

Deborah Michelle, DSS Counselor

Cypress College What does your initial interview look like?

Prior to working as a DSS Counselor at Cypress College, I was a Vocational Counselor for the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR). It was at DOR that I developed the Initial Interview questions we use at Cypress.

Since adopting an electronic filing system (ClockWork) three years ago, my cherished two-sided Initial Interview form morphed into an on-screen form that we use in New Student Appointments (NSA). I want to go over this form with you to learn why we use certain questions.

1. What is your preferred name?

Now, more than ever, it is important to clarify the name someone chooses to go by. *I will ignore you or glare at you if you call me “Debbie” or “Michelle”.* Seriously. We encounter students from all over the world and sometimes we cannot pronounce their name or say it incorrectly. So, in addition to their “preferred name”, I spell it out phonetically in the file.

2. Who is your counselor?

The answer to this question tells me 1) if they have a preferred counselor; 2) if they are in a special program (EOPS, Legacy, Athletics); 3) if they have seen the same counselor more than once.

Our college has decentralized counseling and centralized counseling. Each counselor is assigned a major(s) for which they are responsible and they are housed in the buildings where the courses for those majors typically take place.

3. What is your major or educational goal?

This question can open a flood gate for a 30 minute discussion on why you should choose a major by the end of your second semester. You will find out: 1) if they have a major; 2) if they know what majors are offered at your college; 3) if they have a career, but don't know the major; 4) their area(s) of interest.

Often, we get students who want to major in nursing. Many of them are unaware of the rigors of the program. I will refer them to our campus' information workshops to help students understand what is expected prior to the program and once they are accepted into the program.

This also allows us to refer them to the career center or career exploration courses. It can also set up a future appointment to discuss their goals and understanding or expectation of specific majors and careers.

4. The next set of questions is about high school: when they graduated, from which school, their GPA and, if they received accommodations, can they name them? Were they in SDC or RSP?

Here's where you find out who knows about their disability and what helps them to be successful. Often, students don't know if they were in special classes or which special program served them. At this point, I may bring up their transcript to view it with them. It allows me to see which courses they took, their grades and pattern of success. If I see Ds, I will point out that those are not passing grades, meaning a D in a prerequisite course will not advance you to the next level.

Prior to meeting with the student, I have already reviewed their documents, including their IEP and psychoeducational report. I can see if they were permitted a great deal of modifications and accommodations. The IEP helps me a lot in determining how to approach our discussion of accommodations at the college level, which happens later in our session.

5. Diagnoses and medication.

I am direct with my questions in this area. I want to understand what they know about their condition. I also want to check in with those who have been diagnosed with a mental illness. I ask them if and when they have been hospitalized. If they were just released from the hospital, I want to discuss the timing of them attending college. I ask how they are feeling at this moment. I give them the number to the Health Center and local mental health resources. College is stressful, do they have the financial means, transportation, family support, etc.? Some students thrive in such a structured environment, but only if they are able to handle the demands put upon them.

6. Do you have a computer? Internet access?

I can get a sense of their resources from these answers. I can also point out all of the computer labs on campus and, if they are with DOR, possibly give them a letter of support for them to receive a laptop to borrow from DOR to complete their program.

7. How do you get to school? What is your mode of transportation?

If a student says that they take public transportation, I keep that information in the back of my mind until we discuss scheduling classes. If they get a ride with friends or family, I ask if they know how to take the bus. If not, we have Continuing Education on our campus and they have a course for learning to take the bus.

Some students don't drive because they cannot afford the insurance or gas or do not have a vehicle to use anyway. But, the real reason I ask if they drive, is to find out if they are permitted, by law, to drive. A doctor once told me that if the DMV does not issue a driver's license or suspends it, there's a serious reason for that. Some of our programs (health

sciences) require “reliable” transportation. If they have a DUI, that can show up on background checks for employment or when applying to some health science programs.

8. Do you have children? Do you care for a family member?

This answer tells us their time commitments and emotional commitments. Also, if you have day care resources, you can offer them at this time, as well as support groups for caregivers.

9. Are you working or volunteering?

Again, another opportunity to refer the student to valuable resources they might not otherwise be aware of. This is often when I refer them to Work Ability, DOR or our online job board. I want to know if they worked while they were in high school. Any type of extracurricular commitment gives me a sense of their ability to manage time, or lack thereof. For some, it’s an eye-opener to know that volunteering is valuable, that you don’t need a paying job in order to include it in your resume. There’s also a misconception that anyone get be offered a volunteer position. However, sometimes these positions request resumes and interviews. These are all good opportunities for growth.

10. Have you applied for financial aid?

We know that there are so many students and parents who think that they are not eligible for financial aid, but, I always encourage them to apply, at least their first year. Some financial aid offices offer workshops. Our FA office offered workshops in our center just for our students. Then, they developed a peer FA expert, a student to help other students with the forms.

11. What is your source of income?

If I think that they might be eligible for SSI, I give them the information to apply for that. I also direct them to our food bank and any other community resources that they might benefit from. If financial aid is their source of income, we discuss debt and the future need for more financial aid (at the university).

12. Are you a client of DOR or Regional Center?

I get the name and number of the counselor, just in case we need to communicate with them. With a signed release on our end, we can speak with the counselors.

That’s the end of our formal questioning. Now we review accommodations, policies, procedures, on campus and off campus resources. Our NSA satisfies the Orientation that new students get when meeting with general counselors.

Safety is an important topic to cover, encouraging them to get to know the layout of the campus and where the emergency phones are, in addition to the Campus Safety office location. We will develop a one semester SEP. If time permits, we will create additional

semesters. I refer them to their major counselor and encourage them to take advantage of all of the resources we have reviewed previously. I encourage them to return to our office as often as is necessary to answer any questions they may have or get the assistance they need. Of course, I end with “do you have any questions?”

I enjoy these NSAs because they vary greatly from student to student and I hear some fascinating stories of survival and persistence. I always remind myself that they have worked very hard to get to college, to be brave enough to ask for help and to care enough about themselves to be proactive.