Pharmacy Employment Interviewing
How to present yourself and your qualifications skillfully

In This Guide:
A. The interview format
B. How to prepare for the interview: Four good ideas
C. What employers want to know: Responding effectively to interview questions
D. The six most common questions about answering questions well
E. Ending & after the interview

A. The Interview Format
UCSF students have shared that the format of their interviews varied: They sometimes just met the district hiring manager, and also interviewed with a pharmacist. Usually, these were 1:1 interviews, rather than panels. In general:

- **Community pharmacy**: Interviews usually involve an initial brief, 15-20 minute phone interview, that can lead to an in person hour-long interview with a pharmacy recruiter or manager.
- **Hospital pharmacy, managed care & pharmaceutical pharmacy**: Interviews also vary and often involve a screening phone interview that, if successful, can lead to an in person interview with your direct supervisor. The interview can range between 45 minutes to an hour.
- **Helpful Hint**: When an employer calls to arrange an interview, it is fair to ask, “May I ask what the interview format will be so I can prepare?” You can ask about the length, the format and the names of individuals you will meet.

B. Preparing for the Interview: Four good ideas

Very few people can “wing” an interview successfully. Interviewing well is a skill that often requires both preparation and practice. It’s challenging to find the time to prep for an interview between classes, student group activities, as well as, the actual job search. However, UCSF students said that prepping for between 3-10 hours paid off in long run.

**There are four main strategies to prepare effectively for an interview:**

1. Talk with pharmacists and fellow students to hear about their interviewing experiences
2. Create a “Tell/Know List” to lay out your strategy during the interview
3. Practice answering common interview questions
4. Practice interviewing with a counselor in the OCPD

Let’s look at each of these steps:

1. **Talk with fellow pharmacists/fellow students**
   It’s to everyone’s benefit to share information about the interview process. That includes not only asking later stage students about their job experience, but also sharing information with fellow students in your class about the interview process.
   - **Key questions**: what the format was like, how they prepared, if there were any unusual questions and final advice.

2. **Create a master “Tell/Know List” to lay out your strategy during the interview**
If there’s one key thing that almost every interviewee should do, but doesn’t, it’s this: Create a master “Tell/Know List”. This list helps you think through the overall framework and goals of the interview, and it’s simple to do. Make a list of everything you want to tell the employer about yourself and everything you want to know from them during the interview. If you do, you’ve prepared yourself to use every interview question strategically, as every question becomes an opportunity for you to make your case about why you are a strong candidate.

Since job interviews are usually 30-60 minutes long, an interviewer only has enough time to ask between 5-15 questions. This is enough time to share about 3-5 points about yourself, so they have to be key. Let’s look at our hypothetical student, June Lee, who is interviewing for a job with at Mortar Pharmacy. On the ‘TELL’ side, June’s interview framework includes her academic training, professional skills and interest in the position. On the other ‘KNOW’ side, she writes her main concerns, including their expectations for the candidate they hire, and when they expect to make a final decision. June decided what would be on her ‘TELL’ list, by reading Pestle’s job description and requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What June wants to tell the interviewer: Her Message</th>
<th>What June wants to know about Pestle Pharmacy: Her Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Her Academic Training</strong></td>
<td>• What a typical day is like?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• UCSF 4th year pharmacy with bio. undergrad</td>
<td>• Who are typical patients?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Her Professional Skills</strong></td>
<td>• What are common clinical issues?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hospital &amp; community pharmacy experience</td>
<td>• Biggest challenges for staff/organization over next 6 months?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Business/project management experience</td>
<td>• Training/ professional development?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Spanish language skills</td>
<td>• Compensation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Her Desire/Interest in Position</strong></td>
<td>• Opportunity to advance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enjoy patient interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Like community focused setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Likes Pestle’s organization/hours/compensation package.</td>
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This framework is the basis of the entire interview. As you will see, June’s answers will highlight information from the “what I want to tell Pestle” list. Her questions to them will be shaped by the, “what I want to know from Pestle” list. One again, in this light, every question, from “Tell us about yourself”, “Tell me about your pharmacy experience”, and “How do you handle stressful situations”, to “Tell me about a time you had a difficult conversation” or “Where do you see yourself in 5 years” are an opportunity for him to keep on message about who he is and why the position is a top choice. Take a few moments to jot down what you want to know and tell an interviewer.

