

Tips to Secure an Undergraduate Research Experience in Social Science

Interested in gaining research experience in the social sciences? Here's a guide to help you get started, including steps for finding research positions, key dos and don'ts, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Getting Started

1. Should you get involved in research?

Before searching for a research position, take a moment and ask yourself the following:

- Are you considering a career in research?
- Do you need research experience for graduate school?
- Are you hoping to strengthen your CV?

Research experience can be a valuable part of your academic journey, but it's beneficial when you're genuinely interested. If you are passionate about research, this experience will contribute meaningfully to your professional development. Taking part in an opportunity that you are not passionate about is unlikely to result in success. Take the time to consider why you are pursuing research experience. If you are truly interested and passionate about a research career the experience will likely be meaningful and help with your professional development.

A research position can help you:

- Gain exposure to research methods and techniques
- Build connections with professors and peers
- Explore whether graduate school or a research-focused career is right for you
- Earn valuable letters of recommendation

2. Where should I start?

Step 1: Begin by updating your CV and gathering your unofficial transcripts. Your CV should include:

- Contact information
- Work and research experience (if applicable)
- Honours, awards, publications, presentations (if applicable)
- Licenses/certifications, skills and extracurricular activities

Step 2: Identify your research interests and target a department. Consider what you hope to achieve and find opportunities that align with your goals.

Select your preferred research area/department. When considering a research opportunity, it is very important that you reflect on your goals and that you target opportunities that will help you realize those goals.

Step 3: Research faculty members in your chosen department. Visit their websites and profiles to review their research interests and recent publications. Select 4-5 professors whose work you find interesting. Within your preferred research area, go to the departmental website and research faculty. Look at their research interests and most recent publications. Choose 4-5 professors you may be interested in working with.

Step 4: Reach out to professors. Send a customized email (avoid sending generic messages to multiple professors). In your email, briefly explain why you're interested in working with them, highlight your skills and experience, and attach your CV and unofficial transcript. Make sure the email is professional, proofread, and personalized to the professor. Email individual professors about potential opportunities. Compose a tailored email (do not send the exact same email to multiple professors) outlining your interest in a research position working with the faculty member. You should highlight what skills and experiences you would bring to the position/lab. Make sure your email is worded professionally, that you proof-read your email, and be sure to attach your CV/resume and unofficial transcript.

3. Where Can I Find Research Opportunities? What are the best avenues for finding a position in my field of interest?

There are several ways to find research positions: It may be difficult to know where to start, but there are multiple ways you can increase your chances of securing a research position.

- Check faculty and departmental websites for posted opportunities Check out faculty and departmental websites for posted opportunities
- Follow social media accounts for updates on ongoing research Watch social media and university newsletters about ongoing campus research
- Stay engaged in class and connect with professors and TAs Be engaged and participate in class. This will help you to connect with professors and TAs.
- Attend office hours to express interest and learn about openings Attend office hours
- Participate in events like guest lectures, workshops, and seminars Attend special events such as guest lectures, workshops, and seminars in your area of interest.

Securing a Research Position: Do's and Don'ts

DO:

- Start early—waiting until the spring may be too late to secure a position. Start early. Waiting until spring is often too late.
- Consider volunteering to gain experience. Many volunteer roles can lead to paid internships later. Consider volunteering. Volunteering can often lead to paid internship opportunities.
- Follow department and faculty social media for research updates. Follow social media accounts for your faculty or department to learn about opportunities and ongoing research.
- Keep your CV updated and seek feedback from mentors or the Student Success Centre. Update your CV and get feedback.

- Persistence. If you don't succeed at first, keep trying and seek areas to strengthen your application. Keep trying. If you were unsuccessful this doesn't mean you shouldn't keep trying. Look at areas where you might enhance your CV and work towards those goals in the meantime.
- Ask questions and utilize university resources.

DON'T:

- Send generic emails to multiple professors. Personalize your message by showing you understand their research and how your skills align. Send generic emails to every professor in your target department. Demonstrate you are serious about research by having a grasp of the faculty member's ongoing research program and be clear about what skills you might bring.
- Follow up excessively. Send your initial email, then wait 2 weeks for a response. If you don't hear back, send a polite follow-up email. After that, move on to another professor if necessary. Send more than 2 emails to a professor unless they have indicated an interest in working with you. Send your initial inquiry email, then wait for a response. A polite follow up email is appropriate after two weeks without a response. If you still do not receive a response, move on to another faculty member/lab.
- Forget to proofread your email or neglect to attach your CV and unofficial transcript. Forget to word your email professionally and include a copy of your CV and unofficial transcript.
- Give up! If your first attempt doesn't work out, try again—there are plenty of opportunities if you stay persistent. Give up! If you do not succeed, try again!

FAQ's

What should I do if I do not receive a response from a faculty member?

Professors are often very busy and may not reply right away. Wait 2 weeks before sending a polite follow-up email. If you don't receive a response after that, consider reaching out to another professor. Faculty are extremely busy and receive many emails. Follow-up after 2 weeks without a response. If you still do not receive a response, move on to another faculty member.

What if I don't secure a position?

Competition for research opportunities can be tough, and there are many factors that influence whether you secure a spot. If you're not successful, stay motivated. You can improve your chances by strengthening your GPA, engaging more with your department, seeking feedback on your CV, and exploring volunteer opportunities. There are many reasons why a student may be unsuccessful in securing a research opportunity. They are competitive. Try not to be discouraged and think strategically about how you might improve your chances. This could include focusing on improving your GPA, getting involved in departmental events or clubs, receiving feedback on your materials through the Student Success Centre, and volunteering.

Where can I find research opportunities?

Regularly check the Faculty of Social Science website for updates.

Speak with professors and TAs about potential opportunities.

Create a LinkedIn profile to connect with students and faculty.

Stay informed about the Undergraduate Summer Research Internship (USRI) program and other university initiatives.

Check the Faculty of Social Science website regularly. Western has the Undergraduate Summer Research Internship (USRI) program and details will be available on the website once the program launches.

Speak to your professors and show an interest in their research. Speak to your TAs and faculty advisors. Create a LinkedIn profile to connect with other students and professors.

What type of research should I pursue?

While it's ideal to choose research that aligns with your future career goals, gaining experience in any research field can be valuable. The key is to focus on areas that genuinely interest you—this will keep you motivated and help you perform well in your role.

Opportunities are limited so it helps to be targeted in your approach. This does not mean you need to limit your approach to research programs that are entirely compatible with your future goals. You will gain valuable skills and experience in any research program. However, research can be challenging, and you are more likely to remain motivated and exceed your supervisor's expectations if the research is something you are very interested in.