How to: Approach a Research Supervisor

Steps to find an undergraduate student research assistantship (USRA)

Prepare:

- Read about faculty in your area of interest. Find their publications and research areas. Places to look: professor’s profile page; internet search; library catalogue search. Are you interested in their most recent work? Do you want to learn more?
- Ask around: has this professor supervised undergraduate students in the past? What were their experiences? Also: ask department administrators. They’ll know if a professor is heading off on sabbatical or isn’t taking on any new students.

Connect:

- Use proper respect: Dr. Smith or Professor Smith is the best way to start.
- Make the first contact brief (in-person, by phone, or through email).
- Make an appointment for a longer conversation, either during scheduled office hours or at a time that works well for both of you.

Questions:

- Plan open-ended questions specific to the professor’s area of research.
  - Are you planning to continue investigating in your current area of interest or are other areas appealing to you right now?
  - What are the next steps in your research?
  - What roles might there be for an undergraduate student? What skills would be helpful to have?
- Options for discussion about research areas:
  - A topic or question from class that sparked your interest.
  - Information from a lecture, textbook, or elsewhere that you found curious or troublesome.
  - An idea or question you have related to the faculty member’s published work.
- Does that faculty member have research funding in place? Will they apply for additional funding to support an undergraduate student?

Share:

- Share your interest in the subject area as well as your academic and career plans.
  - Some may advise and mentor you or refer you to another professor.
- Bring a printed copy of your most recent resume, with your current contact information and NSID.

Talking to professors helps you gather information, consider future action, get additional resources or skill direction, hear about opportunities, or find your summer research experience!

Good luck!