3. Practice answering typical questions
In addition to this guide, you can find examples of interview questions at the following sites:

4. **Meet with a counselor in the OCPD and receive helpful feedback on your interviewing skills.** To make an appointment and practice a mock interview, call 415-476-4986, Monday – Friday, 8:00am – 5:00pm. We book about 2-3 weeks in advance for counseling appointments!

**C. What Employers Want to Know: Responding to Interview Questions Effectively**

Once you have an overall master “Tell/Know List”, you can start reviewing interview questions, and practice using them as opportunities to share information from the ‘TELL’ side of your list. To know what you should tell, and how to say it, it’s helpful to first understand what an interviewer is trying to determine about you. Let’s now look at typical interview questions, to review both their purpose and effective strategies about how to respond:

**I. The Opening/Agenda Setting Questions: “Tell us why you’re interested in this position”**

- **Why interviewers ask these questions:** The first question you’re asked in an interview is often very broad and open-ended, such as, “Tell me about yourself”, or “Tell us why you are interested in this position”. The reason is often that the interviewer wants an overview, or opening statement summarizing how your skills, experience and background are a good fit for the job. In short, your interviewer is waiting for you to set the agenda of the conversation. Also, at times an interviewer has reviewed scores of resumes and is interviewing 5-10 candidates, and is asking for an opening statement that refreshes their memory about your application. It’s also a helpful synopsis for interviewers who never reviewed your resume or cover letter.

  The best approach to respond is to keep the selection criteria or key competencies in mind, and summarize your relevant background and training listed on the ‘TELL’ side of your “Tell/Know List”. A synopsis of your academic training, professional skills and interest in the position should take only 2-3 minutes.

- **Common mistakes: Speaking for more than 1-3 minutes:** Interviewees trip themselves up by answering the question too broadly, (for example, addressing where they were born, raised, went to school, all in chronological order), and speak too long. No matter how interviewers ask the question, (”Tell me a little about your background”, “Why should we hire you”, etc.) they really just want a summary of why you’re a good match for the job. Keep it brief!

**June’s Strategy:** She summarizes her skills and experience:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interviewer: Why you are interested in this position?</th>
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<tr>
<td>June says: I’m a graduating pharmacy student trained at UCSF, with a background in biology. Also, I have 4 years of health related volunteer and work experience in hospital, research lab and pharmacy settings.</td>
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The job description suggested that there is a significant amount of patient interaction, and is a face-paced environment. I’ve also heard good things about a number of aspects at Pestle, from your computer system to your competitive compensation package. Overall, this position seems a good fit for my skills and interests, so I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today.

*Prepared by Naledi Saul and Kathleen Cassidy*
**Variation Summary Response**

I’m currently in my final year at UCSF. Prior to entering the program I volunteered at Walgreen’s pharmacy where I...(what did you do that is relevant?). In addition to gaining pharmacy experience, I worked in customer service for 3 years and gained experience in (what did you do or learn that is relevant to the job?). At UCSF I have completed training in (what certifications or trainings have you done?) and participated in two community outreach activities educating individuals from underserved communities on prevention and treatment of TB and Diabetes. Finally, I’m fluent in Spanish and have served as a translator at Walgreen’s and during the community outreach activities. I was thrilled when you called

**Practice: Variations on the “Opening/Agenda Setting” Questions:**

1. Tell me about yourself/Tell me a little about you.
2. Can you share a little about your background?
3. Why did you apply for this position?
4. Walk me through your resume.
5. We have over x number of applicants this summer, including 14 from UCSF. Why should we hire you?

**II. The Do You Have the Relevant Training, Skills and Experience To Do This Particular Job Questions:** “Tell me about your health-related experience”

* Why interviewers ask these questions: After opening, agenda-setting questions, interviewers will often ask a series of questions to see if you have the key skills needed to accomplish the job. For hospital and community positions, questions will focus on areas like your pharmacy/health related experience, ability to work in stressful/busy pharmacies, ability to learn quickly and think independently, attention to detail, and customer service skills.

