

# The Insider's Guide to the Alumni Interview

By **Risa Doherty**

To schedule an alumni interview or not? It's a question that high school seniors across the country grapple with every fall. This issue, *Your Teen's* Risa Doherty spoke with admissions officers at Northwestern and Dickinson, as well as six alumni interviewers from competitive schools -- including University of Pennsylvania, Cornell and Tufts -- who told her why applicants should seek out the alumni interview when available.

## 1. What is an alumni interview?

An alumni interview is just as it sounds: an interview in your area with an alumnus of the college or university to which you're applying. Some schools require applicants to have them; for others they're optional or only available in some geographic areas; and still others don't offer them at all.

## 2. If it's optional, should I go?

When a school offers a student an alumni interview, but doesn't require it, it can be puzzling. Students and their anxious parents are left to wonder: If it's not required, is it safer to decline, than risk the chance that it may go badly?

While admissions staffers will often say it doesn't count against a student to skip the interview, these same staffers are looking for evidence that an applicant really wants to be at their school.

Acceptance of the interview signals interest," says Stephanie Balmer, dean of admissions at Dickinson College, who adds that most colleges distinguish between "hard," or serious, applicants and "soft," or less serious, applicants. The assumption is that if a school is an applicant's top choice, he will make the effort to interview.

"There are other ways to show interest, such as visiting the campus or attending a local information session," notes Allen Lentino, senior associate director of admissions at Northwestern University. Still, even though Lentino downplays the necessity for an interview, he encourages students to have one if they can't make it to the campus.

## 3. Should I prepare?

Yes, definitely and absolutely. While schools say that alumni interviews can't count against you, let's face it, particularly at competitive schools, everything can count.

Take, for example, Northwestern: On the one hand, Lentino says, the university has found that the alumni interview rarely makes a difference -- even for borderline candidates -- but he also notes, it can raise a red flag, highlight an inconsistency on an



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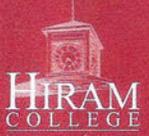
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application and help the staff gauge the applicant's level of interest in attending the school.

In other words, an alumni interview may not significantly help or hurt, but why not be prepared, just in case?

Dickinson's Balmer sums up: "The alumni interview will not be a deciding factor, although a positive one can effectively help an applicant advance in the pool."

#### 4. How should I prepare?

Once again, opinions vary. Lentino cautions against being too rehearsed, because colleges want an authentic voice. "The interview should be conversational, not confrontational: a two-way conversation," he says.

Of course, how many nervous high school seniors are capable of this kind of casual conversation, especially with a representative of their dream school? If yours isn't, roll up your sleeves and get to work.

Dickinson's Balmer recommends that since interviewers are assessing a student's ability to speak intelligently about himself, parents should help their teenager avoid monosyllabic responses and encourage him

to take the initiative to lead at least part of the discussion.

Another tip: access the college alumni network websites for information intended for interviewers, including instructions and sample questions. For example, Cornell Alumni Association's Ambassador Network information can be found at <http://caaan.admissions.cornell.edu/ContactTips&Advice.pdf>.

#### 5. What kinds of questions should I anticipate?

Most interviewers use best-practice guidelines and sample questions to conduct the interview. They have some information about the student, like the student's name, intended major and up to two extra curricular activities. According to Balmer, interviewers are not provided with scores or grades so as not to color their opinion.

Lentino stresses that the mission is not to evaluate grades - that is a job for the admissions committee. The alumnus' task is to personalize the process, give information and receive any significant updates.

Colleges want a personable and articulate applicant who can explain his interest in the

school and describe how he spends his free time. According to Lentino, "colleges want a thread of consistency and they want to try to determine if an activity is a deep passion or just a good interview topic." In evaluating a student's extra curricular involvement, Georgetown University's Alumni Admissions Program Handbook advises alumni to try to get "an understanding of the significance of their involvement" to assess "the energy of an applicant."

Bring a resume as a starting ground for the conversation. Artwork or photos are also good aids to demonstrate a student's passion. "Don't bring a trumpet, but instead tell me how music shaped your life and how it formed your world view," one interviewer recommends.

#### 6. Just do it!

The alumni interview has some value, but exactly how much is impossible to determine. A student who is seriously interested in a school should request an alumni interview to maximize every effort to impress the admissions committee. The addition of a positive evaluation to a student's file might help in the heavy competition for admission. ■



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