

A Guide to Getting Started in Research

Based on resources available at <https://www.cur.org/>

In student research, you will work with one or more research mentors, faculty members who will provide guidance and support during your research project. But how do you find that right project and right mentor?

Here are some steps to get you started:

1. **Identify a specific area that interests you.** When seeking a research mentor, it is important to consider your interests. Although you may be willing to participate in any research project, it is important to have an idea of what you would like to work on since the experience will require self-motivation to learn about the topic and complete the work. Plus, you'll want to do your best to find an experience that will help build the next steps in your career.
 - a. Questions to answer when considering your interests.
 - i. Have there been any particularly interesting topics from the courses you have taken?
 - ii. What do you do/read about in your spare time? What are you passionate about?
 - iii. Which potential careers are you considering? Could you develop a project related to those careers?
 - iv. Do you have any personal fields of interest? For example, someone with a family history of cancer may be interested in research projects related to cancer.
 - b. Activities to narrow your answers.
 - i. If you have many ideas, can any of them be merged or combined?
 - ii. Does one project idea help you achieve your future goals more than others?
 - iii. If you don't have your own research idea, no problem! Consider if any of your interests connect with any faculty/on-going projects at DSC. Search for "Undergraduate Research" on the Dalton State website and review what faculty have listed as their interests.
2. **Identify faculty that are working in your area of interest.** You could begin by:
 - a. talking with professors whose classes you have enjoyed,
 - b. meeting with a Student Research Ambassador,
 - c. discussing it with your Academic/Faculty advisor,
 - d. checking out student research projects at DSC's undergraduate research symposia,
 - e. reviewing the research posters displayed throughout Peoples Hall,
 - f. searching for "Undergraduate Research" on the Dalton State website and review what faculty have listed as their interests.
3. **Ask for a meeting.** Once you have identified one or more potential faculty research mentors, reach out to them through an introductory email requesting a meeting to talk about student research opportunities.
 - a. Always approach faculty in a respectful, polite, concise, and thoughtful manner.
 - b. Be sure to include your name, major, relevant background, and information about what interests you about their work.
 - c. Include any connections you may have with them, such as "I was in your Biology 1107 class in fall of 2024" or "I was told about your interest in research by the Student Research Ambassador."

- d. Recommend times to meet like during their student office hours or general times you are free.
 - e. Close with your contact information and thank them for their time. *There is a sample meeting request email later in this document.**
 - f. If needed, follow up. With many emails coming in at a time, a faculty member may miss your email. It is acceptable to follow-up with your initial email after 2 weeks have passed. In your follow-up email, you should provide the same information as before and reiterate your interest in their research area. You should state that you would be interested in meeting with them to get an idea of their research area and how individuals can get involved in research with them. For example, “Dear Dr. XXXX, I reached out a couple of weeks ago regarding my interest in pursuing undergraduate research with you. I am just sending a friendly reminder to that effect. For reference, [previous email can go here]...”
4. **Prepare for the meeting.** Make sure you treat the appointment as an interview. This means come prepared to make a good impression and to ensure they understand your interests and your skills. You should be able to answer the following questions:
- a. Why do you want to do research?
 - b. What excites you about this research area?
 - c. What interests you about working with this faculty mentor, in particular?
 - d. What availability do you have?
5. **At the meeting.** Meeting with a potential faculty mentor is an opportunity for both of you to become acquainted. The faculty member will want to learn about your experience and reasons for wanting to conduct student research. This is also your chance to learn more about the faculty member’s expectations for student researchers.
- a. Make sure you show up and are on time.
 - b. If your appointment is over the phone or virtual, check to see if you have strong service, have their contact information in case the call is disconnected, and have practiced using the format with a friend. If the call gets disconnected, you should try to reconnect.
 - c. Determine if the research area and personalities would be a good fit. If it is not a good fit, that is okay. Another faculty member may be a better fit for you.
6. **After the meeting.** After your meeting, send a thank you message to the potential faculty research mentor.
- a. If there were questions you could not answer during the meeting, address them now.
 - b. If they offered help or resources, remind them by being appreciative.
 - c. If you are still interested in conducting student research with the faculty member, say so.
 - d. If you decide to not work with them, let the faculty member know and thank them for taking the time to meet with you. Perhaps something like “Thank you for your time in talking with me about student research. I do not believe this project is the right fit for me at this time.”

