

# The University of Akron School of Law

## Career Planning & Placement Office

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### **Interview “Boot Camp” – Everything You Need to Know for a Successful Interview**

The employment interview is the single most important event in the entire job search process!

Your resume sets forth the facts about you; the interview presents you with the opportunity to bring your resume to life and to demonstrate your intelligence, competence, ambition and personality. Interviewing is stressful for everyone, but the more you learn about the process, the easier it will become, and the more effective you will be in your interviews. Always remember that a job interview is a dialogue: an opportunity to ask as well as answer questions.

#### 1. GENERAL ADVICE

Although every interview is unique, some basic guidelines apply because all interviewing sessions, no matter how different from each other, have quite a bit in common.

##### A. Understand the purpose of the interview

The main objectives of the interview process are to convince the employer that you are a desirable candidate, and for you to find out whether the employer is a good fit for you. A desirable candidate is:

Poised, self-confident, mature; enthusiastic;

Pleasant to be around;

Conscientious, reliable, has good judgment;

More interested in opportunities to grow than in immediate high compensation;

A fast learner, adaptable;

Able and willing to work hard;

Eager to take on significant responsibility;

Achievement-oriented;

Interested in this particular firm, organization, or corporation.

How do you convey all these things in a way that your resume cannot? It is a subtle process of marketing yourself. Your appearance, demeanor and speech should all aim toward demonstrating your desirable qualities to your interviewer. Avoid the common mistake of focusing on how beneficial the job will be for you -you need to show the employer the skills and qualities you will bring as assets to the firm.

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To show your interest in this employer, be specific and show your knowledge. If you are attracted to their pro bono opportunities, say so. If they have a special litigation training camp you're interested in attending, let them know.

### B. Remember that interviewing is a two-way street

Keep in mind that you and the potential employer are interviewing each other. The firm only makes the preliminary decisions-whether to extend a callback and make an offer. You decide whether to accept the offer. Too many students get to the last step in the process (i.e., deciding between offers) and can't distinguish between firms. Ask questions, not just to make a good impression on your interviewer, but in order to elicit real information from your "candidate" that will help you decide whether you want to work there. Ask questions about the things that matter to you, even if you're afraid they may be 'sensitive.' (If an issue that is important to you is too 'sensitive' for a lawyer at the firm to discuss, then you don't want to work there, and you'd do best to figure that out before you accept the offer.) If you can remember this, and believe it, it will help you enormously.

### C. Be positive

Never bad-mouth anyone or anything at an interview. Your answers should always be "upbeat" in some way; this conveys that you are enthusiastic, psychologically healthy, and pleasant to be around. Most negatives can be presented in a positive way; for example, if you are asked what was your least favorite course in law school, after a brief statement of why you disliked the class, say what you would have liked to improve about it, the aspects of it that you appreciated; and how you managed to learn a great deal despite its shortcomings. When you practice answering interview questions, try eliminating all "no's," "not's," "didn't's," "although," "buts," and "however's" from your speech. Rephrase your answers using positive speech forms. This will prepare you to speak about yourself in a positive light.

Past failures and shortcomings need not be volunteered, but don't try to cover them up or sidestep them. Should the interviewer ask about them, try to explain the circumstances rather than find excuses or blame others. Discuss what steps you have taken to make up for these shortcomings. You create a better impression by being candid and by demonstrating your eagerness to overcome past failures.

### D. Be Honest

Don't let your enthusiasm for the job cause you to exaggerate. Never pretend to know something-or someone-that you really don't. Don't try to avoid a question about your past or present job experiences or academic performance. No one expects you to be superhuman. In fact, letting others know about some of your weaknesses can often make you appear more human and attractive to employers. Of course, all attorneys are trained to highlight facts that paint a

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favorable picture of their clients. You can do this on your own behalf, if you do not exaggerate anything or omit crucial facts.

If you're interviewing in your 3L year because you didn't get an offer from your 2L employer, don't dodge the question. Relate what happened in a positive light. Explain what you learned over the summer, and if the reason you didn't get an offer was because you didn't 'fit' with the firm, reassure the interviewer that you have the ability to do the work, and consider getting a reference from your former employer who can at least attest to your work product.

