Finding a Committee Chair

What is a committee chair?

A committee chair is a faculty member (typically, but not always in your major) who agrees to advise you on your research in a formal capacity. While you may have taken a course (or multiple courses) with this faculty member, a sponsorship extends beyond the requirements for a specific course. The role of a committee chair varies, but may include:

- Supervising a student on research work in their lab or on a research project they direct
- Providing feedback on a student’s independent research or creative project
- Sponsoring a student’s application for an Honors Research Grant or Research Assistant Fellowship
- Reviewing a student’s abstract submission for the Undergraduate Research Conference
- Serving on a student’s Honors Thesis or Project committee

Because every sponsorship varies, it is essential that both the student and faculty member have a clear understanding of the expectations each hold for the other. This should be discussed at the beginning of the sponsorship.

How do I find a committee chair?

Step 1: Identify potential chairs

- Think about what you are looking for in a committee chair. A committee chair will be someone you work with closely. Remember that you are looking not only for an expert in your field, but also someone who could be a good mentor or sponsor – someone you can work with personally and who has the time and flexibility to sponsor an honors student.
- Contact your department’s Honors Program Director (HPD) to inquire if your department has specific information and resources that may help identify a committee chair who is a good fit for you.
- Also, visit your department’s main office and website. Many departments have information available specifically for undergraduate research.
- Make a list of relevant courses and instructors: Consider courses you have taken, public lectures, and guest speakers. Use the course catalogue and departmental websites to find related courses and faculty.

Unsure where to begin?

- Ask! Ask for recommendations from current professors, graduate students, or departmental staff. Ask for names of alumni who could give you suggestions.
Attend lectures on campus and at the Five Colleges.
Check the UMass calendar and Five College calendar.
Check departmental email lists and announcement boards.
Attend meetings of your disciplinary association (ask in your department).
Attend meetings of Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) related to your academic discipline or research interests.
Consider the interdisciplinary potential of your research interests and identify all relevant departments, including professional schools and certificate programs.

Step 2: Research the potential chairs on your list.

Locate (through an internet search or departmental websites) faculty members’ personal websites, where you can read the faculty member’s publications list, resume, and discover their past and current research interests. Sometimes a faculty member’s research interests may differ considerably from the courses they regularly teach. (Note: The resume of a faculty member is generally called a “curriculum vitae” or “CV.”)

Do your homework before meeting with a faculty member – know the faculty member’s areas of research, specialization, and publications. Access and read their recent publications.

Step 3: Approaching a potential chair

The first time you are approaching a faculty member about sponsoring your research, go to their office hours to meet with them in person (instead of sending them an email).

Be prepared: Why are you seeking a particular faculty member’s advice or sponsorship? Be prepared to talk about their research, your interests, and why you would like to work with them. Bring along a copy of one of their articles that interests you and that you have read in advance. What are the specific reasons that make your interests a good fit with this faculty member and their lab/research? If you are proposing your own research project (generally the project should be formulated in discussion with the faculty), bring a paragraph summarizing your ideas. It can also be useful to bring with you a copy of your resume and unofficial transcript (which you can view and print in SPIRE).

Many faculty members are not familiar with the CHC Research Assistant Fellowship program, so be prepared to tell them about it. You may want to print a copy of the information about the fellowships available on this website and bring it with you to your meeting.

Be specific and confident when asking for advice or assistance. While it is important to remain flexible and open to new opportunities that you may have not considered, it is also a good idea to prepare a few specific questions and requests.

Remember to arrive a few minutes early for meetings with potential committee chairs. If you are attending a faculty member’s office hours, be prepared to wait since other students may also be in line.

Bring your calendar with you so that you are able to arrange another meeting if necessary.

If the faculty member is not able to sponsor you at that time, or your research interests are not a good match, ask for suggestions of other colleagues you might approach. Do not be discouraged! Continue your search for the right sponsor.
Step 4: Follow up

- After EVERY meeting with a potential committee chair, thank them for their time, even if you do not begin a sponsorship relationship with them at this time.
- **If this faculty member is a good potential committee chair:**
  - Clearly communicate your request and the commitment that it entails.
  - Once the faculty member has agreed to the sponsorship, be sure to share information **well in advance** about application and paperwork deadlines.
  - Arrange a specific date for your next meeting.

**Expectations of committee chairs**

Not all faculty members have been committee chairs for honors undergraduate research. Be sure that you and the faculty member are on the same page about expectations. Faculty may not be available to support your independent research but may be able to offer you other opportunities to assist them with their own research projects.

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