Finding a Faculty Mentor
Making Contact and the Interview Process

Once you have been approved to begin contacting labs, you have many options. It is possible you have already had contact with some of your potential mentors and you have an open line of communication. This handout offers suggestions for making that first contact and other tips for maximizing your first impression.

Before you make contact:

- Prepare a list of questions to ask the faculty mentor in order to understand the requirements and responsibilities of the lab. There are samples at the end of the document.

- Be sure to have good notes on each lab you will be calling and a "hook" for why you are calling them. You might mention a common acquaintance, someone you know in the lab, a paper you read, or that you have them for a class or heard them give a talk.

- Review the list of questions they might ask you (also at the end of the document) so you are prepared with answers to common questions.

- Know your availability in case they are ready to schedule an interview. Be prepared if they want you to come in the same day.

First Contact by E-Mail:

Because faculty are busy, it is often easier to make first contact through e-mail. It gives you a better chance to make a strong sales pitch and an easier way to respond.

- First e-mail draft:

  Dr. _____, My name is _____. I am student in the MARC/IMSD program (https://medicine.missouri.edu/offices-programs/marc-imsd). I have been approved to be a student apprentice which means the program has funds to pay my hourly wage in a research lab. I have heard/read/spoken with _____ about your research and I would like an opportunity to speak with you about working in your lab. My goal is to be a researcher in _____. I have already explored graduate programs at/in _____ and I feel like working in your lab would help me prepare to study at that level.

  I can be reached by return e-mail, or by phone at _____. I am generally free on _____ to meet with you. If that does not work for you, please suggest other times and I will do my best to find a time that works. I look forward to hearing from you soon and I appreciate your time and consideration.

  Thanks again, _____

- Be sure to check your e-mail for a response. You might even want to check your SPAM folder if you are not using your campus mail account.

- If you do not receive a response within a day or two, do not be afraid to e-mail again, or follow-up with a phone call.

- If you do receive a response and you set an interview time, be sure to be specific about the day, time, and location. Do not be afraid to ask for directions if you are not sure about the location. Faculty often work in multiple locations, so do not assume you know where they will want to meet.

First Contact by Phone:

If phone is your preferred choice, or the recommended contact, even if it is not your choice, this script can assist you. You can keep it handy during the conversation on case you get uncomfortable.

- When a person answers:

  Hello, my name is _____. I am a student in the MARC/IMSD program and I am trying to reach Dr. _____.

- The person is likely to ask for your information to leave a message, have you leave a voicemail, or offer to make an appointment. Be prepared with the following:

  My name is _____. I am a student in the MARC/IMSD program and I would like to make an appointment with Dr. _____ to discuss working in their lab. My number is _____, my e-mail is _____, and the best time to reach me is _____, or if you could tell me when a good time might be to reach you, I can try you at that time.

- If and when you make an appointment, be sure to be specific about the day, time, and location. Do not be afraid to ask for directions if you are not sure about the location. Faculty often work in multiple locations, so do not assume you know where they will want to meet.

- Be sure to be professional and say thank you to anyone you speak with.

- If you leave a message and do not hear back in a day or two, call again. Faculty are busy and may not return calls immediately, but that does not mean you should not persist.

- Be sure you can receive a message in case you do not answer the return call and that your voicemail message is professional and identifies you. If they are unable to leave a message, or think they reached a wrong number, they may not try again.

Prepare for the interview:

- Use the interview as an opportunity for you to get to know the faculty mentor and ask questions about the lab. You can do this by asking questions and describing your interests. Ask about the type of work you would be doing in the laboratory.

- Read the faculty descriptions (on the web). Do not worry if you don't fully understand all of the science, but do try to figure it out, and have some questions about the research area when you talk with the faculty mentor.

- Sit down with your class schedule and figure out how many hours/week you would be willing to work (between 8-12 hours/week). Figure out when you would have big chunks of time to work in the lab M-F between the hours of 8-5. But also ask about lab hours—many labs work late nights and weekends due to the nature of the experiments. DON'T overestimate the number of hours you think you might be able to work. It is much better to schedule 9 hours at first, and then once you get the hang of classes, etc., see if you can add additional hours if your schedule permits. It's not cool to commit to 12 hours, and then only show up for 8 hours.

