

How Do I Find Out What Faculty Are Doing?

Faculty members are the moving forces of higher education. You want to pick their brains. You want their ideas, their commentaries on your ideas, and their advice. If you're building a field of study, faculty members are the experts. However, sometimes they don't seem very accessible. How do you find these people, and what do you say once you have located them? Some tips for the curious follow.

Semester schedule books are academic catalogs. Small gems and good bargains are frequently hidden in the small print. Faculty members teach under their departmental sponsorship, even if their course titles are far afield from their departments' major focuses. International relations may be a natural for a political science department, but for example, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, a former ambassador has an appointment in the sociology department. By carefully looking through all course offerings, you may find interesting classes in unexpected places.

Faculty members show off their true interests in upper level courses and in special-topics seminars. Departments go potluck when assigning instructors to introductory courses, so if you want to know who specializes in specific areas, look at upper division and graduate level offerings.

Keep a special eye out for seminar courses, too. Although you may not take the courses offered by the specialists of interest for credit, you may be able to sit in on the class. You will find the faculty members' expertise and cross-disciplinary interests in these courses. For instance, when you discover the course in geography of world conflict, your perspective on international relations may take a different bent, especially if your interest is national security policy. You may find that your interest in international relations, when tied to special topics courses in communications, physics, and economics makes up an appropriate field of study.

Once you've identified the courses and professors of interest, you need to go through the process of generating a field of study. Suggestions for getting started on planning your tailor-made education follow.

Contact the professors of the identified courses to talk over your interests and expectations for their courses. Get the current course descriptions and look over the reading lists. Ask these professors to identify other people who are working in your areas of interest.

Many departments publish listings of the faculty members' interests. At larger schools, these lists are often part of the promotional package for prospective graduate students. These lists are usually available on departmental Web sites or through the departmental secretary. By the way, the secretary usually knows much more about the faculty's work than most students realize!

Check out all upcoming seminars and lectures. You'll usually hear an informative talk and find out who on campus is involved in the areas of interest.

Once you begin to get a sense of who's doing what, think about how their work fits in with your plans. Then, see these professors during their office hours or write brief E-mails or make quick phone calls to make appointments with them. In your meeting, talk with the faculty member about how to make your program of study substantive. You need to find out if ongoing groups of faculty members and students meet to discuss the topics in which you're interested. They may be meeting through informal lunches, study groups, or Friday afternoon coffee breaks; a faculty member can invite you to these seminars. In your meeting, you can also find out about independent study opportunities with them or their colleagues.

Make use of your elective hours to get into the special topics courses you've identified, create special topics courses with the faculty you've discovered, or convince faculty members to lead an independent study project with you. In these special topics courses, you will be asked to think, apply the tools you have learned, and produce your own work: Your education truly begins in these environments. Faculty members are usually willing to teach under such arrangements as long as they know that you're serious.

Find out about ongoing research projects in your areas of interest and try to get involved in these projects. If the lead researchers know that you want to learn and find you to be energetic

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and able to contribute through good efforts, they'll listen to you. Faculty members won't usually turn away good help. Here's an approach that seems to work: "Professor B, I've been reading some of your articles on international economic development in Latin America. I'm interested in your theory on the interaction of cultural patterns and economic growth. I'd like to work on this problem with you." If you tie into ongoing research projects or independent study, you learn how people define the critical problems in their areas, how they learn to ask the questions to find solutions to those problems, and what it takes to come up with workable answers. Regardless of your field, such skills are critical to your success when you graduate from college.

Keep in mind that you cannot accomplish your goals in a vacuum. You must integrate your current knowledge into your educational plan. You also must increase the amount of information you get and learn to think about how it pertains to you. For example, in addition to reading the major national newspapers and magazines, pick up the trade journals and papers that the professionals read. Don't wait until your senior year to take the initiative to learn outside of class; even if you're a freshman, do it now.