### E. Relax

Remember that the interview isn't completely within your control. Regardless of how well you prepare, and no matter how well you fit a firm's ideal profile, an interview can still go poorly without really being anyone's fault. Try to consider each interview to be a positive learning experience, no matter what the outcome.

## 2. PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Rehearsing for an interview is difficult because there are as many different types of interviews as there are interviewers. You are dealing with human relationships and with your skills of judgment, intuition and insight into people. Nevertheless there are a number of things you can do which will add greatly to your chance of success.

### A. Self-Assessment

Preparation for an interview includes being aware of both your strengths and your weaknesses so that you are ready for whatever questions come your way. Use your knowledge of yourself to develop self-confidence. Remind yourself of your personal strengths and achievements academically, in employment, and personally.

Try and make up a short list of three to five of your strongest selling points related to each particular hiring organization. This list should reflect your most notable achievements or qualities so that it will help distinguish you from the other candidates for the job. Before each interview, try and review your resume from the perspective of the particular hiring organization that will be interviewing you that day. You have something-probably many things- that distinguish you from all other candidates. Figure out what they are and sell them (subtly, but sell them). Have you developed client service skills? Teamwork skills? Does your background demonstrate initiative? The ability and willingness to take ownership and make a success of projects? Do you have a technical background? Can you bring in business? Tell your interviewer!

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Assess your strong points and have them at the ready. State them at the opportune moment, calmly and clearly, without bragging but without undue modesty. The interviewer wants to know what you have to offer and doesn't expect you to be demure about it.

Also, assess what you want from an employer generally, not specifically. Most law students are too uninformed to know exactly what they want, and interviewers know this. Nevertheless, try to develop a pretty good picture of what kind of experience you're looking for, find out how to speak knowledgeably and ask good questions about it, and then tell the interviewer what you want and ask if they offer it.

### B. Know your resume and your writing sample

Completely review your own background before the interview. Be ready to discuss everything on it intelligently and knowledgeably, as well as accounting for any period of time that it does not cover. If your writing sample was written a while ago, review it to refresh your memory about its contents. If your resume includes your thesis title, be sure you can have an intelligent discussion on the topic, even if you completed the research some time ago.

### C. Research the employer

Research will help you anticipate interview questions and to prepare thoughtful, intelligent questions to ask the interviewer. The more you know about the prospective employer, the better able you are to highlight relevant skills and to demonstrate how your credentials correspond with the position for which you are applying. Lack of knowledge about the firm is a common reason to not give a callback or an offer to an applicant.

Coming to an interview prepared with knowledge about the firm indicates that as a lawyer you will come well prepared to meetings, court appearances, and the like. Your knowledge about the employer will also demonstrate that you are serious about your career goals, are selective about the jobs that interest you, and that you understand what it means to work in that particular organization. Research can help you avoid embarrassing faux pas, such as asking about a practice area or branch office the firm doesn't have. When you have prepared for an interview, you will be able to enter into it in a more focused frame of mind.

If you have researched the employer thoroughly, you can use your interview time to seek information that you were unable to find through other resources.

A review of the firm or organization's web site prior to an interview is imperative. The CPPO has much information and many links to research resources. Check out the National Association for Legal Career Professionals (NALP) form on the particular office of the firm at which you are interviewing. Many firms' branch offices have stats different from the headquarters, especially when it comes to practice areas and attorney demographics.

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Classmates and alumni are also an invaluable resource-talk to people who have worked at your target firm. They will usually give you the real lowdown on what it's like to work there. The CPPO can help you identify alumni working at your prospective employers.

### D. Grades

You will probably be asked about them at some point in the course of interviewing. Keep the grades issue in perspective. Do not raise the question of grades yourself; interviewers who wish to discuss grades will raise the question independently. If your grades aren't as strong as you would like them to be, don't make excuses. Being defensive about your grades can be fatal. Talk about your grades positively-convey to the interviewer that you are comfortable and confident in your law school studies- and be sure to emphasize other aspects of your qualifications.

### 3. THE FIRST IMPRESSION - AND BEYOND

The first few minutes of the interview are crucial; employers make up their mind about candidates very early.

