

Faculty Conversation Project Tips

Below are some off-the-cuff tips for conducting faculty conversations. Some/most of it you will innately know, and you may have your own inimitable style, so take from it what you wish. The aim is to develop a peer to peer relationship with your faculty members, understand them better, and to deepen your interaction with your departments. The project was first framed as faculty interviews however the word “interview” is a misnomer as this should be a no-pressure discussion where you gather some information in areas you may not have touched on in previous interactions. It also helps the faculty to know you outside of your capacities of instruction and acquisition.

The Questions:

What are the challenges you are facing as a researcher and teacher?

How is the field changing?

What are emerging areas of emphasis for the department?

What are your hopes for library support?

Preparing for the Meeting

- Start by choosing someone you have a good working relationship with, someone who you know will allow you to find your feet in this new process and skill. Feel free to explain that this is as brand new to you as it is to them. If you don't have someone in mind, e-mail 2 or 3 faculty members with the request and let them get back to you.
- Meet somewhere “neutral” away from your home turf that way the faculty member doesn't feel obligated to talk only about the Library and his/her experiences with it/you. I normally take my faculty to Starbucks. I explain that it will take no more than an hour of their time. I prefer the mid-afternoon normal coffee break when Starbucks tends to be less crowded.
- You can e-mail the questions in advance, explaining that they will be used to guide your discussion.
- Explain in person there is no right or wrong answer and that it is simply their own opinions that you wish to obtain. If they ask what the purpose of the conversation is for, tell them about the great changes and improvements the Library is undergoing and that these answers will help that process and have their voices included. You may want to explain that these conversations are for internal purposes and that there is no pressure if the person does not have an answer for any of the questions. Overwhelmingly they will have answers, and they will get quite passionate about it.

- If possible, I don't like sitting directly opposite to the person; that is too formal. I try to sit slightly to the side of them but not too close.

Beginning the Conversation

- I bring my large notebook, and I hand write the four questions at the top, on the left of a blank double page. Hand writing the questions makes it appear less formal which eases communication. I briefly reiterate the purpose of the meeting and then turn the paper around and read the questions to the person so they can start thinking about them (if you haven't previously e-mailed the questions).
- The questions are purposefully open-ended so that the person feels comfortable in interpreting the question in any way they want. The first question asks them to reflect on their current situation, rather than about the Library or their Department, per se. It also shows that you are interested in them.
- Something that works for me is "opening the kimono" which means to reveal something of yourself. The kimono is a very formal type of outerwear and by extension, a professional persona and to open or loosen it suggests something not often shared in formal settings, hence getting to know the essence of the person, not the public face. People are naturally interested in you but would never ask. I talk a little about my background so that the person can "place" me and feel comfortable to talk freely to me, as I did to them. It breaks the ice. If you don't feel comfortable talking about yourself, perhaps talk a little bit about the inner workings of your job that the person may not be aware of.
- The most important skill to develop in any meeting is to be a good listener. Listen actively, which means paying attention not just to words but clues in body language. Affirm you understand when appropriate and let the person speak. Eye contact is crucial to show that you are giving the person your undivided attention and that you are "present" and not thinking about the next question.
- Feel free to ask for clarification, don't assume or feel pressure to be knowledgeable about the faculty member's work or departmental operations.
- You may become privy to confidential information which may be told to you off the record. Be sure to honor that and take it as a sign that you have their trust.

Assisting Faculty

- While the primary reason for the conversation is to gather info in a guided way, sometimes the person will mention previous conversations they have had with the Library regarding launching a project/obtaining a database or other item, etc. and they may ask you to get involved.

- **I write down any action points that the faculty member has asked me to address during our discussion, and I explain that I will look into it without promising. I reiterate the changes we are making in the Library, and then I start looking into their request. If it is simple, I will go ahead and do it, and if it is a larger project, I will follow up in an e-mail with my findings and feasibility.**

Note Taking and Writing Up

- **My preference is to take shorthand notes of what the person is saying which is enough to get me through to the end of the conversation. As soon as it is over, I immediately type it up. I budget 2 hours for each faculty, the first hour to conduct the meeting and the second to write it.**
- **Others have found writing detailed notes during the conversation is a very good thing. It makes sure you don't miss important information and you have a record for writing up the responses should you not be able to do so immediately.**
- **Find which style works for you. Try and mirror the language that the person is using. Rephrase important points they have made in your discussion and pose it as a question so that you can check you understand what they are trying to tell you.**

At this stage of the Faculty Conversation Pilot we are gathering feedback and experiences in conducting these conversations. Your conversations will yield some interesting results and perhaps give us insight into things we hadn't thought of and potential avenues for collaboration that will strengthen and deepen our working relationships with otherwise elusive faculty. One major point to reflect on is "are we asking the right questions?" You may suggest another question or to augment an existing one. It might also be helpful to ask the person if they have any questions for us as you concluding your time with the faculty member.

I am very happy to talk with you about any of these points, to learn from you, and I can also accompany you on any conversations if you'd like friendly back up.