

Interviews

I hate interviewing new students for programs.

Interviewing is a painful, tedious, mind-numbing process. It takes forever, is extremely repetitive, and can drive you completely crazy.

But you have to do it.

Believe it or not, interviewing students is one of the most important things you do and a very valuable use of your time.

Successful interviewing will enable you to:

1. Establish an initial relationship with your students
2. Create momentum and generate new word-of-mouth recruits for your programs
3. Help determine whether or not a student is suitable for your program or event

Because these factors are so essential to running a good program or event, it is important that you personally conduct all the interviews. (By "you" I mean the person directing the program or event – the person who will have the most direct interaction with students both during the program and afterwards.)

Setting up your interview schedule

Once students begin submitting applications and your database starts filling up with people eager to participate on one of your programs, sort the program candidates by university or region, pick a date, and assign the applicant an interview time.

A typical interview takes about twenty minutes. I schedule my interviews four per hour, in fifteen-minute intervals. I do this for two reasons:

1. Someone will always flake and miss their appointment. I do not want to sit around doing nothing and I can catch up with the people I have waiting.
2. Psychologically it is good for the program candidate to see that you are busy and to have to wait for you. If you accept them, they feel even better about it and are more likely to get the word out to their friends for what they feel is a popular program.

Preparing for the interview

You should look over all the applications carefully before you show up for your interviews. I do this, but since I hate interviewing I set up as many interviews as I can in a 4-6 hour block and usually forget everything by the time I start meeting with people. Look for red flags (red flags vary depending on the type of program you run but most certainly include issues that could be damaging or disruptive to your program and conditions that you are not qualified to handle).

When interviewing over the phone, make sure to have the student's application in front of you and try to get a photo as well. There is so much you miss over the phone (I am big on face-to-face vibes), so the more info at the time of the interview the better.

The interview

The standard interview takes about 20 minutes. The first 10 minutes are finding out about the student, the second 10 are explaining (and oftentimes selling) your program.

Part I – this initial part of the interview is almost exactly the same as one of those 7-minute dating programs. You can tell a lot about a person very quickly. I usually know if I want to accept a person within the first 2 minutes or so of talking with him. And to be fair, the overwhelming majority of students you meet you will want to accept.

Most of the factors disqualifying the student are issues that came up on the application (no longer in college, does not attend a university in your region, etc), but the interview will help to determine whether or not the student is a potential superstar (someone with obvious leadership qualities) or just someone you would like to take. When you have limited space on a trip, this can often be the deciding factor.

Your goal during the first phase of the interview is to get the student talking. Ask about his major, where he is from, if he was in his high school band, why he chose the school he is at – pretty much anything.

You may end up sitting next to this person on a bus for three weeks - talk, get him talking, and get as much of an intuitive feel as possible.

Part II – sell your program. I think this is easily the more important part of the interview (and the most draining). If you do your job well, the student will be psyched about the program, excited to get accepted, and will talk to his friends about the awesome program he is hopefully going to get to go on. I have often seen new students sign

up for a program, listing as references people I have recently interviewed.

You need to do an excellent job explaining. Present the history of your organization, your goals, and specifically the goals of the program. Speak out your goals honestly, accurately, and in a language that your interviewee can relate to. Explain what is unique about your program and how it may differ from programs he has previously participated on.

Explain the educational content on your programs. Do not undersell or be afraid to be honest. Not only is it misleading and wrong, but you will be surprised how many students actually find the ideas that you will be raising compelling and a major reason why they want to do your program.

Go over the major highlights and attractions featured on your program. If you are going to climb a volcano or repel down a 70-foot cliff, make sure to hype this during the interview.

Be explicit about your program's "free time" policy. On my programs we are very lenient about what the students can do during free time. At the interview (before they are even accepted) I let them know that because we give them free time and treat them with respect, we expect them to treat our program with respect and to plan on participating in everything.

Be sure to go over your programs scholarship requirements, what their payment covers and what is not included, and let the student know when he can expect to hear from you. Also let the student know how to contact you in case he has any questions.

Take notes

If you meet 20 people in an afternoon without a break, there is no way you are going to remember anyone – they will all be one big blur. (Not only that, but I find I forget in the middle of an interview what I said and who I am speaking to, it has led to some pretty funny situations.)

To help, I have created an "interview sheet" (see below) that I print up (one per interview) and bring with me on a clipboard. On the sheet, I have boxes at the top for:

1. Name

2. Interview date (this is important, when you are sorting through your stacks of sheets, sometimes remembering the context of the interview is very helpful)
3. University
4. Year of graduation
5. Major

There is a big box in the middle. In it I fill in information about the student including background, interests, my impressions – basically anything I want.

At the bottom I have a code “for office use only.” It looks like this:

MT | T | Maybe | ? | DT

The codes stand for:

MT = Must Take. These students are potential superstars. More importantly, we connected during the interview and were really able to talk.

T = Take. These are usually great kids but for some reason I wasn’t sure. It could be that they are graduating at the end of the semester, or that they had something “interesting” I needed to look further into.

Maybe = we had a boring meeting but no real reason not to take the student either.

? = A question mark means there was some serious factor that I need to resolve before I can say that this is a person we should have on our program.

DT = Don’t Take. Something was wrong or socially dysfunctional with this person that would seriously ruin the program for the other participants. I have very rarely marked someone a DT.

Notes are essential and often very helpful when reviewing your program after the fact. It is interesting to see what you thought and to compare that to what the person is really like.

All that said, I usually only take notes if I am accepting all the participants at once (i.e. at a given specified date in the future). If I am accepting the students as I go (i.e. that night after I met everyone that day), then I don’t bother (not the best thing if I have a lot of interviews in one day, but I manage).

Odds and Ends

I used to bring a camera to the interview, but it was weird and I stopped doing it.

At the end of a long day of interviewing, you will be drained and irritable – although meeting great people will get you excited for your upcoming program. If you did a good job recruiting you are going to have to interview a lot of people – get used to it.

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Interview Worksheet

NAME:

YEAR IN SCHOOL:

JEWISH EDUCATION:

REFERRED BY:

PHOTO:

Date Interviewed

YES

NO

COMMENTS:

CODE:

MT

T

M

?

DT