#### A. Dress like a lawyer

A professional appearance shows respect, preparation, and that you can one day be a desirable representative for the employer in court, with clients, or at other public appearances. For an interview, this means shined shoes, hair (including facial hair, if applicable) that is neat, clean and nicely cut, and clean and clipped nails. Clothing should be understated, conservative (usually this means dark colors), pressed and brushed. Male and female interviewees should wear a business suit. Men should wear a clean and not-too-loud tie, and a clean and pressed shirt. Women interviewees should wear an appropriate blouse and, if your suit has a skirt, you should also wear hose. Shoes or pumps should have modest-sized heels.

Perfume, after-shave lotion and cologne should be used sparingly if at all. If you are a smoker, do not smoke prior to an interview. Too much jewelry, particularly dangling earrings, is distracting. Avoid overdoing the make-up. Remember that employers will see you from the back as well as from the front; check your appearance from both perspectives.

#### B. What to bring

Bring extra copies of your resumé, transcript and writing sample. The interviewer may come unprepared, or another employee may decide at the last minute to join the interview. Even if your interviewer has everything, it is a good way to show that you are prepared. Of course you would never knowingly let your cellphone ring during a job interview, but double-check to make sure you haven't inadvertently left it on.

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### C. Demeanor

Your demeanor should be dignified, friendly and confident. Remember, the interview starts the second you park your car. Shake hands (firmly, but not bone-crushingly) with everyone to whom you are introduced. Make eye contact (but don't stare). Don't fidget, and keep your hands away from your face. Try to keep your posture confident, neither too rigid nor too informal. Avoid crossing your arms across your chest, which is considered a defensive posture. Smile. Avoid nervous mannerisms such as "you know" or nervous laughter. Before you depart, thank your interviewer and express your enjoyment of your meeting. If you are not sure you will remember the interviewer's name, it is fine to ask for a business card.

### D. Be on time

Allow more time than you think you need to get to an interview. Lateness is so rude that it may eliminate you from consideration; arriving late for an interview can also make you unduly nervous. If you know you are going to be late, you should try to inform the employer--even if doing so means you may be later.

## 4. THE INTERVIEW

A little nervousness can be energizing, and shows the employer that you care about the interview; too much can impair your performance. Firms must always think of their clients, and no one wants a nervous lawyer representing them. Arriving on time and thoroughly prepared are the best things you can do to minimize your nervousness.

Establish rapport with your interviewer. In addition to tangible things such as a firm handshake and appropriate eye contact, other items which develop rapport between people include warmth, humor, responsiveness and sincere interest in the interviewer. Remember that most people like to talk about themselves, and like the people who give them the opportunity to do so.

Interviewers will often try to put you at ease, but sometimes they will not. Some interviewers want to see how you react to pressure. If this happens in one of your interviews, remember that it is a way of testing your potential as a litigator or negotiator and respond accordingly. Pause to gather your thoughts before you answer. Don't hesitate to be politely assertive in asking questions.

Listen carefully. Listening is one of a lawyer's most important-and most underrated-skills. Don't let your concern with coming up with a good answer keep you from hearing the question. Try to hear the question behind the question and respond to the interviewer's concerns. You should also "listen" to body language. Be sensitive to cues of boredom or impatience.

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Vary the pattern of your responses by answering the question and then occasionally taking the opportunity to expand on some aspect of your abilities or experience. Or, answer briefly and then ask a related question of the interviewer.

Try to think of yourself as a lawyer during each of your interviews. Lawyers need to be "up" whenever they are dealing with clients, opposing counsel, or judges. Even if you answer the same question a dozen times in the course of interviewing, try to respond with the same level of enthusiasm as the first time. If you use a similar answer or anecdote more than once, present it a bit differently each time; this will force you to concentrate and help you avoid sounding "scripted."

Know your audience. Try to get a sense of each person who is interviewing you, and tailor your answers a bit to their personality. As a general rule, associates and younger partners in law firms are less interested in your qualifications than in your personality. Let them see you as a friendly, likable person rather than as a competitor. Older and mid-level partners are likely to be more concerned with your grades, your ability to work hard, and your potential to one day bring in business for the firm. When you are interviewing with these lawyers you can take the opportunity to tell the firm how talented you are and how hard you like to work.

