Guide For First Years Interested In Research

For some medical students who did research extensively as undergraduates, finding the right mentor and project may be relatively easy. Others may be less sure of how to get started. Below are some suggestions to make things easier.

1. **Everyone should keep in mind that it is very, very important to start planning early.** If you are planning for a summer research experience, you should be considering what type of research you would like to do and exploring opportunities for funding by mid-fall. By the end of December, you should be finalizing your plans. Many year-long funding opportunities have mid-January deadlines. If you wait until late in the spring to decide what to do, you may miss out on the chance to be funded.

2. **Think about what areas most interest you.** If you have no idea what you would like to do, one place to start is the Research by Department website (http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/research/research-by-department.html) or previously funded projects for the Summer research Program (http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/education/medical-school/academics/research/summer/project-index.html). These resources can help you get started as you gather information about different areas of research.

3. **Be realistic about your time commitments.** You are first and foremost a medical student. Research is additional scholarly activity that many students take advantage of in different time amounts. Short-term research programs (Summer Research through UT, NIH, or HHMI) are the most popular way to engage in research, as well as taking a year off to complete research. The types of projects available might also vary depending on the time that you have to dedicate to research.

4. **Think about funding.** Funding is a key factor in looking for research opportunities. There are opportunities for short term, summer, and year-long programs. Some mentors also might be able to fund a student throughout the school year depending on their grant resources. **Volunteers are not supported by the Office of Medical Student Research.**

5. **When you have narrowed your interests down to one or more broad areas, you can seek advice on things to keep in mind when choosing a mentor, and also ask for suggestions on which labs would be good for students.** You might start with your course directors and lecturers, if their expertise is in one of your areas of interest. You can also e-mail or make appointments with the relevant Department Chairs or Division Chiefs, Directors of Centers or Institutes. There is no substitute for the advice of faculty members. The Associate Dean of Medical Student research is always available to meet with you to discuss research.

5. **Once you have a list of potential mentors that you are interested in, contact them directly or through the research coordinator listed for their department.** Tell them about your enthusiasm for their research and ask if they would be interested in having a medical student in their lab. Request a chance to meet with them to discuss possible projects.
5a. In your introduction email to a potential mentor or a department chair, provide information as to what exactly you are seeking, what you have already done, and what your background is. Think of it as a cover letter for a job. Usually, there is no need to actually attach a CV at this juncture in the communication. For Example:

   Dr So-in-So,

   My name is Bob and I’m a MS1 here at UTSW. I am looking into research opportunities for the ___ Program (Summer Research, HHMI, DRS, TL1, MED 1800 Elective). I have experience in a lab where I worked on ___ (some experience that would be in line with their research goals) and found the work in your lab very interesting.

   After looking through your lab website, I would love the opportunity to talk to you about your research and any opportunities that you might have in your laboratory for this summer.

   Thank you,

   Bob, MS1

5b. When mentors email you back and suggest a time or direct you to their administrators to schedule a time, be respectful and stick to the original time that you agree on. Rescheduling is a burden on both the admin and the mentor.

5c. Mentors will be frank about not having research opportunities available but frequently will recommend others in their departments with active research. Do your due diligence to find out about these other mentors before emailing them an introductory email as well.

6. You should also get the advice of your fellow students. First years with extensive research experience and/or more senior students who have already been through this process are a great resource when it comes to time commitments and mentor personalities. You can learn more about other students’ research experiences at the various research forums put on by the Office of Medical Student research. If you have a specific mentor in mind and would like to speak to a student who has worked with them before, Amanda Arista can give you a few students to contact.

7. When you meet with a faculty member to discuss possible projects, explore whether he or she would be a good mentor for you. Talk with the faculty member about how you would develop the project and plan the research if you end up working in that lab. You need to find a mentor who is a good fit for you. How much guidance will he or she provide? Is he or she fairly available? Are there other people (grad students or postdocs/residents/fellows) who can also help you? You definitely want to work with someone responsive and available, who is clearly committed to helping you learn about the scientific process. Try to assess how much time they have to actual devote to research, or if their clinical duties would keep them away from your project most of the time.
8. Once you have chosen a mentor, set up a schedule of periodic meetings to develop the project, get pointers on appropriate background reading, and perhaps to spend some time learning techniques.

**REMEMBER, IT WILL SERVE YOU WELL TO GET STARTED EARLY AND TO PUT CONSIDERABLE THOUGHT AND ENERGY INTO CHOOSING A RESEARCH MENTOR.**