Essential Steps for Connecting with a Faculty Mentor

The UMKC Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship is here to support students with having beneficial experiences in research, scholarship, and the arts that are mentored by faculty. Students connect with faculty mentors in many ways: through classes, through a department's faculty directory, or through our UR-Linked database.

Alicen Lundberg, the Assistant Director for Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship, can help you with any part of the process: for help identifying possible connections, advice on communication, and/or processing feedback.

Preparation

Before you approach a professor about research, do your homework to have a good understanding of the professor's research, scholarship, and/or artistic work:

- Review the website of the department where the faculty member works.
- Familiarize yourself with their profile on UR-Linked and/or professional website.
- Look up recent accomplishments (such as publications and performances).

Understand what experiences, strengths, and goals you have that connect to the professor. In terms of goals, if you would like to find an opportunity to work with a faculty member on research, think about the schedule you would be able to commit to. Be realistic about how much time you have and what you could commit with your coursework, employment, and personal/family responsibilities.

Also, think about the smaller steps to make progress toward your goals – most students start with tasks like cleaning lab equipment, cleaning data, or otherwise assisting with the faculty's research. Prepare to have an optimistic and curious attitude, no matter how small or trivial a task may seem.

Introductory Email

Once you have identified a professor you want to reach out to, prepare an email. Unless there is a known opportunity with the professor (such as you are responding to a job ad for a lab assistant, etc.), this email can explain what you find appealing about the faculty's research and express curiosity to know more.

- Address the faculty member by "Professor Last Name" or "Dr. Last Name".
- Keep the email professional and positive.
- Introduce yourself, including your name, what you are studying, and briefly how you found out about their research. If you have already met them (such as been in their class or talked with them at an event), that is also great to acknowledge in your message.
- Include a sentence or two stating what specifically draws you to know more about them and their research.
- Show enthusiasm and commitment to having research be something you pursue as a student.
- Request an appointment to talk with them about their research, and if associated with a lab, to visit. Give some ranges of dates and times that work well for you.
- Make sure to proofread and edit your email to make a positive impression.

Meeting

Make the most of your time with the faculty member and be open to the possibilities.

- Prepare reviewing the experiences, strengths, and goals you have that connect to their research as well as the particulars of their research that you are most drawn to.
- Also prepare some questions you would like to ask about their research, their process, and/or their experiences.
- Be prompt and professional.
- Introduce yourself and address them by “Professor Last Name” or “Dr. Last Name” (unless they request a different way).
- Ask them for advice about working toward your goals involving research.
- If not already brought up by the faculty member, if you would be interested in being involved with their research, ask them if they ever have opportunities for students.
- If there are opportunities currently or anticipated, ask what expectations would be if you were involved.
- Thank them for their time.

Follow Up

Take a few minutes to send an email to express gratitude for their time and summarize in a sentence or two some specific aspects of the conversation that you appreciated. If there were any questions that came to you after the meeting or follow-up matters, you can include them, too.

You have taken important steps to learn more about research and expand your professional network. By having a positive exchange with a faculty around research, even if there is not an opportunity at the moment, there are other possibilities. They may learn of an opportunity with their research or a colleague’s project and connect you.