They will often ask about these areas with either, “what was X experience like?” questions or “behavioral style” questions. Behavioral style questions will ask you for a specific example of a situation you dealt with or a skill you used that would be relevant to the job. They are based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. Through asking these questions, employers determine if you have certain competencies needed to be successful there.

* Common Mistakes: Rambling! Your answers should be between 1-3 minutes long, and should state your main point, use 1-2 examples, and close. Often, interviewees aren’t sure what they want to share before they start talking, and end up rambling for more than 5 minutes. So, before answering an interviewer’s question, first take a few seconds and analyze the question, and the interviewer. There are hundreds of interview questions; why are they asking you this one? What do they want to know? What are they trying to get at? Then, respond in a structured way, highlighting no more than three points. For example, let’s look at a “What was X experience like” question:

| Interviewer: | I see you volunteered at Pestle Pharmacy for two years. What was that like? |
| June thinks: | Ok, so here, they want to know what things I can already do, and how familiar I am with the pharmacy environment. So I should start there, and highlight 2-3 key skills, rather than talking about the entire 10-week experience. |
| June says: | Very rewarding - I learned three main things at Pestle. First, I learned how to work in a very busy pharmacy – the 2 pharmacists, two technicians and three interns, and we saw about X clients a day and filled about Y prescriptions daily. Second, it was where I developed my medical vocabulary in Cantonese – I sometimes served as the interpreter between staff and clients, or just greeted customers. Third, I had the chance to give a community presentation about asthma – which is one of the things I enjoyed most. |
Let’s now turn to a behavioral-style question, where you’re being asked about how you dealt with a specific situation in the past. When asked these types of questions, respond using the S.T.A.R. Method. The S.T.A.R. Method is:

\[ S = \text{Situation} \quad T = \text{Task} \quad A = \text{Action} \quad R = \text{Result} \]

- Lay out Situation or Task to be completed.
- What Action did you take and why?
- What was the Result?

Let’s look at June’s response to a behavioral style question, using the S.T.A.R. Method:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>A patient/customer is frustrated because she has been kept waiting for her prescription. How would you handle it?</th>
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| June says:   | • *(Situation/Task): At Pestle Pharmacy, I often worked at the returns counter, and a particular customer became angry and loud regarding the wait time to the counter.  
• *(Action): When her turn came, I listened to her concern and rather than trying to immediately explain why the wait was long, I acknowledged the situation and her feelings of frustration. I apologized for the inconvenience, explained we were unexpectedly short staffed due to staff illnesses and then asked if there was anything she needed that I could help her with before ringing up her purchases. In those situations, rather than react or become defensive, it helps to acknowledge the customer’s experience and just apologize.  
• *(Result): Our interaction took a few minutes longer, but the woman seemed satisfied with the service and attention she received, was no longer visibly angry and thanked me before she left. |

And this is a variation of a S.T.A.R. Method response to a similar question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>Discuss a time you worked with a difficult customer.</th>
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<tr>
<td>June thinks:</td>
<td>All right, so there will be difficult customers in this job. I wonder in what way they will be difficult? I’d like to know. So, first focus on my approach, give a detailed example, discuss results, and end by asking for more information.</td>
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</table>
| June says:   | In general, my approach to working with “difficult” clients is to realize that it isn’t often about me; I just happen to be the person the customer is talking to, and will let their frustration out on. I find it helpful to acknowledge their frustration and then focus on tangible steps.  
When I worked at Pestle Pharmacy, we had a number of situations where the customer insisted that their doctor had called in a prescription but we had no record of the call. Often, the doctor had not made the call yet, but the customer, so worried that they would leave without their medication, would grow tense and begin to raise their voice.  
I often began by ensuring the client that if they didn’t leave with their medication, they would leave with a plan. I often asked questions to diffuse the situation, including when they believed the physician was supposed to call, if it was a new prescription, if they had any past problems filling the prescription, etc.  
If it seemed as if the prescription should have arrived, I would try to call the physician, depending on how busy it was. If I was unable to connect with the physician at that time, I encouraged the patient to step out of line and call the physician, and tell them to come to the front of the line if they reach them. Finally, if I am unable to fill the medication at the time, I tell the patient the next best steps: to contact the physician directly and to call us, so they don’t make an unnecessary trip. In the end, they might still be somewhat angry, but with a plan, they don’t leave empty-handed. I found they appreciated that.  
That said, can you describe some difficult situations interns commonly face in here? |
Helpful Hint: Remember that each interview question is an opportunity to tease out more details about the job! One strategy to learn more about the responsibilities or challenges you will face is to ask for more detailed information about their job after responding. Read June’s response above – note how he ended his answer – asking what kind of ‘difficult situations’ staff might face. You don’t have to wait to the end of the interview to ask questions from the ‘KNOW’ side of your Tell/Know List!

