Applying to a Lab FAQs

Working in a research laboratory can be an important part of your undergraduate experience, and can be an important steppingstone to graduate school and/or other careers. Here are some frequently asked questions and their answers:

Q: I’ve never worked in a lab before and I don’t know how to do anything. Should I still apply?
A: Yes! Labs are looking for undergraduates with enthusiasm, good work ethic, and who are reliable. Very few research labs will expect previous lab experience. You will be taught everything you need to know.

Q: How do I choose a lab to apply to?
A: Choose a lab that is studying a topic that you’re interested in learning more about. Also, consider if there are any techniques the lab uses that you want to gain exposure to. Investigate the types of studies the lab does (e.g., neuroimaging, animal models of disease, cell culture). For example, if you’re interested in working with humans, perhaps a neuroimaging lab is a good option. Checking out the lab website is a good place to start getting a feel for the lab and if it’s a good fit for your interests.

Q: I applied to work in a lab and I was told there were no open positions. Should I give up?
A: Don’t give up! Labs are dynamic, with frequent personnel turnover and projects starting up and concluding all the time. Don’t be discouraged if you get turned down several times before finding a research position. Likewise, if you email a lab and don’t hear back, don’t be afraid to send a quick follow-up email after a reasonable wait.

Q: What will I be expected to do as a research assistant?
A: This depends entirely on the type of lab you apply to. Some possibilities include analyzing data, running subjects or participants, performing biochemical assays, and helping to manage the day-to-day operation of the lab. Look at the laboratory website to get a better idea of the types of research you might be involved with.

Q: Will I get paid and/or course credit?
A: There are several options:
   - Course Credit: Most students earn Independent Study credits for working in a lab. Independent Study counts as an elective and students earn a grade at the end of the semester based on their lab performance. It is expected that students work 3-4 hours a week per 1 credit. Most students take 3 credits and work 9-12 hours per week. If a student has completed 2 semesters of Independent Study, they can take Collaborative Research credits for an additional 2 semesters (and similar expectations apply).
   - Work study: Some students are eligible for Work Study and can get paid via Work Study for lab work. This option depends on the lab’s funding, so opportunities may vary.
   - Grants and Funding Opportunities: There are several grants for undergraduates to complete research projects in a laboratory. These include: the CARAS.
Research/Creative Project Grant, the Diamond Research Scholars program, and the LAURA award.

Q: What will my schedule be like?
A: Typically, students are expected to work during normal business hours and in 3-5-hour timeslots. However, this can vary depending on the lab and project needs.

Q: What year should I apply to work in a lab?
A: You can apply to work in a lab at any point during your undergraduate career. However, waiting until your senior year is not a good idea because 1) You may not be able to get into a lab on the first try, and 2) Laboratories generally prefer applicants that can work in the lab for more than a semester or two. Starting earlier is also advantageous, because it may give you enough time to be given your own project! Generally speaking, your sophomore and junior years are the best times to apply.

Q: I keep hearing the term “PI”. Who or what is a PI?
A: PI stands for “principal investigator”. The PI is the professor who heads the lab. In addition to the PI, the lab might have a Postdoc (someone who has earned their PhD “relatively” recently and is working in the lab to gain more experience), a Lab Manager/Technicians (someone who is employed by the lab to manage its operation or conduct research for the PI), graduate students, and undergraduate research assistants.

Q: What can I do to increase the chances that I get into a lab?
A: There are several things you can do to stand out from other applicants. Below are some important ones:

- Do your research beforehand. Find some recent papers published by the lab and familiarize yourself with the types of research the lab does. Note that the PI will often be the last author on publications from the lab (if the PI is a middle author it is usually a collaboration and not a main line of research). When you email the lab, make it clear that you are familiar with the lab and not just applying randomly. Also, be enthusiastic about the potential opportunity.
- Be willing to commit time to the lab.
- Be professional in your emails and other interactions. Address the PI as “Dr.” in all correspondence. You may notice others in the lab being less formal in their interactions, but err on the side of professionalism, at least at first!