No matter how comfortable you feel, or how informal the person interviewing you may seem, never get too relaxed in your demeanor or your answers. Even young interviewers must answer to the hiring committee. Your job is to communicate that you are professional as well as likeable. Never provide answers that reveal highly personal aspects of your private life.

If you have a late afternoon interview, try extra hard not to show your weariness, and keep in mind the interviewer has been interviewing students all day and may also be a little weary.

### 5. QUESTIONS TO BE PREPARED TO ANSWER

Anticipate questions about what your resume says and what it doesn't say. If there is something in your background you are particularly concerned about, write out answers in advance as part of your preparation. Take the time to think about your answers to questions. Some questions require multi-level answers. Start with a summary response, then pause and give a more detailed description if the interviewer seems interested or asks you to go on. Make sure your answers are short, concise and to the point; this demonstrates confidence and clear thinking. Try to avoid nervous wordiness or long academic disquisitions (unless the interviewer shows a genuine interest in a high level of detail on the topic).

Typical interview questions

Why do you want to work for us?

Why should we hire you?

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What do you know about our organization?

How have you spent your summers?

How do you spend your free time?

What experience have you had in organizing or directing clubs and/ or activities?

Tell me about yourself.

Describe yourself in one word.

What are your future career plans?

Why did you choose law?

What courses have you liked best? Least?

What qualifications do you have that make you feel you will be successful in your area of interest?

What have you learned from some of the jobs you have held?

What type of people do you feel you work with best?

What type of people would you have trouble working with?

What is your greatest personal asset? Your greatest weakness?

Do you like routine work?

What constitutes "security" in your mind?

What fields interest you other than the one you are in?

What do you really feel are things that help a person become successful?

What constitutes "success" in your mind?

What kinds of things give you the most satisfaction in your work?

What criteria are you using to evaluate the employer for which you hope to work?

What's the worst question you can think of to ask me?

What do you enjoy doing the most?

Why did you only get a "P" in \_\_\_\_?



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How would you reconcile being assigned a case you were morally opposed to?

Why do you want to be a lawyer?

Why did you go to law school?

How do you like law school?

How are you doing in school?

What are your grades?

Why are you interested in this firm?

What can I tell you about this firm?

What type of law do you want to do?

Who are your favorite instructors? (Asked by alumni.)

What classes are you taking?

How did you like \_\_\_\_ (work experience)?

What are your ultimate career goals?

Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten? Twenty?

What is your greatest strength?

What is your greatest weakness?

What one thing have you done that you're proudest of?

Do you have any more questions?

Why do you want to work in [city]? (Be prepared for this one if you have no obvious ties to the area. Firms do not want to waste recruiting efforts on someone who is not committed to their location.)

Offensive or illegal questions

Certain questions, such as relating to family background or national origin, marital status or plans, age, disabilities or sexual orientation are illegal; others are offensive or inappropriate. Unfortunately these kinds of questions are sometimes asked; spend some time thinking about how you might want to respond if you were to encounter them. Please see a CPPO Counselor with any questions.

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### 6. QUESTIONS TO ASK

Questions to ask at interviews should include some questions on your part as well as answers. Try to make them real: while questions are part of your interview “performance,” they are also an opportunity to actually learn important information about the firm, so demonstrate your maturity and interest by asking questions whose answers you care about.

Try to prepare at least some inquiries that are specific to the firm, and which go beyond generic interview questions. Sometimes questions can be prefaced by statements that show something about you or your knowledge of the firm: "I know the firm does XYZ, but does it also do ABC?" Always have a few extra questions in mind, in case the conversation lags. (Interviewers, especially those who are underprepared, will sometimes put the burden on the interviewee to ask questions about the job or the firm.) Questions also can allow the interviewer to relax by talking about something familiar.

The purpose of summer programs is to recruit future attorneys, so be sure to ask about what you might expect both as a summer and as a permanent associate. If an associate worked at the firm as a 2L, you have a great opportunity to ask how the experiences compare.

Try to elicit information in ways that go behind standard answers. Instead of asking how much responsibility young associates are given (the stock response will be “a lot”), ask the interviewer about a current project she is working on, and then ask how she assigns or is assigned work.