Another Helpful Hint: Behavioral questions can be difficult if you are not prepared with a vignette from your past to use to illustrate key points. So have 1-2 sample stories/situations in mind, and know you can use each two or three times to demonstrate different skills or abilities to deal with a particular situation. Let’s look at examples of behavioral style questions and responses that tease out your skills or abilities, often using the S.T.A.R. Method. For example, a key employer concern is how well you will handle the stress you will face in their job, so they will ask about difficult customers/patients, or as we see below, disagreements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>Tell me about a situation in which you had a conflict or disagreement with a colleague?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June says:</td>
<td>I am currently working on organizing the Alpha Phi’s Mission Neighborhood Health Fair with a fellow student. Earlier in the project, my colleague reported to the president of the organization that I was not giving the information he needed to complete his part of the project. I was surprised because I had thought I was giving all information ahead of the established deadline. Rather than continue to involve the president, I approached them to discuss the situation and find a solution.</td>
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</table>

I first let him know that I wanted to work this out, and asked for examples of when I had not provided information he needed, to help me understand what was going on. It turned out that he needed a particular piece of information earlier than I had sent it. I realized I had gotten the dates mixed up, and while I wish he had come to me first about the situation, I can understand why he thought I had just decided not to complete and send the work. So, in an effort to move forward on the project, we agreed to sit down and review the deadlines, and he agreed to let me know if he had any concerns before involving outside parties. It all worked out fine.

Practice: Variations on the “The Do You Have the Relevant Training, Skills and Experience To Do This Particular Job” Questions: (remember – always use the S.T.A.R Method!)

Tell me about a time when you disagreed with a supervisor or colleague (communication/conflict

- Tell me about a time when you disagreed with a supervisor or colleague (communication/conflict resolution)
- Tell me about a problem you had to solve? (analytical skills, problem-solving)
- Tell me about a difficult decision you had to make (decision making skills)
- Tell me about an ethical dilemma you faced? (Integrity, reasoning, maturity)
- Give me an example of your initiative in handling a challenging situation. (Initiative)
- Tell me about a time when you worked effectively on a team (teamwork/collaboration)
- Tell me about a time when you lead a team to reach a goal (leadership)

Prepared by Naledi Saul and Kathleen Cassidy
III. The Curiosity/Concern/Fit Questions: “Where do you see yourself in five years?”, etc.

- **Why interviewers ask these questions:** After being convinced that you do have the relevant training, skills and experience to do the job, interviewers usually turn to more about why you want the job and if you’re a good fit. Now that they know you could do the job, they want to know more about why you want to do the job, and what might be barriers to you doing the job. This is where questions like: “Where do you see yourself in five years”, “What do you find most exciting about pharmacy?”, and “Why CVS?”, all fit in.

- **Common Mistakes:** There are two common mistakes: The first has to do with any question that focuses on your long-term goals: Many interviewees fail to make the connection between the specific job you are interviewing for and your long term goals. An interview is like a first date, and employers want to hear why you chose their particular job (rather than a competitor’s), the same way a date would like to hear something specific about why you chose them to ask them out. Tell the interviewer something specific about the job or organization that you think makes it a good fit for you and/or with your long term goals.

