

***"The How-To Manual of Undergraduate Research"*** by Dean Marilyn Williams, retired

All professors at Cornell regularly guide undergraduates in research projects. They are all internationally recognized leaders in their fields of study. Faculty in the sciences involve many people, including undergraduates in their projects. Faculty in the social sciences and humanities are happy to help students find their way to projects they will learn from, so long as the topic lies in the range of faculty member's expertise. The important thing is to find the project that you will learn the most from, guided by a faculty member whose habits of mind are compatible with your own, at least, when you are first starting this process.

*How can you learn who is doing what, in the way of research?*

In the sciences it's usually easy. Internet websites tell the story of current research in a paragraph or two and the bibliography tracks the story to date. Partly because of the way we go about research in the humanities and social sciences, the faculty in these fields don't generally set out a paragraph about their current research interests. For them, as for the scientists, the titles of their articles usually provide a good outline of where they have been, if not exactly where they are going next.

*How will you know what kind of project will be right for you?*

Pay attention to your reaction as you read those descriptions. We all usually react positively to all the topics. Were it not so, you'd wonder what made you think you were interested in that field. One or two topics, however, are likely to grab you; before the words even shape themselves, you know you'd like to get involved in that kind of thing. Those are your first clues.

Learn more. E-mail the professor to schedule an appointment during her or his regular office hours. Tell the professor that you saw she/he was working on (fill in the blank), and, you are interested because (fill in the blank). For the second phase, make yourself aware of what it is in your background that connects to those projects you find thrilling – there must be connections for you to experience that reaction. Some of those

connections may seem babyish to you; don't hold back. That kind of experience is very authenticating. Entomologists are sometimes found by their field when they are about three years old.

Between the call and the time of the appointment, read one of the research articles listed on the faculty member's website. Don't worry if you can't understand it all. You may find that it is not all what you supposed, in which case, you cancel the appointment. Otherwise, this reading will help facilitate your conversation with the professor.

### *How do you get involved?*

When the conversation swings, it's time to say that you'd like to get involved in such a project. Ask whether the professor can help you do that. (Marketing 101, cold calls and yes/no questions are a sure miss.) Never fear, the professor's first answer will relate to whether she/he is willing to sponsor your project.

Usually the first answer is, "No; I'm too busy," or "You'll learn more if you take English 320 first." Often, you make plans to do a project after that obstacle has been removed. Sometimes, the professor suggests another professor to contact. That is not a way of saying "go bother somebody else," rather; she/he senses that there will be more for you in a project with that other professor. Follow the advice.

Just in case you and the professor decide you want to get started on a project right away, be sure to carry an Add/Drop form and Independent Study proposal form with you to the meeting. Then you can cut the deal on the spot. In case the answer is "no," but you still wish you could get started working under this professor's guidance, ask, "May I leave this with you, in case anything should change?" "This" is your skills resume. Frequently, a good project for you will jump into a professor's mind within a day of your conversation. Your e-mail address will re-connect you.