

How to Find a Lab Position

There are several ways undergraduates, particularly those planning to attend graduate school, can earn laboratory research experience. The most common ways are independent study, paid work, or volunteering.

1. Look through your department's faculty research interest webpages, which describe the research interests of the faculty in the department. Determine in which laboratories you might wish to work.
2. Consult other students in your department to learn what other students have done to obtain lab positions and get their perspective on the experience they've gained.
3. Before contacting a professor, you should review some of the latest publications that have come out of his/her lab. You will find a list of recent publications on the faculty member's web page or on the department's publications web page. You are not expected to understand the articles completely, but if you read some articles and try to understand the professors' research as best as you can, they will be more convinced of the seriousness and depth of your interest in research.
4. Bring a resume, contact information, and your most recent transcript (an unofficial copy is fine) to your appointment with a professor. Professors often find this information useful for future reference.
5. Set up appointments to meet with the professors you have selected.
Tip: When calling or emailing professors, do not ask "Do you have space in your lab?" since most professors will find this approach too casual. It works best if you can meet with him/her for advice on getting into a lab that does that type of research. Once you make an appointment, keep the appointment and be on time. Otherwise, faculty may be less willing to make other appointments with you.
6. During your appointment, ask the professors if they would be willing to accept you into their labs to do an independent research project. Professors want students who are genuinely interested in their research, not students who are primarily interested in improving their resume. Be prepared to discuss his/her work intelligently. Since there is so much competition for lab positions, it is wise to approach your search for a lab position with the same degree of professionalism you would approach a real job search.
7. Clearly indicate whether you are seeking a paid position or whether you are seeking work for academic credit. In almost all cases, professors only offer unit credit during the academic year. Occasionally, professors will pay summer salaries to students who are continuing work begun in the academic year. If you agree to take academic credit, find out how many hours a week the professor expects you to work and decide on an appropriate number of units.