



COLLEGE OF HUMAN ECOLOGY

Professional Communications – Alumni Networking Guide

Where to contact alumni?

The Alumni Affairs and Development office located in 1302 Martha Van Rensselaer Hall provides services and information for students who want to reach out to alumni. They have a database of alumni based on location, graduation year, and careers. There is also a Human Ecology Alumni LinkedIn group that students can join to get connected to Human ecology alumni.

Don't hesitate to contact alumni!

Remember, the alum ASKED to be put in this database because s/he WANTS to talk to you! Your initial contact will be through either email or as members of a Human Ecology LinkedIn group. Keep it brief and personalize it, nobody likes to get something that looks like spam.

Examples of an initial message:

- "I'm a Human Ecology sophomore, and would like to talk to you about your experiences in the xyz career field."
- "I'm a Human Ecology senior planning to move to your city to conduct my job search. I'd like 15 minutes of your time to get insights about living in and job searching in xyz city."
- "I'm a Human Ecology junior planning to go into xyz career field, and would like to ask you about your graduate degree program. I'm trying to decide between abc and xyz."

Etiquette—Do's and Don'ts of informational interviewing

Remember that the goal is to have a real conversation with someone. A telephone conversation works well, but if you can at all arrange a face-to-face meeting that would be even better. Begin with an email exchange to outline your interests and set up a time for your conversation.

- DON'T ask for a job, even if you are bursting to do so! You could, however, say something like this:
 - "I really enjoyed meeting with you and learning about your television station and what a producer does. WGJX is the kind of setting where I would like to work. Do you know of stations with a similar work culture that I might contact?"
- DO send a thank-you note/email immediately, referencing some point or bit of information from your discussion
- DO stay in touch! Your goal here is to build relationships with people, not have a series of one-off conversations. Keep follow-up light and breezy:
 - "Thanks for talking to me last spring about xyz; I was able to xyz with the information." OR "I see that congress has xyz; how is that impacting your mission?" OR "I found this blog article, and thought you'd find it interesting." OR "I'm going to the xyz conference; will I be able to meet you there?"
- DO research the field/industry/organization you're exploring so you have good questions to ask. You want to make a good impression on these people you are meeting.
- DO try to arrange to have a face-to-face conversation, or at least a phone conversation. You want this interaction to be as real and human as possible.
- DO schedule about 30 minutes for the interview and be aware of the time. Watch for cues that it's time to leave, such as glancing at a watch, or winding down a conversation.

- DO dress as if you're going to a job interview or as professionals in this type of work would dress. You don't want to embarrass yourself or your contact.
- DO pay attention to your thoughts, body signals, and reactions during the interview. If you feel energetic and excited, this type of atmosphere may suit you. If you feel bored or tired, perhaps this isn't a match.
- DON'T book too many interviews back-to-back. Allow flexibility in case your contact chooses to spend more time with you or to introduce you to others.
- DO ask for names of more people to contact, and if it's okay to use his/her name when you contact others.

Sample Informational Interview Questions

1. Preparation

- What preparation is necessary for entry level jobs in this field?
- How important is graduate school in this field?
- Could you recommend some courses that I should be taking now in preparation for a career in this field?
- How does your education and experience relate to what you are doing now?
- How did you get into this field and into this position? What are some alternative routes into the field? What kind of background, training, special programs or other learning experiences does one need to enter the field?
- What professional journals, books, newspapers or publications do people in your field generally read? Are any professional associations particularly influential?
- Is there any advice you would give someone just entering the field, maybe something that you wish someone had mentioned when you were starting?

2. Lifestyle

- What kind of "lifestyle" choices have you had to make? How many hours do you work in a typical week? Do you take work home at night?
- Is travel involved in your job and if so, how often are you traveling?
- What is the typical salary range for an entry-, mid-, and upper-level position?
- Do you need to dress in a particular way?
- Has your work experience differed very much from what you imagined it would be? In what way?

3. Job Outlook

- Do you anticipate employment in this field to grow, decrease, or remain stable?
- What are the opportunities for advancement? Is there a high turnover rate and if so, why?
- What types of employers hire people in your line of work?
- You mentioned that you made a transition into this field from another career path. How difficult was this?
- What job choices are there within this field and to what types of other organizations can one move?

4. Job Routine

- Describe how you spend your time during a typical work day/week.
- What major satisfactions do you derive from working in this field?
- What are some of the issues/problems that you must deal with in your work?
- (If you are interested in the company the alumnus is working for) Could you tell me a little about the management style here? How are promotions decided? What does one need in order to be successful in this field?