Don't be alarmed if you don't understand the interviewer's answer to a question. Often attorneys are not well calibrated to what a law student can be expected to know. So, for example, if an attorney responds to your inquiry about her practice with "I mostly work on submission of comment letters on the Basel 3 remuneration guidelines as well as the incentive compensation rules of the Dodd-Frank Act (Section 956)," ask an intelligent follow-up question, and move on from there.

Remember who your audience is: some questions are better for associates, while others should be directed to partners. Your questions should also differ according to where you are in the process: screening interviews aim at making it to the callback; at callbacks you can probe deeper, and once you have an offer, you have more leeway yet. Keep in mind that in responding to your questions, younger attorneys especially may feel conflicted between wanting to give frank answers about the firm to someone who is nearly a peer, and their job of promoting the firm as part of the recruiting process.

A. Questions to Ask the Associate Interviewer:

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Associates can tell the difference between legitimate and “filler” questions, as they went through the interview process not long ago. They are your best source of information about what life might be like if you were to come to work at the firm.

Tell me about your most important cases or transactions.

This question can generate a useful dialog about what an associate is actually doing--not what the firm says lawyers do early in their career, or a recital of the firm’s high-profile cases.

How are these cases and transactions staffed (partners /associates / seniority / reporting lines)?

Every firm will tell you its cases are staffed “leanly.” Hearing about how particular matters are staffed will help you understand whether this is true, and learn how much direct partner contact you are likely to get.

Follow up questions: at what point did you (or do you expect to) handle a deposition/oral argument/client call/transactional matter unsupervised?

How does the associate evaluation process work?

All firms have evaluation procedures of one kind or another. But you will want to know how often young lawyers are reviewed, how the evaluation is delivered, how active a role the associate has in the process, how it affects compensation, whether reviews are anonymous, etc. Pay attention to cues about how the process actually seems to be working for the associate.

What is the process for providing feedback to summers?

“Lots of useful feedback” is a standard claim; try to get specifics about how the firm gets busy attorneys to provide constructive criticism to summer associates.

Tell me about supervision, mentoring and training for associates.

All firms tout their professional development opportunities. Specific questions about how this interviewer experiences them will help you find out what the firm’s priorities are, and how organized the firm’s approach to development is. Ask about mentoring, advisor systems, writing programs, in -firm and outside CLE programs. Ask about how much time associates are expected to devote to professional development. Does the firm have benchmarks for attainments of specific skills by associates at different levels? How does the firm support associates’ realization of those goals?

How does the firm use summer associates’ work?

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It's not always easy for lawyers to find projects of the right scope for summers. Some firms even create exercises for summer associates to be sure that everyone gets a chance to do different types of projects.

How is work assigned in your summer associate program?

What does the firm do to ensure that each summer gets a good mix of assignments? How much say do summers have in choosing assignments? How many of the partners/associates/staff attorneys is a summer likely to work with? Is there a centralized source of assignments, or will my work be assigned from a department head, or from one partner?

How is work assigned to associates?

Does the firm have a "free market" assignment system? Does work come through a committee or do you just hear from partners who need help? Do associates ever go to partners and ask for work? How do the work assignment systems for summer associates and permanent ones compare?

Other areas of inquiry might include:

Is your work concentrated with a small group of partners or clients?

At what point are junior attorneys expected to specialize?

How accessible are partners to associates?

How accessible are associates expected to be after hours?

How important would you say "face time" is at the firm?

What constitutes a billable hour?

How much client contact do you have?

How much control do you have over your schedule?

How often do you have to change personal plans at the last minute?

What kinds of pro bono work does the firm do?

Do you feel as if the firm values pro bono work?

What do you like most about the firm?

What would you change about it if you could?

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Why did you choose this firm over other options you had?

### B. Questions To Ask A Partner Interviewer:

Partners see their firm from a very different perspective from associates. Not only are partners older, and usually with a longer relationship to the firm, they are its owners. This means that they are responsible for managing the business of the firm, which includes getting and keeping clients, collecting receipts, and meeting expenses—including associates' paychecks. Showing some interest in the firm as a business indicates that you have a longer-term point of view than simply landing the job.

What practice development challenges does the firm face?

Every partner must think of the firm's future, and this is more urgent now than ever. Firms try to anticipate clients' needs, and ensure the capability to serve them. Questions could pertain both to practice areas (which ones the partner sees as being in demand in coming years) and to ways of serving clients (new technologies, billing schemes, etc.).

