“How Can I Get Involved in Research?”

General Advice:

1. Be sure that you’re ready, willing, and able to make the commitment. Research takes time and effort, and you reap what you sow. It should be a priority for you, as important as your most important academic courses.
   - Consider waiting until you have a few defined interests to follow. Comments like “I am really interested in molecular biology” or “I want to do clinical research” won’t get you too far. They are way too general. The faculty here are interested in one thing – what they work on! They will be thrilled to talk to you about that topic if you have some passion and enthusiasm about it.
   - Concentrate on your coursework in the early years. Good grades will help you get into a lab! Take appropriate classes so you know the theory behind the work done in the laboratory. Wait until you have enough time in your schedule to spend 10 – 15 hours a week on your project.
   - Talk to lots of people and listen to their advice: Ask your faculty advisor, professors in classes that really excite you, graduate and undergraduate TA’s, and any other student that you can find who is doing research.
   - If you are a freshman, think about waiting a while until getting into research unless you have done some significant research in high school. Your freshman year is a big one for you. Give yourself time to get adjusted. It will also take you some time to find a lab – most faculty members recommend that you wait a bit.

2. You’ll increase your chances (and have a better idea of what you want to do) if you first complete our five core neuroscience courses (NE 101, 102, 202, 203, 204). Additional neuroscience coursework might be useful, depending on the lab you want to work in, but advanced coursework usually isn’t necessary. Most students just learn “on the job”. Sometimes faculty will require a specific course before you work in their labs.

3. Look beyond the faculty who teach your courses here in CAS…there is a much larger Neuroscience community on campus, scattered across many departments on the Charles River Campus and at the School of Medicine. To see all your choices (comprising more than 50 faculty), visit the Undergraduate Program in Neuroscience website: http://www.bu.edu/neuro/undergraduate

Under “Undergrad”, select “Research Opportunities”, and look through the broad, diverse research interests that are represented on campus. By clicking on a name, you will find contact information and a brief description of faculty research interests.
4. Narrow your list to 8-10 faculty you want to contact. That sounds like a lot, but half of them may be “dead ends”, for various reasons (see #7, below). Before you contact a faculty member, read one of his or her recent published research papers (a few are listed on each faculty member’s web page). You may not understand much of the paper, but it will give you a good idea of the general questions asked and technical approaches used in that lab.

5. Send a personalized, separate email to each of the faculty you want to meet. Keep it brief and to-the-point. Proof read carefully! No text message slang or abbreviations. Introduce yourself (year, major; no long resumes, no C.V.), state your interest in their research (easier if you’ve read one of their papers), if your grades are excellent – tell them that, indicate when you’re looking to begin, and ask if you can arrange a meeting with them. Make it clear whether you’re interested in receiving academic credit, volunteering, or a paid position.

6. Suggest 2-3 days and time slots that you’re available for such a meeting in this initial email contact. Indicate that even if they don’t think they have room in their lab, you’d still like to meet with them, because you are interested in their work, and they may be able to help you find an opportunity in a lab that does similar research.

7. Don’t get discouraged if your first attempts are not successful. Some laboratories NEVER take undergrad researchers. Some faculty may have labs that already are full, or they may be too busy to commit at this time. Be persistent! Nearly every qualified student who is committed to finding a research opportunity will be able to find one.

8. What to ask them during the interview:
   - Find out what kinds of projects undergrads in the lab work on. Find out how many other undergrads are working there. As the professor to let you visit the lab or get email addresses of the undergrads that work with him/her.
   - Find out how many hours a week they expect you to be there. What hours do they want you there? Who will you be working directly with?
   - Will you be volunteering, receiving credit, or being paid?
   - Find out if the lab has lab meetings and ask to attend one. You can find out a lot about how people get along in the lab by watching them interact in lab meetings.

9. Research takes time. Don’t get involved until you can comfortably spend 12-15 hours a week in the lab. Many senior students spend nearly 20 hours a week doing their work. Research experience will not make up for poor grades when you apply to medical or graduate school. Research is essential if you are applying for graduate schools, but again you will need good grades to be considered.

10. Still need help? Contact Becca Reynolds at reyn@bu.edu