Getting Started With Research

"Undergraduate research has multiple benefits to the student - both personal and professional. Personal benefits include increased self-confidence, independence, readiness for the next level of challenge, and ability to tolerate obstacles. Professional benefits include . . . gaining experience that will advance career opportunities, and obtaining specific skills such as critical-thinking, communications, and making presentations."

- James M. Gentile, President of Research Corporation for Science Advancement

This page includes the following information to help you get started:

- Introduction to Research
- First Steps
- Next Steps (if you have identified a research project)
- Getting to Know Faculty
- Student Blog Entries
- Discipline-specific Recommendations

Introduction to Research for Honors Students

Research is the hallmark of the honors student. Through research, you will demonstrate the ability to do advanced work in a discipline. The advantages of gaining research skills while you are still an undergraduate student are numerous and include:

- The satisfaction of developing your cognitive powers to their fullest potential
- Enhancing your ability to gain admission to a graduate school by creating a research thesis or project that you can showcase or summarize in your application
- Cultivating close mentoring relationships with faculty advisors who will know your work well enough to write thoughtful and detailed letters of recommendation
- Developing advanced problem-solving skills that will apply to any profession you choose.

This website provides an introduction to undergraduate honors research. For additional
research opportunities within your specific major, be sure to contact the Honors Program Director within your academic department directly. This is not an exhaustive list of research opportunities, but rather a guide to help you get started. Specific recommendations for students in different fields can be found at the bottom of this page.

First Steps

If you are just beginning to think about engaging in research, essential first steps are:

- **Get to know faculty!** (read more below about getting to know faculty)
- **Find a Faculty Sponsor**
- Get involved with the department that is home to your major: attend departmental events, read articles and publications by faculty in your department, and familiarize yourself with journals and conferences in your discipline.
- Contact the UMass Amherst Office of Undergraduate Research and Studies (OURS). OURS provides a clearinghouse of research opportunities both on-campus and off-campus, during the academic year as well as summer internships. OURS can help match you with a research opportunity.
- Browse through the rest of the information on this website to learn about CHC research opportunities for students at all levels. Students are welcome and encouraged to begin exploring research opportunities as early as their freshman year.

Next Steps

If you have identified a project and are ready to get started, check out:

- Library Research Tools and Tips
- Research Databases
- How to Find a Faculty Sponsor

Getting to Know Faculty

There are many long-term advantages of getting to know your professors and other faculty and staff. Getting to know faculty can help you:

- Learn about opportunities to work in their lab or studio
- Find a thesis supervisor to develop an independent research project or independent study
- Gain a more in-depth understanding of your course content
- Uncover new course opportunities in other departments at UMass Amherst and across the Five Colleges
• Broaden your knowledge of graduate school and career options
• Receive meaningful feedback on a research or creative project idea
• Identify appropriate background reading and literature related to your academic interests and passions
• Access facilities and equipment
• Design a research instrument or plan
• Navigate the complexities and expectations of your discipline
• Receive guidance about your academic needs, concerns and goals
• Learn more about the local area and connect with the community. Since most faculty members call the Pioneer Valley home, they may be able to recommend activities, organizations, and resources off campus that will help you explore and enjoy this vibrant area

Other staff members including advisers and librarians may also be open to developing a mentoring relationship and can be a help in supporting your efforts and finding resources. **These relationships take time to develop.**

You can **begin building relationships with faculty from your first day on campus.** In fact, you should! It is important to have established a relationship with faculty before you seek out an official sponsor for an Honors Research Grant or Research Assistant Fellowship. Note that many faculty members express how much they enjoy getting to know students outside of the formal classroom, and they often lament that very few students take the initiative to connect with them.

In addition to visiting faculty members during their office hours and attending lectures and events, you can participate in additional programs sponsored by Commonwealth Honors College, like Pizza and Prof Seminars and other honors activities, as well as Student Affairs events; that help connect faculty and students.

You should always do some homework before you reach out to a faculty member that you do not already know. **Before asking to meet with a faculty member, be sure to have a good rationale for why you are interested in working and learning with them.** Though most faculty members are thrilled to have the opportunity to meet with students who share their passions, their plates are already full with other responsibilities. To put your best foot forward at the beginning of a potential mentoring relationship be prepared to clearly express your knowledge of the faculty members’ research and how that connects with your own interests.

- A great first step is to visit departmental websites and read about faculty members’ areas of interest and research specialties. Follow links to learn more about their labs, research projects, and professional affiliations. Take the time to access and read a journal article or chapter that they have recently published.
- Many colleges and departments (but not all) have information about faculty
mentoring programs on their websites. See your departmental website or office staff for more information.

- When approaching a faculty member, introduce yourself as an honors student. You may want to ask them if they teach an honors colloquium that accompanies their larger courses or if they would consider advising you on a 1-credit Honors Independent Study to augment your experience in a course they teach. Connecting with faculty in these smaller settings is a great way to build rapport with them.
- Also, don’t forget to take advantage of your advising resources, here at CHC.
- For more specific information on finding a faculty sponsor for CHC grants and fellowships, visit the page on finding a faculty sponsor.

Student Blog Entries about Research Experiences

Current and former Commonwealth Honors College students have written blog entries about their experiences with research opportunities. Click on the links below to read these blog entries.

Honors InSight (Commonwealth Honors College Student Blog):

- Attending the Undergraduate Research Conference
- Capstone Part 3: Jumping In/Asking for Help

UMass Amherst STUDENT Blog:

- Lab Rats (How to find a research position on campus)

 Discipline-Specific Recommendations

While most of the information on this website will be useful to CHC students from across all majors and academic disciplines, there are some important differences in terms of when and how to begin identifying research projects.

- Majors in the Life Sciences and Physical Sciences
  - It is important for students majoring in life and physical sciences to begin identifying potential faculty members and labs to work with during your first year on campus. Many students begin working in a lab supporting a faculty research project as early as their sophomore year. Being involved with a faculty research project early in your degree process will be very helpful when you seek out a faculty member to support your honors thesis or project.
  - Because many introductory classes have large numbers of students enrolled, it is essential to connect with faculty members outside of the classroom. When you identify a faculty member you are interested in working with, visit them at their office hours. Before meeting with a faculty member remember to do some substantial background work first. Download and read a few recent articles she/he has written and be prepared to talk about why you are interested in supporting their research.
- Majors in the Social Sciences (e.g., sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and education) and Humanities (e.g., history, philosophy, visual/performing arts)
Students majoring in the social sciences and humanities should also begin thinking about faculty members who they are interested in working with in their first and second years. However, because it is typically not as critical for students in these majors to begin working in research labs as early as students in the hard sciences, it is recommended that you get to know faculty members better by enrolling in the smaller, more advanced courses (at the 200 and 300 level) that they teach beyond the introductory level.

Former UMass Amherst history professor, Heather Cox Richardson, won an award for her series of tips for undergraduate students. Check out her Tips for Writing Research Papers for a College History Course (these are helpful for all humanities majors, not only History majors).

Source URL (retrieved on 04/08/2016 - 6:04am):
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