***Sample Meeting Request Email**

Hello Dr. Smith,



My name is Jane Brown, and I am a third year Chemistry major. The Student Research Ambassador told me that you are interested in and currently conducting research on novel chemotherapy drugs. This is of particular interest to me because my brother battled cancer when he was 12 years old. Would I be able to meet with you to discuss your research and any opportunities to work with you as a student researcher? I could meet with you during your student office hours on Thursdays or I am available to meet anytime on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. You can reach me by email or via cell phone at 555-123-4567.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jane Brown

[Getting Started in Research Checklist](#) (download)

[Sample Proposals](#)

What is mentoring?

A research mentor is a faculty member who provides guidance for a student researcher, sharing knowledge, experience, and advice. The mentor will field questions and help students overcome problems and challenges relative to their research, as well as helping the student researcher develop technical skills, writing skills, use of specific software, etc. as appropriate for the project and discipline.

Common expectations for mentoring relationships:

- Meet regularly and as often as your schedules permit.
- Keep any commitments made.
- Maintain confidentiality with one another.
- When you meet, give each other your undivided attention. Turn cell phones off (or, if necessary, discuss reasons it must be left on).
- Show respect and support for each other.
- Work together to resolve any minor concerns about the relationship.
- Come prepared with any questions.
- Be open to feedback.
- Be open to trying new things.

Setting specific expectations in a research setting:

Since the goal of the partnership is accomplishing tasks related to a specific project, this relationship includes time requirements and performance expectations. Additionally, many meetings will be focused on project details. To help provide a framework for the work and promote success in a student research mentoring relationship, here are a few suggestions:

- Jointly establish clear expectations. The faculty research mentor will develop a proposed contract or, less formally, initiate a discussion of expectations. Some ideas to cover include:
 - Time requirements
 - Performance expectations
 - Possible dissemination of the work (publications, presentations, etc.)
 - A detailed plan for the project with specific outcomes
 - Identify how each prefers to be contacted (call, text, email, IM, etc.) and when it is acceptable to make and expect return communications (working hours, weekends, etc.).
 - Specify situations when contact should be made immediately, within the next 12-24 hours, or at the next regularly scheduled meeting.
- Try to meet regularly and as often as possible, even if it is only for a few minutes or virtually. Frequent meetings will help to promote communication and prevent surprises.
- Ask for help with procedures if you do not know how to do something.
- If multiple students are working together on a project, the mentor and students should lay out the students' respective roles and how to appropriately work together.
- Likewise, if there are multiple mentors co-advising a student, the mentors should establish their respective roles.

Reasonable expectations specific to Research Mentors and Student Researchers:

| Faculty Research Mentors | Student Researchers |
|---|---|
| Provide help, offer suggestions, and be a sounding board for issues relating to the student's career goals and development. Talk about skills student could acquire to add value. | Take initiative to drive the relationship and be responsible for your own career development and planning. Ask questions. |
| Provide feedback and help the student researcher understand how they can have the greatest impact on the project. | Focus on and be interested in getting feedback and measuring how you are perceived. |
| Provide suggestions and advice on goals and activities that lead to effective and rewarding work. Share stories about the successful paths others have taken in their careers that might be relevant to the student researcher. | Ask for suggestions and advice early in the relationship. When advice is given, listen to the research mentor, apply at least some of their ideas, and let him or her know the results. |
| Help the student researcher develop a network. Suggest others with whom the student researcher might engage. | Ask for the research mentor's advice on developing other informal mentoring or networking relationships. |
| Communicate regularly. | Communicate regularly. |
| Evaluate the relationship periodically. | Evaluate the relationship periodically. |