  The second mistake has to do with the general ‘curiosity/catch all’ questions, like: “How do you handle criticism?, or “What’s your weakness?”, or “What are you most proud of?” questions. They are sometimes called ‘roommate questions’, because the answers give the interviewer a sense of how self aware you are - what is important and meaningful to you, and what it would be like to live with you (at work). View these questions that way.

Let’s first look at the fit, ‘future’ goals questions, and how June chooses to respond:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer:</th>
<th>What are your long term career goals?</th>
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<tr>
<td>June says:</td>
<td>I've worked very hard for the past 5 years to identify and situate myself in experiences I find professionally rewarding – and I want my future to be an extension of that goal. In 10 years I hope to still be in work situations where I get to address a wide range of clinical issues, and be involved in community education and outreach. It is one of the reasons I am interested in this position – I like the opportunity to have both clinical and management leadership roles. I also want to work with Spanish-speaking populations, because I am very interested in health issues facing my community. I see this job as a chance to do just that.</td>
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More questions to assess how well you will fit with their organization might include:

- Why do you want to work for our organization? Why are you attracted to this position?
- What did you like and dislike about your last job?
- How long do you expect to work for us if hired?
- What type of supervision do you prefer?
- How do you work on a team?
- What would a former supervisor or colleague say about you?
- What motivates you day to day?
- What attracted you to pharmacy? (commitment to the field)
- Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years? (how does this position fit with your professional goals)

Let’s now turn to questions that focus on self awareness:
Interviewer: How would you describe your weakness?

June thinks: *What really concerns me is that the training to get new staff up to speed – I’ve never seen their computer system before, and it doesn’t sound like there is a formal orientation program. Without it, I don’t see how people are expected to learn it and do what they’re asking. I need to know how people learn this system.*

June says: In terms of my long-term goals, I have strong organizational and patient counseling skills, but as a future community pharmacist, I need to learn more about the business side of running a pharmacy. That’s what I hope to gain with this internship. In regards to this internship, after our conversation about the day-to-day responsibilities, I feel very comfortable with the population you serve, and the customer service and education outreach component. While I am a quick learner and able to think on my feet, I am concerned about having the necessary information to serve customers well – for example, I am not familiar with the database/computer system you use. I have taught myself computer software in the past, but it would help if you could share a little more about how you train new staff on the system.

**Variation Example Response for the Weakness Question**

I sometimes agree to new projects before I review my workload, so I can, at times, overextend myself. Often, it’s because the project or task is interesting, but I’ve learned that over-committing means that nothing gets done well. What helps when I am assigned or considering a new task is to specifically ask for a little time to review my workload before I commit. I also try to keep my calendar with me so I can review and schedule in any new work. What has helped me in previous internships/jobs is to ask about deadlines so I can be sure that I can do what is expected of me. If I were the selected candidate I would do that here as well.

And here are two more sample responses. Note that they begin with how to conceptualize an issue (constructive criticism can be useful, stress is a normal part of work), and address how they handle an issue. Also note that they are brief – they don’t dwell on the problem; they focus on the solution:

Interviewer: How do you handle criticism?

June says: Regardless of how difficult it can be to hear, I know that criticism can be useful. I prefer to know if someone has concerns about my performance, because then I can evaluate how accurate the feedback is and deal with it. For example, I worked on a student program with another student leader who said she was frustrated because I wasn’t contributing enough. When I asked her for specific examples, it became clear that she was feeling overwhelmed with the number of tasks and had assumed she needed to do them all, even though that was not the case. So, what helped was sitting down, writing down all of the tasks, and then dividing them up. That way, everyone was clear about roles and responsibilities and we had an agreed upon plan which I think addressed all of the issues.
More questions to assess self-awareness, resilience and maturity might include:

• What are your strengths and weakness?
• What are you most proud of and why?
• What’s been your greatest disappointment? (Include what you learned)
• Tell me about a mistake you made and how you handled it?
• What do you think will be most challenging for you in this position and how will you handle this

D. The Six Most Common Questions About Answering Questions Well

The six most common questions are:

• How do I structure an answer/How do I end an answer? Often interviewees don’t know how to structure their response well, instead ending abruptly, or fading out. Two good tactics are to structure your response, and to use language to let the listener know where you’re going. To review an June’s earlier response, note how he begins by saying there are three major areas, and then uses language to indicate where he is in his response: “first…second…third…”

Even without that structure, language such as, “finally”, “to summarize”, or “in the end”, helps him end a long response. Another option is to end by repeating the question.