- Think carefully about what you are looking for in a laboratory experience and with a faculty mentor. Make a list and think about asking some questions in the interview that are related to this list. After the interview is over, jot down your impressions.

- Make sure you know where you are going, go there a day or two before to make sure there will be no problems. Is there a shuttle, parking, etc. There are NO excuses for being late for an interview.

The Interview:

- Dress professionally and show up on time (this means 10 minutes early). If you think you might be even two minutes late, call and let someone know as soon as possible. It is a lab, you do not need to wear a suit, but do not wear your pajamas. Wear something you would wear to church and consider your footwear and the type of lab you might be visiting. Some labs can be more like hospitals, some are greenhouses, many have animals and all the things that come with them. Consider closed-toed non-slip shoes in case you get to tour the lab or other facilities.

- Some faculty offices are located INSIDE of their laboratories. If this is the case, just walk into the lab and if it isn't obvious where the office is, ask the first person you see where you can find Dr. _____. Do NOT bring food or drink with you to the interview. Some laboratories, due to safety reasons, do NOT allow food or drink in the lab.

- If the faculty mentor does not offer, ask for a quick tour of the lab and to be introduced to whoever is in the lab. Don't expect other lab members to chat with you at this point, but at least try and get a feel of the type of people you might be working with in the lab.

- Be honest with everyone. If you are interviewing with more than one faculty member, say so (and they will usually ask you who…out of curiosity. Go ahead and tell them!)

- Before you leave, remember to ask how and on what timeline the lab will make a decision about hiring. Make a note so you can make contact in a timely fashion.

After the Interviews:

- ALWAYS follow-up with a brief thank you note that reiterates your interest in the lab, or if it really is not for you, say that. Express appreciation for the time spent and tell them something you learned. Keep the door open. You never know when situations might change and you want to make a good impression.

- If you are made an offer for a position before you have interviewed with everyone you wanted to (or are still waiting to hear from your first choice after an interview), inform the professor of your situation, and be tactful.

- Be sure not to reject your first offer if you are still waiting to hear from another faculty mentor. If you get an offer from your first-choice lab, go ahead and accept!

- If you do not hear from a lab in the time discussed, make contact. Reiterate your appreciation and ask if they have made any decisions about hiring.

- When you accept an offer to work in a lab, you MUST inform any other professor that you have interviewed with that you are taking a position in another lab. Tell them with whom, and if possible and you are comfortable tell them why. Thank them for their time and consideration. Faculty members generally know eachother, and <u>will</u> talk about you. Be courteous and follow through with <u>everyone</u>. You may decide to switch labs which is why building bridges should be one key goal of the interview process. You may also end up in class one day with a faculty mentor with whom you've interviewed.

Questions You Might Ask:

- How long have you been at MU? Where did you get your training before coming to MU?

- Why did you get involved in science?

- What is the most important thing your lab is trying to discover?

- How many people are in your lab and what are their positions? (Can I meet some of them?)

- Who would I be working directly with? What is their position?

- What are some of the undergraduates that have worked in your lab in the past doing now?

- Is there the opportunity for me to continue working in this lab in the future and eventually doing my own research project?

- What kind of research projects have undergraduates recently done in your lab?

- Are there any special skills you are looking for? What skills would you like me to have learned or know before entering your lab? If so, will there be someone to teach me?

- How many hours/week are you expecting me to work? Do you have any special times you ***need*** someone to work? Will I work on weekends or in the evenings?

- Does the lab have weekly lab group meetings? When? Would I be expected to attend?

Questions They Might Ask You:

- Why do you want to work in a lab? Why are you interviewing for *this* lab?

- What are your career plans? (It is OK to be unsure, so don't hesitate to tell them that you are exploring your options!)

- Do you have any experience? (No is an OK answer, but demonstrate your enthusiasm to learn!)

- What classes are you taking now? (Let them know of any classes you may have college credit for already. If you aren't taking College Algebra, it may be because you don't need to!)

- Do you plan on continuing research after this year ends with this lab or any other lab?

- When can you work? How much time are you planning to work this semester?