

Finding a Research Mentor

Identifying an undergraduate research mentor can be a bit intimidating. In many ways, it is similar to a job interview, or to selecting a graduate research mentor. The suggestions below should help you arrange a supervised research experience beginning at any time.

Advice to students searching for research mentors

1. Research the possibilities: What areas of research interest you? It is likely that you have a few topics that truly catch your attention. Visit the departmental websites and click on the research tab. Use the local media, library, and the web to seek additional information. Talk to your academic advisor and to your instructors for suggestions. Friends and classmates may also be able to suggest faculty members that have a reputation for being good research mentors. If you have work-study funds, you can try to find work at a laboratory of interest.

2. Narrow down your search: Once you have some likely mentors in mind, you will need to contact them to determine whether they are available for mentoring undergraduate researchers. Faculty are usually limited in time and resources, and you want to determine availability as soon as possible. Call or e-mail the researcher, and explain that you are interested in participating in research. You can ask to make an appointment to discuss the possibility of working with them. Do not be discouraged if you receive no reply: it is possible this researcher is out of town or busy with a grant deadline. Try someone else in your list. There is nothing wrong with approaching more than one potential mentor simultaneously. Your goal is to find a great mentor and research environment and shopping around is usually necessary. If you end up with more than one offer, decide which one you will explore, and decline the other offer with many thanks. This way, the researcher that you turn down will be able to recruit other students, and the phrase "flaky student that came by, acted all excited, then disappeared..." won't be associated with your person.

3. Prepare for the interview: The kindness of their heart aside, why should this busy stranger agree to mentor your research? The answer is simple: you would be an asset to their lab. As an undergraduate, you are not expected to be a fully trained expert; however, you should have a general idea (the more detailed, the better) of what this researcher's work entails. Prepare for the interview. Bring a list of questions to ask, such as what kinds of projects might be available for you to work on, and whether this faculty has mentored other undergraduates. Discuss your interest in continuing this collaboration for more than one semester. Take notes. Discuss how this experience is important to your future career plans. If possible, indicate a project in which you would like to be involved (whether that is a project already in progress, or a project you devised your own).

If it applies, discuss compensation: are you looking for a paid position, a work-study position, or are you interested in doing research for credit? Bring a transcript of your

coursework, should you need to discuss your academic background. You want to appear informed, prepared, and eager to learn and work.

4. Follow up on the interview: Make time to call or send a note thanking the researcher for meeting with you. A short e-mail will do. If the researcher is unable to offer you his/her support, do not be discouraged. Think of this interview as good practice for the next one. If the interview leads to an offer to collaborate, set up a time to further discuss the project, and ask for materials or references to help you prepare.

5. Details, details: Find out as much as you can about the project and the research environment before you accept to participate. Discuss issues such as how many hours/week can you devote to the project (and is this in agreement with your research mentor's expectations)? Who will supervise you (and are you comfortable with this arrangement)? How often will you meet with your faculty advisor (or will you mostly interact with another laboratory member; is the arrangement acceptable to you)? How will your performance be evaluated? What skills will your project require and if you need training, when can this training begin? Discuss whether you need training in lab safety, use of radioisotopes, animal handling, or whether you need any tests/vaccinations. What is the laboratory protocol for notebook keeping? Will you be working in a project that might lead to a publication? The above questions are offered as a starting point. Most misunderstandings between students and mentors stem from a lack of clear expectations on these issues.

These notes are liberally adapted from guidelines and suggestions produced by Emory University.