Finding Opportunities to Get Involved in Research

Some Advice From the Students’ Perspective

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Everyone is always encouraging students to get involved in research. We students are told that if we want to get into graduate school, it helps to have at least assisted with research, if not presented our own research at a conference, or better yet, to have it published. How does one do this when one barely knows what research is about? As members of the Gender Research Group at La Salle University, we decided it would be a good idea for students to know more about how to get research experience, and just as importantly, for faculty to know what would help students find the opportunities that faculty have available. We asked professors and fellow students how they became involved in research and in turn will now share this information, in addition to our own experiences, with you.

Advice for Professors

Talking about research. It has probably been a long time since you professors have had to try to find research opportunities and didn’t know where to look. So, maybe you’ve forgotten that it’s hard for students to find these opportunities since students are very new to research and still learning. One of the easiest ways to encourage students to take part in research is through your class lectures. Since students have chosen to take your class, they may already have an interest in the topic. During class time students are focused on your ideas and expertise in the area that you teach. This is a great chance for you to talk about your research and what you learned from it. Students may have a desire to pursue the subject further. You should also talk about other research that is taking place on campus and about any opportunities for involvement. Announce the opportunities at the beginning of the semester so that students can get an early start. Invite students to come and sit in on research groups and they may eventually take part in the group.

Taking the first step. Students often lack confidence in their abilities as researchers and need to be helped along the way. Therefore, if a student has exhibited research potential through their ideas or work, you may want to take the first step. Approach students about their work, and help them transform their papers or ideas into a research project. Of course, an excellent method for getting students to join research groups is by offering extra credit. Extra credit is a great way to give all students an incentive to engage in some type of research experience and find out whether they like it. Suggest basic research projects such as creating a survey on a specific topic. Allow students to practice their surveys on small populations of students. These small research projects give the student a taste of research and improve their confidence levels, increasing the chance that they will go on to take part in larger research projects later.

Encouraging students to start early. A lot of undergraduate students don’t get involved in research until later in their studies. For example, Delores is the only first-year undergrad in our research group. There are two upperclass students and a graduate student. There aren’t even any sophomores in our group. When students don’t do any research until their junior or senior year, they end up struggling to obtain research experience before they graduate. This creates additional pressure. Students may not get to finish the study or to present or publish the results. Getting involved in research early on is wonderful, because it gives the student a chance to see the study through until the end, and maybe even do additional studies. It is intimidating at first, but there is so much for younger students to learn. It is helpful to teachers as well, because these students can stay with the study until it reaches its end. Also, try to remember to encourage students that research is not only for students who want to go to graduate school. Conducting research is also important for students who are not interested in pursuing graduate-level studies. Research skills are required by a number of jobs that require only a bachelor’s degree.

Spreading the news. Many students are not very familiar with opportunities available through their psychology department, even if they are psychology majors. Most students go to class and leave—they don’t spend a lot of time around the building. So, it is important to post information about research groups and research opportunities in several common areas on campus, not just around the psychology department. Post notices about opportunities in student-populated areas such as dining halls, lounges, and dorms. This way, everyone gets to see it, not just employees in the psychology office.

Another way to get students on campus involved is by marketing your research opportunities through other students and teachers. Tell students and colleagues about your current research and ask them to spread the word. If you are a professor who is not currently conducting research, but would still like to give students the opportunity to take part in research, advertise research of colleagues or students on campus. You can direct students to clinics or hospitals that may yield research experience.
Advice for Students

Asking the prof. How many times have you heard a faculty member talk about an interesting topic or their own research and thought, “Wow. That’s interesting. I’d like to know more about that”? One of the best ways to find out whether anyone on campus is doing research in that area is to ask that professor after class. If the professor is teaching the topic, they may have done some reading in the area and may even be active in research on it. Or perhaps they know someone in the area who has an interest and can help you contact them. Don’t be shy. Ask. If the first professor you ask can’t help you, though, simply ask your advisor or another professor. Persistence pays.

Joining a group. You can also ask your professor or advisor whether there are any research groups or psychology clubs in your psychology department. Often there are groups that discuss research in a general area, such as gender issues, clinical psychology, social psychology, developmental issues, etc. Research groups composed of faculty and students are a good way to get involved in research because you work with others to develop hypotheses, select the population, and analyze the results. If you are new to research, you can learn how these things are done. When you have more experience, you get a chance to teach the new group members how to do the work.