• What if I find myself rambling? Occasionally, everyone gets lost when responding to a question. If you do, Stop and Redirect. When you realize that your monologue response to the “tell me about a time you failed” question has begun to glaze over the eyes of your interviewer, you can stop talking for a moment, take a breath and say:
  • “Let me summarize my response…”
  • “As you can see, I could talk about this topic all day, but my main point was….”
  • “The main thing I learned was….”
  • “And to synthesize all of my earlier points, I would say that…”
  • “In the end…”

…and then reiterate a main point/themes, and end your response. One statement you can say after any response is: “Did I answer your question?”, giving the interviewer a chance to redirect the question, if you were off point.

• What if I feel the interviewer is a bad/hostile/fails to ask relevant questions interviewer? Could be hostility. It could also be anxiety. Remember that your interviewer might be a practicing pharmacist who lives in the area, a Human Resources representative or the pharmacy manager. This means they might not experienced interviewers, and may not have a sense of the pace, format or the best questions to ask to elicit the most valuable information from the interview. Don’t depend on the interviewer to ask you the ‘right’ questions. Know your agenda before you sit down with them, and know what you want to
share. That way, if the only question they ask is “Tell me about you” before they launch into a 20 minute monologue about their trip to France, you still will leave them with a summary of your relevant skills and experience.

- **What if I don’t understand the question or the purpose of the question?** If you didn’t understand what a patient was asking or why they were asking about a particular medicine or side effect, you wouldn’t pretend to know and guess the answer. Don’t do this in with an interviewer either. Instead, treat the interviewer like your patient and realize sometimes they don’t exactly know how to ask for the information they need: While you can give a brief response, you would ask the patient more questions, gather more information and clarify their concerns.

- **What happens if I am asked a question that seems inflammatory? Or if I’m not sure is legal?** Occasionally, you will get asked a question that seems inappropriate or potentially illegal. For example, say an interviewer asks you if you intend to have a family, or have children. In almost all cases, the best response is to treat it like another question where you don’t understand the purpose of the interviewer. For example – one reason they could ask you a question about children because they intend to use your answer as a strike against you, but another reason they could be asking you because they are using it to lead into their great family friendly environments and benefits. The first reason is discriminatory, but the second reason is just poorly executed (because the interviewer could have just **told** you the information, without putting you on the spot or confusing you by **asking** you about children). But it helps to assume good faith (the second reason) until you have proof otherwise, so if you are asked any question that seems potentially inappropriate or illegal, just say, “That’s an interesting question. Before I respond, can you tell me what motivated you to ask it?” If their reasons seem suspect, you have the choice of either asking the question, or just saying, “I understand your motivating for asking the question, but I don’t feel entirely comfortable responding to your question.” or, “I see why you’re asking, but I under the impression – and correct me if I’m wrong – that such a question was not within bounds.”

- **What if I have further concerns about being asked inappropriate or illegal questions, or questions about something in my past that might raise flags?** Just contact us, and we can talk about your situation further. Make an appointment with a counselor in the OCPD by calling 476.4986.

**E. Ending & After The interview: Thank You Notes**

*Before you end the interview, thank the employer for the opportunity to share your skills and experiences and learn more about the position. A simple “Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview. I greatly appreciate it” Should do. Take their business card/contact information so you can send a thank you note within 48 hours. Make sure you know their hiring time frame before you leave! Note that there are sample thank you notes on our website at career.ucsf.edu*

**Want More Help? Practice your Interviewing Skills in the OCPD.**

Remember: pharmacy students can make an counseling appointment to discuss your upcoming interview, or just want to practice interviewing skills in a mock interview.

The UCSF Office of Career and Professional Development is located in the Medical Sciences Building Lobby, in Room S140. Our phone number is 476.4986, and you can either drop in or call to make an appointment.