

How to Identify and Contact a Potential Faculty Mentor

Professors are your most important resource when designing a research project. Aside from writing letters of recommendations for funding applications, some faculty members can allow you to serve as their research assistants (this varies by department). For independent projects, faculty are the ones to help you identify whether you're ready to begin research, how to identify a potential research topic, how to narrow down that topic, and what methods to use to carry out the project.

How to Find One

There is no centralized, standardized way to select a faculty mentor in the same way that, say, you might be assigned an advisor in your major to help you select classes. Rather, this is an organic process and you are the one in the driver's seat. The most important criterion is that the kind of research *you're* interested in is the kind of research *they* are interested in.

-An ideal way to cultivate a relationship with a professor is by taking a class(es) from him or her. This should be natural, because if it's a good fit, these are the types of classes you'd want to sign up for anyway.

-A good resource for selecting a mentor is a particular type of faculty member known as a Director of Undergraduate Studies, or DUS. Each department has one. This is a professor who is tasked with all things undergraduate-related in that department. If you don't already know who this person is in the department that most closely aligns with your interests (ordinarily, this will be your major) find that out on the department's web page. Then email that person to ask if you could meet with him or her to talk about undergraduate research: both how it's usually done in that department and if the DUS knows of any professors that might be a good fit for your interests.

-Another way is to go to the department's website and click on "Faculty" or "People." This should generate a list of professors in that department. Some of them will have a brief summary of their research interests listed on that page; for others, you will need to click on individual faculty's names to see their research interests.

How to Contact One

Often, but not always, finding a research mentor will mean cold-emailing a professor. You can title the subject line something like "question about undergraduate research." Then simply introduce yourself (name, year, major/minor) and provide 1-2 sentences (no more!) about your research interests and skills/qualifications. Attaching a CV is ok too. (If they want to know more after that, they will ask in their response).

-If it's a DUS and you want to come by their office hours to learn about undergraduate research in the department, then ask to do that.

-If it's a faculty member you want to work for as a research assistant, you can ask if they are currently looking for research assistants or know of any faculty that are. If they respond in the affirmative, you can then ask to set up a meeting/come to office hours.

-If you're hoping they could become a mentor for an independent project, it's probably best to ask to come by office hours/schedule a meeting to discuss your general interests in the field. (Asking someone via email to commit to supervising a project –particularly when you don't already know each other - is a big ask). If the meeting seems to be going well and this person seems like a good fit, you can then bring up the possibility of an independent project/thesis/capstone.

Some professors will respond promptly. Many will not. If you don't hear anything within a week, send a follow up. If nothing after that, you can contact the DUS in your department to see if there's a better way to get in touch with this person. If that doesn't work, you may need to decide it's best to focus on another professor. After all, this can be (though isn't always) a good glimpse of what it might be like to work under this person's supervision.

So What Do I Need CUSE for Again?

If faculty are so important to the research process, why do I need CUSE? For one, CUSE can help you think through and digest the conversation you had with a faculty mentor and create a plan for putting their advice into action. For another, the resources of CUSE come in handy once you get to the stage of **needing funding** for a project. This is usually only after considerable time choosing a topic, narrowing it down, learning appropriate methods, and locating sources --- all of which fall under the faculty member's purview. We at CUSE are experts in helping you craft compelling grant proposals to **get you the money you need to do research or to present that research** somewhere – at say, a conference. If you do significant, transformative research and amaze some professors, CUSE staff are also experts in helping you translate that mass of knowledge into compelling **fellowship applications** that highlight your achievements. But before we can help you do these things, you first need to make use of your professors. They're the experts in your specific field of research (and are best suited to nerding out with you on thermodynamics or Croatian cinema or the feeding patterns of zebrafish...)