

Reference Checks

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Part One: Obtaining References

Reference checks are a means of verification and clarification used to assess an applicant's knowledge, skills, abilities, and work experiences. An appropriate reference is one who has worked with the applicant in a professional manner and can comment on the applicant's qualifications. Generally, when the campus advertises the ad requests a list of three professional references. These are considered the initial references. Rarely will an initial reference be poor as the applicant has carefully chosen those individuals who will make only positive comments.

If the college is inviting candidates from out-of-town and/or for a full day interview, it is strongly recommended that reference checks be conducted **before** the candidate is invited for an on-campus interview. Otherwise, the campus may spend a considerable amount of time and funds on a candidate who we later learn we would not consider for the position based on the references' feedback. At a minimum the initial references provided with the application materials should be contacted prior to inviting applicants to campus.

Reference Checks (Source State of Vermont)

Before any offer of employment is extended, the Search Committee Chair or Designated Search Committee Member should conduct a reference check on the final candidate(s). Candidates should be notified that a reference check will be done and that the information will be used in making the final hiring decision.

Only those references provided by the candidate may be contacted unless the candidate has given permission to contact others. The Search Committee Chair or Search Committee should ask candidates for additional references as necessary and appropriate. This can be done prior to inviting finalists to an on-campus interview, or at the conclusion of the phone or campus interviews. The Search Committee Chair or Search Committee may also ask candidates if they give permission for the committee to check references with any individual the candidate currently or previously worked with or for. It is from these references that the search committee may uncover information not previously known about the applicant. The search

committee should notify applicants being interviewed that it is our practice to conduct reference checks before and/or after campus interviews.

The following is a sample “script” of asking candidates for additional references.

“Prior to an applicant's visit to campus, we check references. We have the list of initial references you provided when you applied. To confirm, the references are _____ and we can reach your references at the addresses and telephone numbers (confirm them) provided on the reference sheet. In addition, we would like to proceed with contacting some of your former employers. Is there anyone in particular you would recommend us contacting? Besides your former employers, would it be okay if we contacted your current employer? May the search committee contact anyone who would have information relevant to your qualifications for the position?”

If the applicant says yes, ask who you can contact and get phone numbers. If the applicant expresses reluctance, state you can appreciate his/her concern and that you will revisit this if the applicant becomes a finalist for the position.

Part Two: Planning the Reference Check

The Search Committee should determine who will be conducting the reference checks. In some cases it may be the Search Committee Chair and/or divided between Search Committee members. If more than one individual is conducting reference checks, it is important that the same list of initial questions be developed and used by each individual conducting the check. Questions may be supplemented as appropriate depending on the course of the discussion during the reference check.

The questions should pertain to the knowledge, skills, and abilities identified as important to the position and any significant gaps or missing elements in the applicant’s materials. Be sure to keep the questions job-related. You cannot ask questions that would be illegal to ask the candidate directly, as outlined in the document “ESF Interview Questions – Sample and Unlawful” such as age, marital status, etc.

It is recommended that final reference checks include immediate supervisors from the candidate’s last two positions. If these persons are not listed as references, it is important to ask the candidate why. Often a candidate has not mentioned to his/her supervisor that he/she is seeking other employment. Rarely will a finalist for a position request that you not contact the current supervisor. The Search Chair or hiring manager should discuss this with the candidate. Another reference may be substituted at the discretion of the Search Committee Chair or hiring manager.

References who currently know or recently knew the finalist are preferred. References who have not had direct contact with the candidate for over ten years provide little if any useful

information. Keep in mind that former students can provide a different perspective about faculty candidates.

References must be checked prior to extending an offer to the finalist for the position!!!
Never tell an applicant that the reason for rejection is because of a poor reference. This violates the reference's confidentiality!

Part Three: Conducting the Reference Check

When calling, the search committee member should identify himself/herself, his/her position, the position for which the applicant is being considered, and that the call is being made to verify employment information given to the search committee by the applicant.

The person you are calling may be busy, suspicious, or protective. Take the time to establish rapport, ask credible questions, and be a good listener. You'll also need to evaluate how candid a source is and how well the respondent knew the applicant. Many employers will not release information for fear that they will be sued. Employers are protected as long as they're telling the truth and not attempting to maliciously slander a previous employee. If the employer still won't provide a reference, you can ask the applicant for other references, or have him/her contact the current or former employer to have your request for information provided. If this fails, contact Human Resources for further guidance. If the former or current employer won't give you any information about the employee, document this as well, including the date and time you spoke.

A reference check questionnaire should be prepared (see sample format and questions at end of this document) prior to conducting the reference checks.