5. Job Search Techniques

- What strategies would you be using if you were in a job search for a position in this field?
- Would you mind reviewing my resume and giving me feedback on it?
- What types of questions should I expect when interviewing for a job in this field?
- Could you give me the names of others who might tell me more about your field? May I say you suggested I contact them?

Emailing Alumni

With the volume of email, it is even harder to get someone's attention amongst all of the many emails and distractions in any given day. And if the person you are reaching out to doesn't know you, your email will not have priority.

Here are some suggestions:

Use a meaningful subject line.

Ideally, you are making a contact because someone—friend, relative, former faculty member, career adviser, other networking contact—gave you their name. Otherwise, you are likely making contact because of a common or shared affinity, such as Human Ecology or an industry group. Mention the connecting person or entity in your subject line to increase the odds that it will be opened. Using a subject line like “Referred by Ray O’Neill” or “Human Ecology alumna making contact” increases the odds of being read.

Mention Commonalities.

Alumni often take more seriously networking emails from students who referenced two commonalities or connections in their email, such as a personal referral and a common group connection (business or industry group, Human Ecology connection, common campus activity while a student such as sorority or sports team, etc.).

Keep it short.

A concise, to-the-point email increases the odds that it will be read. You are NOT writing a persuasive cover letter or attempting to describe your many experiences or what has motivated you to be interested in the reader's industry or specialty.

Tell them about yourself.

DO share the relevant parts of your professional background or story that will help the reader understand why you are reaching out to him. Have clarity about your own career goals, as well as the goals and outcomes of your contact; it should be clear why, of all people, you are reaching out to the alum for advice and information. Ideally, your email is two or three short paragraphs:

- Who put you in touch or what is your common connection.
- A brief description about you that provides context to the reader about your background and explains why you are getting in touch and what you want from him.
- Your contact information and a thank you for the reader's time and attention.

Keep your focus on your reader rather than on you.

The focus needs to be on the person to whom you are directing your email, rather than on your wants, needs, or convenience. “Keep the focus on the recipient and how you would like to meet with them for a few minutes at their convenience at a convenient location to them for their advice and any suggestions they may have regarding transitioning into their respective career field.”

If you say you will follow up by phone, do so.

While not personally a fan of being told by someone who I don't yet know that they will contact me in a particular window of time, some people swear by this approach. It is only effective if you follow through as promised.

Try, try again.

No response to your first email? Try again! Try different subject lines to try and get your email opened. Ask the person who referred you to reach out on your behalf. Determine if you have more than one connection point with your target reader that could increase the visibility of your outreach. It's true that not everyone will respond to your email. However, our own feelings of vulnerability in a job search may cause us to ascribe to our target reader thoughts they may not be having. In fact, they have missed your email; put it aside to answer when they have more time, etc.

Don't. Please don't.

- Do not send your email as high priority unless you have been instructed to do so by your reference (in fact, as a general rule, you should do exactly what your reference suggests you do). DO copy your referring connection as appropriate, since they could then easily send a “reply all” follow-up email, increasing the odds of a successful contact.
- Don't provide a lengthy discourse about yourself; since the reader doesn't yet know you, they have no reason to be invested in your story and, as noted above, they have many competing claims upon their time.
- Don't be fuzzy about your own goals or plans; the reader who doesn't know you will not want to invest their time into helping you on a “big picture” level, if at all. The more specific you can be, the easier it is for someone to feel confident that they can help you.
- Don't ask for a job. What you are seeking is information, insights, an ally in your target field or industry. Similarly, don't just ask someone to pass along your resume to HR when, in fact, they could ultimately be a wonderful resource to you about the company, the industry, upcoming changes within the company, or their own career path and other possible contacts. Think about what you need to, or could, learn from an information standpoint, and hopefully you will have an opportunity to build rapport with your reader through a follow-up meeting or conversation.
- Don't assume that a referral from a common connection alone will make someone open up her contact list or address book for you. You have got to give your reader an opportunity to get to know you and to feel comfortable sharing their friends' and colleagues' names with you. When someone refers you to a friend or colleague, their own reputation is implicated.
- Don't attach your resume to your initial email. Doing so may cause your email to be trapped by a company spam catcher and also may confuse the reader about why you are writing to them. Just succinctly describe your relevant background in your email; you can use a subsequent face-to-face meeting to provide your resume (and get tips on it, as well, for your target industry or company).