so, please use the list to stimulate thoughts and inspire you to share ideas effectively during interviews.

- Why are you interested in conducting research?
- What academic achievements are you most proud of?
- When did you decide you wanted to be a doctor/dentist?
- Why did you choose your major and how does it relate to your goals?
- What classes did you find most stimulating, and did they nurture your interest in research?
- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- How would you describe yourself and how would others describe you?
- What are your three most significant employment or co-curricular achievements?
- What clinical experience have you had?
- What are your long-term career/academic/research goals?
- Where do you see yourself in ten years?
- Where else have you applied? Why do you want to go here?
- Do you have any specific research topics in mind and how did you choose these?
- Have your academic experiences prepared you for a career in research, and what are your future goals?
- What would you do differently with regards to academic, co-curricular, and practical experiences?
- What was your most difficult decision to date, and how did you go about making it?
- What research projects have you found most rewarding, and why?
- What do you think it takes to succeed as a student researcher or as a professional researcher?
- What lessons have you learned from your “failures” or “mistakes”?
- Are your grades fair reflections of your academic abilities and intellectual potential?
- What concerns do you have with regard to a career in research?

After you review all general queries, identify a “top five” that relate to the specific research experience or program you will be interviewing for. Then, conduct a practice session, having a friend or family member ask the five questions. Remember, there are no “right” answers to particular questions. Responses during an interview must seem well conceived, yet conversational, not memorized. Think of this interaction as a conversation, not an inquisition. Thus, it is best to complete this exercise aloud, even if you are doing so alone. Never “practice” via actual interviews with firms you have no interest in. It’s better to conduct role-play interviews to generate advice about your performance. Identify key concerns and build confidence. Don’t over-analyze each role-play or real interview. The questions you might ask potential employers during a medical or health professions graduate program interview or during a pre-interview information conversation, include:

- What type of person would most likely succeed within this research setting?
- What should I expect of myself over the first few days, weeks and months as research assistant?
- How will my performance be judged, and by whom?
- What characteristics does it take to succeed as a student researcher, technician, or assistant here?
- What obstacles should I avoid my first weeks or months and how can I enhance my potential to succeed?
- What advice would you give a student just starting a research experience here?
- What quality or asset of this program is most likely “hidden,” but should be more evident?
Each interviewer has a personal “style,” but there are some identifiable “techniques.” The “Behavioral Interview” allows interviewers to “quantify” and “objectify” a traditionally subjective process. It is based upon principles: that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior; more recent behavior is the best predictor of future behavior; and trends in behavior are better predictors than isolated incidents. Therefore, the interviewer will present “what did you do when” scenarios or ask you to identify past incidents when you used certain behaviors to achieve a task or reach a goal. Prior, interviewers have determined desired behaviors so they will use a pre-established “checklist” to determine if you have qualities associated with those required to succeed in graduate school. Be prepared for and don’t become “rattled” by open-ended question. Additionally, be prepared to answer general questions about the field of research and issues in the field. Bring the resume with you to the interview and offer it to the interviewer. If he/she declines, don’t be concerned. Don’t memorize answers to questions, but be prepared to expand upon anecdotes you identified as illustrating related behavioral qualifications.

Behavioral and Ethical Questions include:

- Describe when you faced problems that tested your coping skills. What did you do?
- Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
- Tell me about when you used communication skills in order to get an important point across.
- Give me an example of when you were able to motivate others.
- Give me an example of a time when you were able to communicate successfully with another person, even when the individual may not have personally liked you.
- Do you have an opinion on controversial research within our field?
- How do you feel about stem cell research?
- Do you understand confidentiality issues associated with research?

Hypothetical Situation questions include:

- If you found a factual error when reviewing research paper or presentation drafts, what would you do?
- If you had difficulties completing an assignment in time, what would you do?

Verification is a key to pre-interview preparation. Call a few days before any interview to confirm your meeting and, whenever possible to arrange an "informal conversation" with someone who attended the specific graduate school. Identify logistics of the day. Know how many people you will be seeing and what to expect of your visit. Pre-interview research does not have to be completed covertly, so specifically ask “Is there information I should be reading?” And, you might also ask “Are there particular questions I should be thinking about prior to my interviews?” To build interview skills, practice with a friend, family member or, most importantly, a Career Center counselor. Don’t memorize. Be yourself. Take a copy of your resume with you to the interview, with key points and achievement anecdotes clearly noted or highlighted. Cite by example and refer to your resume, stating “as you can see on my resume or as noted in my original email, or cover letter.” Never interview without a copy of your resume to use as a reminder of your qualifications. Bring extra copies with you to offer interviewers or others you might meet. In response to questions, do state or allow your internal voice to focus your thoughts on the phrase “thinking about this research experience.” These words verbally or internally preceding your response do inspire you to “connect” past achievements and general qualities to “specific requirements.”
Research Experience Pre-Interview Worksheet

3 PROGRAM QUALITIES

Note 3 qualities of the particular research experience you will be interviewing for.
Review the department’s website and researcher’s profile or biography in detail, and then briefly summarize “general” as well as “unique qualities” of the natural, medical, social science or humanities research you will be doing. What traits would be required to excel in this setting and needed to succeed in any special research roles? What skills as well as attitudes would be required to succeed here? The more clearly and concisely you can describe the programs key characteristics as well as unique offerings, the better.

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3 QUALIFICATION CONNECTIONS

Focusing on the research experience, cite 3 key points that make you qualified.
Review your resume qualification summary. Then identify three key points to focus on during your conversation. Identify courses, projects or volunteer experiences, and reveal academic, intellectual, practical and “motivational” qualifications to excel within research support roles. “Connections” are qualities you possess and expressed, or achievements matching program qualifications. Simply, you are completing the statement “Thinking about what it would take to succeed as a researcher assistant here, my three key assets are . . .” or “Thinking about becoming a student researcher, three key points I want to raise during this discussion are . . .”

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3 STAR (Situation, Tasks, Actions and Results) EXAMPLES

Note 3 anecdotes that illustrate your capabilities to STAR in this research setting.
Stories should support the three Qualifications Connections, linking skills used to take goal directed actions and, ultimately to achieve results or finish a project. First, broadly describe the situation. Then, identify specific task, actions, and results associated with your accomplishments. Be prepared to cite by example, tell anecdotes and describe past behaviors that predict future performance potential.

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3 INTERVIEWER QUESTIONS

List 3 questions you would like to ask the interviewer.
Ask one question in the first 5 minutes of the interview in order to use response as the discussion progresses. Prepare a list of additional questions to ask during and at the end of the interview session.

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