- ✓ **Be thoroughly familiar with the applicant's file.** Review the applicant's materials prior to speaking with the reference.
- ✓ **Follow your plan.** Verify basic information first such as job title and employment dates followed by more detailed questions related to the position.
- ✓ **Sift through the opinions to determine the facts.** In all cases, factual information expressed via examples is far more valuable than opinions and speculations.
- ✓ **Take detailed notes.**
- ✓ **Collect information without evaluating what the reference is saying.**
- ✓ **Be mindful of references who are not completely truthful.** Be alert to unusual hesitations, evasive, vengeful, or overly enthusiastic responses.
- ✓ **Take the time you need.** If necessary reschedule or make an appointment first.
- ✓ **If information is missing or needs to be validated, re-contact the reference.**
- ✓ **Evaluate the information obtained by the references carefully.** If a mixed picture emerges about a candidate, consider the sources. Why does information appear to conflict? Is there a reason why a reference may provide that information? When a negative comment is received, see if it is validated by other references.

Sample Questions for Reference Checks

General Employment/Experience Related Questions

- What position(s) did the candidate hold?
- What were the beginning and ending employment dates for this candidate?
- How was the candidate's attendance?
- Did this candidate earn promotions?
- What were the candidate's most recent job duties?
- What were the candidate's functional responsibilities? How effectively did the candidate carry out those responsibilities?
- How did this candidate's performance compare to other employees with similar job duties?
- Why did the candidate leave your organization?
- Why did this person's employment end with your organization?
- Is there any reason why you or your organization would not rehire this candidate?
- Would you recommend this candidate for a position at another organization? Why or why not?

Technical/Job Specific Skills

- How would you rate the candidate's technical aptitude and knowledge and his/her ability to communicate complex concepts clearly and accurately? Please give an example.
- How would you describe the candidate's approach to teaching? Is this method effective? On what do you base your opinion?
- Ask additional questions specific to the technical requirements of the position the candidate is being considered for.
- Did the candidate have any responsibility for policy formation?
- Did the candidate develop any new plans or programs? Were they effectively developed? Effectively presented?

Work Relationships

- How did this candidate get along well with management? With peers?
- How was the candidate viewed by his or her peers, supervisors, and/or subordinate?
- How did this candidate work within a group?
- How much supervision did the candidate require?
- How would you describe the candidate's working relationship (with coworkers, etc.?)
- Any work conflicts? How was it resolved?
- We are especially interested in the candidate's interpersonal skills. What kind of relationship does he/she have with students? Faculty? Staff?
- What evidence can you provide of the candidate's sensitivity to students special needs or achievements in the area of student-oriented programs?
- What evidence can you provide of the candidate's sensitivity to employees or students of diverse backgrounds? Please give any examples you might have.
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Transferable Skills

- Did the candidate demonstrate initiative? Please give an example.
- How resourceful is the candidate? Did he or she rely on you to find out everything they needed to know, or did h/she demonstrate some initiative in finding relevant information themselves?
- Did the candidate finish what he/she started?
- Can you recall an instance where the candidate effectively handled a complaint? If so, explain.
- Can you recall an instance where the candidate instituted a change which resulted in an improved method or process in the job? If so, explain.
- Can you give me an example where the candidate demonstrated skill in leadership, vision, creativity, or problem solving?
- How good is the candidate at organizing and tracking details?
- In what area(s) might the candidate need to develop? Can you give an example of this?
- Rate applicant's effectiveness in:
 - (Using scale of *Poor, Fair, Average, Above Average, Excellent*)
 - Organization
 - Attention to Detail
 - Critical Thinking Skills
 - Judgment
 - Problem Solving
 - Customer Service Orientation
 - Ability to multitask
 - Interpersonal Skills
 - Flexibility
 - Ability to work within a group

Miscellaneous

- In your opinion, what are the candidate's strengths? Weaknesses? Can you give examples of how these were demonstrated?
- What areas do you think the candidate needs to improve/further develop?
- What is the candidate's single greatest accomplishment in his/her time working for you?
- What one thing do you wish the candidate had accomplished for you, but didn't?
- To your knowledge what interest does the candidate have in multicultural issues?
- Were any internal or external factors negatively affecting this candidate's work performance?
- What kind of job is best suited for this candidate's abilities?
- How would you describe the candidate's overall performance?
- Is there anything we did not discuss which would have relevance to this individual's candidacy for employment?
- Is there anyone else we can talk to who would be able to speak to the candidate's credentials for the position?
- Other comments?

Reference Check

Name of Applicant _____

Position Applied For _____

Name and Title of Reference _____

Phone Number Called _____

Date _____

Name of Person(s) Conducting the Reference Check _____

Identify yourself and your position and tell the reference you are calling from SUNY ESF. Explain that XXXX is a candidate for the position and has listed them as a reference. Ask them if this is a good time to talk with them. If not, select a date for a mutually convenient time. Briefly tell the reference what position the applicant has applied for.

What was your relationship to the candidate?

Verify dates of employment and position.

INSERT QUESTIONS FROM LIST ABOVE

Is there anything we did not discuss which would have relevance to this individual's candidacy for employment?

Is there anyone else we can talk to who would be able to speak to the candidate's credentials for the position?