Joining the psychology club may help you find other students who share your interest in psychology. It is sometimes more fun to come up with research ideas and conduct the research with a friend. Professors like to talk about psychology and to help students get involved. If you already have a good idea for a research project and are motivated, you have a better chance of getting a professor to help you make your research dreams a reality. Again, keep asking for professors’ help. Be persistent! In many cases, your group or team may present the results of your research at a conference or even get the results published in a journal. If you are interested in applying to graduate school, having presented or published your research can help to improve your odds of being admitted.

Surfing the Web. If you become involved in a research group and want to know more, there are good online resources to help you learn more about different types of research. One Internet site that we found practically “has it all.” It is www.nsf.com and is run by the National Science Foundation. The website is well organized and easy to navigate. It advertises research opportunities for college undergraduates. The experiences listed on this site allow students to see how research is conducted firsthand. Students who assist with studies listed on this website are given stipends, and, in some cases, assistance with travel. This site is one of many that are a great resource for gaining research experience. Another site is www.cur.org, the site for the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR). CUR generates awareness and national support for undergraduate research and provides information about opportunities for undergraduates.

Reading the signs. There are still other ways that undergraduate students can get involved in research. Simply keep your eyes and ears open. For example, at LaSalle University there are signs and posters plastered throughout most of the campus advertising jobs, campus events, and organizations. These posters and signs usually contain phone numbers or website addresses where the student can get more information about jobs, events, and organizations. The most obvious place to find posters pertaining to research in the field of psychology would be the psychology building at your school. Scan the walls for ads and signs that pertain to opportunities for getting research experience. Some of the positions even pay!

Scouring the ads. Speaking of which, on-campus sources of information are not the only place to learn about research opportunities. Sometimes there are research opportunities available in other settings outside of your school. Check out the daily newspaper. Believe it or not, research experience may be just one phone call away from reality when you are roaming through the classified ads of a paper and, again, may even pay.

Volunteering your time is also a great way to get research ideas. While you are giving your time to mental health agencies or organizations that need your help, you will be acquiring information and experience that will be useful in your career as a psychologist. When you see real people with problems, rather than just textbook descriptions of diagnoses, it is much easier to empathize and understand the complexity of the issues involved. You may even be able to do research as a volunteer in an organization under the supervision of a professor or other professional with research training. For instance, at your local chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, you might help collect data on pet adoptions to see what factors predict successful adoptions or what correlates with animal abuse. Sometimes organizations such as AIDS Outreach collect data on attitudes and reactions to AIDS or to knowing an HIV-positive person. Hospitals often do studies on patient care and satisfaction. Although these examples probably involve working for someone who is actually conducting the research, you may be listed as a coauthor on the manuscripts from the study, or be allowed to write up part of the project as your own.

Summary

In summary, there are a variety of research opportunities for students. Faculty should be sure to keep an open line of communication with their students, offering assistance and answering their questions. A good relationship with your students will make them feel more comfortable when approaching you about research opportunities. Students should keep their eyes and ears open for opportunities, making an effort to talk with faculty and being persistent if their first attempts are not fruitful. The more ways that research opportunities are publicized and sought, and the better the lines of communication, the more likely a rewarding match between student and study.

Gia Sadowski and Jamie Ball are students in La Salle’s doctor of psychology (PsyD) program in clinical psychology. They are currently studying the relationship between self-esteem, locus of control, and self-complexity, as well as the psychology of women. Dolores Flagler enrolled as a psychology major in the undergraduate program at La Salle University in the fall of 2000. She is interested in the area of interpersonal attraction and plans on earning a PhD or PsyD so that she can become a clinical or counseling psychologist. Kevin Dowd is a psychology major in the undergraduate program at LaSalle University in the fall of 2000. He is interested in the prediction of relationship outcomes from early communication patterns. He plans to eventually use his knowledge of psychology in business. All four students are members of the La Salle Gender Research Group. Dr. Lynn Collins serves as faculty mentor for this group and as faculty advisor of La Salle’s Psi Chi chapter (see page 32 for a photograph and information about Dr. Collins).

From left: Jamie Ball, Gia Sadowski, Dolores Flagler, and Kevin Dowd.