

# SAIS Accreditation Student Interview Method

## Conducting the student interview: notes while watching a Master

While observing an accreditation visit, I was privileged to watch as Peter Jernberg, former President of Jackson Academy in Jackson, Mississippi, skillfully conducted an interview with sixteen middle and upper school students.

We are in the library. The visiting team and students are seated in chairs facing each other. It is the final day of the visit and the interview with students begins at 9:15 am.

Peter welcomes the students and thanks them for sharing their time and opening up their wonderful school to visitors from other institutions. He introduces the members of the team by name and by school and position. He briefly describes the work of the school in preparing for the visit and the work of SAIS. He describes for the students that once every five years, the school is visited by peers who confirm and help celebrate all of the good things the school has accomplished and comment on the things the school is planning for its future. Peter names the stakeholder groups the team has already spoken with: trustees, teachers, alumni, etc. and says that the meeting with students is the highlight of the visit and reminds them that the school exists for them, the students.

In the first five minutes, Peter laid out the framework for why the visiting team is on campus and has succeeded in putting all the students at ease. He demystified the process and has led by example by talking about the great things the school has going on.

Peter asks all the students to introduce themselves by name, grade, and how long they have been attending the school. He thanks them all and encourages them to answer the questions he is about to ask. After a student speaks, Peter thanks the student by name for their comments (they are wearing name tags, but I suspect he remembers all their names from their introductions), especially when they change the subject or move the conversation in a different direction. Some of the phrases he uses are “we’ve heard that echoed in other meetings” or “that is a really insightful comment” or “that seems to be the culture of your wonderful school.” Here are the three questions he asks:

- What do you love about your school that makes it such a special place?
- What can the school do to continue to enhance what a great place it is?
- Several you transferred from other schools (as learned from the introductions that the students have been at the school a variety of lengths of time) what attracted you to the school?

The conversation continued organically, and 45 minutes had passed in a blink with about 95% of the conversation and comments generated by the students in the room. Peter then invited questions from committee members. They asked: What kind of leadership opportunities do you have at the school? What are your thoughts on the scheduling at the school (the school recently switched to a modified block schedule)? Comment on the balance between the myriad opportunities at the school.

Peter ends by thanking the students for the privilege and pleasure of speaking with them and of visiting their campus and thanks them for sharing with the team.

The art form Peter has perfected is in eliciting comments from students by making sure the students understand just how excited the team is to be with them. This excitement about the school is purposefully infectious and causes the students to focus on the positives of their school. Everyone loves to talk about what they are passionate about, and Peter's techniques masterfully engage the students in the conversation from the beginning.

His second question is tricky and could be asked in many different ways. By setting the tone early, the responses to the second question were extremely positive and the students felt like they were owners in identifying what initiatives they think will help the school be stronger in the future. One student even commented that he was aware that he wouldn't be around for one of the initiatives he had suggested, but that making the school better would serve as an excellent legacy – he is currently a sophomore.