

Tips for Getting Involved in Campus Research

One of the benefits of attending such a large public research institution is the opportunity to get first-hand experience in scientific research with graduate students, post-doctoral researchers, and professors. Many of these skills cannot be learned in the classroom, and you can explore your interests in different areas of science.

Keep in mind that when looking for research, you can make up for lack of experience with enthusiasm and the ability to commit for more than one semester. Also, don't be too concerned about starting out in the exact area you want to study forever – consider a variety of subjects, because many research skills can transfer across many labs. Just get your foot in the door!

Get to know your professors. Consider approaching professors for classes that you are enrolled in. You can get to know them first by attending office hours, and if it's a class for your major then there is a good chance that you might be interested in their field of study. Once you are on a familiar level, bring up some of their research topics to discuss. When they see your interest and know you personally, you'll have a better shot at working with them, either then or in the future.

Connect with graduate students. If you're having a hard time talking to professors about getting into their labs, the next option might be to contact their graduate students. Grad students can sometimes be more friendly and responsive to interested students. Try emailing them to set up an informal tour of the lab, or ask about when the regular lab meetings are held and try to attend a few (if public). Finally, don't hesitate to talk to the GSIs for classes you are taking – they might all be in completely different labs, so find out what they do and go from there!

Apply through URAP. The undergraduate research apprentice program (URAP) is a way for professors to formally provide openings for undergrads to participate in their research through an online application. Many positions will have the option to continue for more than one semester, and participants receive research units. URAP can vary in competitiveness based on the position, and the application is usually due during the second week of each the semester.

Start with a work-study position. It is not uncommon for labs to hire students to fill maintenance roles to support the researchers, with labor such as glassware cleaning, media prep, making chemical solutions, etc. However, you can use this entry-level position to your advantage over time. Sometimes the labs may allow you to assist with research activities (unpaid) in addition to your regular paid shifts, and you may be able to later transition to a researcher in the lab. Otherwise, make connections with the many people you might meet while working, because they could know of a place for you later. Tip: If you don't qualify for work-study, you might have the option of converting subsidized loans into work study funds in order to be eligible.

Keep up with your peers. Not sure where to start looking for the ideal lab to work in? Pay attention to what your classmates are doing! This gives you a direct connection to ask about what type of work is being performed in lab, as well as what the work culture is like and how the student started there. Many labs on campus will have a webpage that lists lab members (including undergrads), so check out some labs and see if you recognize anyone from your classes. If timed well, you could even replace a classmate when they decide to leave their lab.