



Education, Schooling, & Society

Choosing a Faculty Advisor

Once you have identified the broad topic you are interested in studying, you need to choose an advisor. There are several ways to start.

How to Identify a Potential Advisor

One strategy is to consider professors you already know well from your coursework. Is your thesis topic relevant to their research interests? Another strategy is to browse the “Undergraduate Research Opportunities” brochure to learn more about the research interests of the IEI Fellows across campus. If you are interested in the general research interests of one or more of the IEI Fellows, then you can look them up on the IEI website (or on their departmental or lab websites) to gain more specific information about their projects and publications. Finally, you can meet with the associate director of ESS to brainstorm ideas about who a suitable advisor might be.

Issues to Consider

Consider several issues when choosing an advisor. First, is the person interested in your topic and knowledgeable about the methodological technique(s) you would like to use (e.g., randomized experiment, ethnography, focus group, survey, advanced statistical technique)? Second, is the person someone with whom you feel comfortable? Having a good working relationship with a faculty member can sometimes be more important than the faculty member’s particular area of expertise. Keep in mind that you can always find “experts” on your topic across the University and meet with them to answer particular questions you might have.

Suggestions for Contacting a Potential Advisor

Once you’ve identified a potential advisor, contact her/him and express your desire to work with her/him. Have your ideas fleshed out ahead of time. Write a brief description of potential topics, along with a few more specific research questions that interest you. (Don’t feel like you have to have a fully formulated research question. Your advisor will help you with that.) Then send an email to the professor requesting a meeting to discuss the possibility that he/she advise your thesis. It should be clear from your email why you have chosen this particular professor as the potential advisor. Below is an example of what your email might look like.

Dear Prof. _____,

My name is _____, and I would like to write a senior thesis next year. I’m a _____ major with an ESS minor. I’m still developing my specific research question, but I would like to investigate [GENERAL TOPIC]. I saw on [BROCHURE OR WEBSITE] that you are interested in [TOPIC OF HIS/HER RESEARCH]. I’m very interested in learning more about your ongoing projects, and I’m hoping you would be willing to meet with me to discuss my thesis and the possibility of serving as my advisor. Please let me know if you have any times available in your schedule to meet with me in the coming weeks. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Keep in mind that professors are busy, so you may not hear back for a few days. If the professor agrees to advise your thesis, it will be important to establish ahead of time practical matters like how often you will meet and when each piece of the thesis will be due (e.g., literature review, introduction, method, final draft). Note that different professors have different approaches to advising theses. Some are very hands-on and provide a lot of input, whereas others prefer you to be more independent. Make sure you are comfortable with the professor’s approach before finalizing your decision to conduct a thesis under her/his direction.