I have heard about marketing, competition for business, "beauty contests" and the like. How has this changed in the past few years?

Is the ability to market important to hiring or promotion decisions? What does the firm do to train younger lawyers to develop business? This is new and important territory for everyone in the profession. Showing that you are aware that young lawyers can't just do great legal work, that they need to be involved in bringing in and keeping clients, will be gratifying to many partners.

Tell me about your most interesting current or major cases / transactions.

This is where a bit of preparation can go a long way: mention a particular case or matter s/he worked on and ask questions about it. Follow up with questions about staffing, and try to zero in on the type of work that is entrusted to younger lawyers.

How do you think the firm and its practice, or your department, will change in the next few years?

This can launch a dialog about several important subjects. Follow up in the following areas:

additional cities or offices

new practice areas types of cases and transactions that will be handled

changes in partner to associate ratios changes in the economics of practice-e.g., will rates or billing systems change, will competitive pressures increase, etc.

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Other areas of inquiry might include:

Is your work concentrated with a small group of clients?

What is the biggest change you have seen since you were an associate at the firm?

How would you describe the firm culture?

If the partner has lateraled from another firm, why did s/he make the change?

What do you like most about the firm?

What would you change about it if you could?

How is the firm governed?

Would you describe management as very centralized, or more dispersed?

How are associates involved in the decision-making process?

### C. Questions not to ask

Avoid questions to which you could have found answers to by reading the employer's NALP form or web site. While you are not presumed to have memorized the firm's web site, a general familiarity with the firm, and greater acquaintance with any area in which you are interested, is expected.

Avoid questions that indicate too much interest in perks, compensation, part-time work or vacations in relation to challenges and hard work.

Expectations as to billable hours, while a legitimate concern, should be asked about diplomatically so as not to appear unwilling to work hard. Same with regard to questions about work/life balance.

While an interest in the training the firm offers is positive, remember that you benefit from training regardless of how long you stay at the firm, so too much focus on it might be interpreted as “what’s in this for me?”

Especially if you have a background in public interest, a focus on a firm’s pro bono work and policies might suggest that you aren’t keen on working for the clients which provide the firm’s revenues.

Questions about your prospects for becoming a partner are likely to be viewed as premature and naive. When asked about your career goals for five years, or ten years, demonstrate that you understand that a law firm is a business and you want to work hard to earn your place there and

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one day begin bringing in business. After several years as an associate, partner could be in your future. Anything that suggests you are thinking of your “exit strategy” sends a negative message.

Be careful with questions which may reflect negatively on the firm (e.g., regarding rumors of high attorney attrition, layoffs and the like). While your concern about such matters is legitimate, proceed with caution, and take answers with a grain of salt.

### 7. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

#### A. Self-Evaluation

It is natural and beneficial for an interviewee to evaluate his/her performance as soon as he/she steps out of the interview room. Keep in mind that you may not be able to judge your performance accurately. Your memory may amplify particular aspects of the interview that the interviewer did not even notice; or, you may downplay certain aspects that actually stand out in the interviewer's mind. Many interviewees are too hard on themselves and agonize over a particular response to a question only to find out later that the interviewer had no recollection of it and would like them to come in for further interviews. If after several call back interviews, you are not extended a callback offer, arrange an appointment with the CPPO. A pattern of performance may be detectable and easily rectified.

#### B. Thank You Letters

Generally, thank you letters are always required after an interview. If you made a particular connection with an interviewer and talked about something unique or memorable, try to mention that in your thank you note. For example, if you talked about your dislike for vegetables over lunch, mention in your thank you note if you recently tried asparagus. E-mail thank yous are acceptable, but hand-written notes are preferred (use plain white/ivory stationery). However, sometimes an interviewer will indicate that they expect to make a hiring decision soon, so mailing your thank you note is not an option.

#### C. Waiting Period

Screening interviewers will often say how soon you should expect to hear from them about callbacks. If they do not, assume 3-5 days; some firms have hiring committees with weekly meetings, so delays of up to a week are not unusual. Be patient – while this job may be your number one priority, interviewers may have more pressing firm matters.

Remember, you can always stop by the CPPO with questions, or schedule a mock interview.