

Selecting a Faculty Mentor

If you are looking for a faculty mentor, check out these tips adapted from UC Davis' *How to Approach and Select a Faculty Member*.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Your success in the Honors program is related to the kind of mentor/mentee relationship you develop with your faculty mentor. A strong relationship is important so your research experience will be as fulfilling as you would like it to be. With this said, there are a number of things you can do to ensure that you make the best possible choice when it comes time to selecting a mentor to guide you through your Honors program research experience.

Two questions should guide you through the process of selecting an appropriate faculty mentor.

- First, what do you want to research? When you think about your research focus, do so in a very specific way. You will find that the more specific you can be about what your research is, the more confident you will feel about approaching potential faculty mentors. Remember, at some point during your conversation with a potential mentor, faculty will ask you to define your research focus and explain to them why you have the interests that you do. This is not the faculty's way of testing you, but it is a way for them to gauge how serious you are about research and how much independent homework you've done on your own prior to meeting with them. It's also a way for them to engage in some meaningful conversation with you. For example, wanting to research Irish economic history is a good start, but stating to a potential mentor that you want to research contemporary Irish economic history in Northern Ireland during the 1980s and your reasons why, gives your research project a tighter and clearer focus.
- Second, do you have a faculty member(s) in mind that would make an excellent mentor? Maybe you've gone out of your way to develop a relationship with a professor in your field whom you admire and trust. This person would be an obvious option for a mentor professor. If you aren't in this position, take some time to think about the courses in your major or minor that you've taken and really enjoyed. Who taught these courses? Why did you enjoy them? There is a good chance that the reasons you enjoyed these courses were because the professor went above and beyond what you expected and presented materials in interesting and dynamic ways. He or she may have had a great sense of humor and made even the hardest material fun to learn. Perhaps you appreciated how organized and logical they presented material. What are the qualities you not only admire but absolutely need in a mentor? Having a good idea about your own working style and what you want to accomplish while in the Honors program will go a long way towards helping you discern a strong faculty mentor.

Locating Faculty

Once you have decided on a research topic or focus the hard work begins. Solidifying what you want to research is a great first step, but this is only one part of your goal. Now it is time to actively seek out a mentor. If you haven't already secured a mentor, or have potential mentors in mind, begin by researching the faculty members listed on your department's web site. All departments on campus have a web site listing all faculty members and instructors. Along with names, most department web sites also list what areas of research they specialize in. This is where having narrowed down your research focus is invaluable. The more you know about your research the easier it will be to narrow down potential faculty mentors. Sticking with our example of Irish economic history, let's say our

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Honors program student researches the political science department and discovers that no faculty listed has the same research focus that he/she has. However, there are faculty members who research contemporary European politics, Politics in the British Isles, and another who teaches a course titled “How Irish Politics Influenced 19th Century America.” Regardless that none of these professors are an exact match for our student, always remember that faculty members are widely trained and have a lot of expertise that may encompass several areas.

Students in the sciences will take a slightly different approach. Typically, students in the sciences will work in their mento’s lab. If you are in one of the science fields, you will still research department web pages to see which professors are doing research you are genuinely interested in. Avoid committing to a professor and their lab just because they invite you to be part of it. Just like your colleagues in the arts, humanities and social sciences, you want to align yourself with research you have a passion for. For example, if you are interested in breast cancer research, don’t agree to work in a lab that doesn’t have a strong connection to breast cancer research. If you do, you may find that it’s interesting and you learn a lot, but it hasn’t brought you any closer to your goal of working on the issues you hope to pursue in graduate school. Also keep in mind that the kind of research you will be pursuing with your mentor is part of their larger research project. Depending on the size of the lab and funding, a mentor professor might have other students working their lab. All of these researchers will be working on various aspects of the larger project and play an important role in answering questions and contributing to the success of the larger project.

Making Contact: E-mail Approach

Once you’ve compiled a list of potential mentors you will next want to make contact with each and set up an appointment to discuss your research, the Honors program and your participation in it. Below is a sample e-mail that can be adjusted to your particular situation.

Dear Professor Jones,

I hope this message finds you well. Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is _____ and I am a junior majoring in political science here at Stanislaus State. Last year, I was a student in your “How Irish Politics Influenced 19th Century America”. I enjoyed the course and the materials very much and have taken the opportunity to read some of the supplemental articles and books you included in the course reader, as I have a growing interest in Irish politics and culture as well.

As my interests have continued to develop, I began to seek opportunities that would allow me to develop a research project focusing on my particular interests. I have applied and been accepted to the Honors program, beginning in the spring semester. The Honors program prepares and supports students to pursue graduate education. Honors program students commit to working on a research project with a faculty mentor over three semesters. Research may either be a collaborative project with a faculty member, or an independent project developed in consultation with the faculty mentor. Since applying to the Honors program, I have researched potential faculty mentors and compiled a short list of Stanislaus State faculty that share similar interests as mine. At your convenience, I would like to set up an appointment to meet and discuss further my interests and the connection between them and your research, as well as answer any questions you might have regarding the Honors program, and the role of the mentor in the program.

Thank you for your time, Professor Jones. I look forward to hearing from you.

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Sincerely,

Making Contact: In Person Approach

NOTE: Scholars may use Zoom to connect with faculty members until in-person instruction is resumed. E-mail has become an accepted and standard way to contact people. It can be particularly helpful in contacting faculty if you cannot make their office hours or getting to campus is difficult. However, it is not the most comfortable way for everyone to communicate. Initiating a first contact through a face-to-face meeting has some definite advantages over e-mail. First, there is less of an opportunity for your e-mail to go unanswered. Like all of us, professors receive countless e-mails every day. Some messages are important, many are not, and some get overlooked in sheer volume of messages. If being overlooked is a concern, find out the office hours of the professor you would like to interview and make it a point to be there when office hours begin. The second advantage of taking the face-to-face approach is that you know that you will have the opportunity to have a more thorough discussion about your research, the Honors program and why you've come to meet with your chosen professor.

Final Words

While this does not encompass the countless experiences you might encounter when looking for a faculty mentor, it does help create a broad guideline for you to follow that makes the process accessible. Again, the more you know about your research, the easier it will be for you to have a meaningful conversation with potential faculty mentors. Knowing what kind of research you want to do allows you to ask the important questions that will lead you to the right mentor. Taking the time to find the right mentor will thoroughly enrich your participation in the Honors program. The right mentor will challenge you in new and exciting ways and you will achieve far more than you ever expected.