

How to Find, Approach, and Interview Potential Faculty Mentors

Postdoc appointments at the College of Graduate Studies are initiated by an offer from a faculty member. Selecting the best faculty mentor requires thought and investigation. Consider the following guidelines:

Start with your research interests and career aspirations.

What are your research interests? Your career aspirations? What excites you in your research field?

Can you identify a productive research area that fits your values and career plans?

Who is engaged in research that is complementary to your interests?

Do you have geographical limitations?

What kind of mentor best fits your needs?

Famous mentors have connections and resources but may travel a lot and have big labs.

Up-and-coming mentors may be in the lab every day but may still be developing resources.

Do you prefer hands-on guidance or a more removed mentoring approach?

Are they nurturing? Is that important to you?

Are they collaborative? Competitive?

What kind of connections do they have in academia? In industry?

Where have former postdocs from that lab ended up?

Read their work and work from their lab widely and critically.

Approaching potential mentors:

Introduce yourself via a concise cover letter or email.

Include:

- The story of your current research (question, approach, results, and significance)
- Your career goals, your plan to achieve them, and how a postdoc position in that lab fits into that plan
- Your postdoc project interests (be creative!) and a proposed approach
- A description of how this collaboration is a great match

Preparing for the interview:

Read up on the field in general, read the last several papers from the group, and research their current interests and projects.

Think about the lab's ongoing work.

Conceive of complementary projects that aren't in their current inventory.

Prepare a 30-minute talk in advance; in this talk, make it clear why you did what you did and the foundation of that work.

Be prepared to answer some hard questions - don't be defensive; discussing and defending your work is part of the process.

Questions to ask current/past group members (be selective, the focus should be on your science):

About them: Ask about their science and the lab environment.

About the PI:

- Is the PI a micro-manager?
- How often do you meet?
- Are they available for guidance?
- Do they play favorites?
- Are lab meetings confrontational or supportive?
- How responsive are they with manuscripts and deadlines?
- How is authorship/project ownership handled?
- About opportunities: Are there opportunities to teach/mentor? Leadership development?
- About the lab environment: What is the lab work ethic? What is the time off with pay policy in practice? Is there encouragement/financial support to attend major meetings? Who represents the groups at department functions? Is there formalized, regular feedback? How long do postdocs usually stay?

Questions to ask the faculty mentor:

What are the mentor's expectations of a postdoc?

How is a postdoc's research program determined?

How many postdocs has the mentor had? Where did they go? How many others are in the lab (grad students, staff, etc.)?

How many papers are being published, and where?

What is the mentor's policy on travel to meetings?

Are there opportunities for practice in grant writing, teaching, and mentoring, oral presentations, and reviewing manuscripts?

How long is financial support guaranteed? On what does renewal depend? Are there adequate research funds to support the proposed research?

What is the mentor's approach to helping in finding the next position? How are projects shared?

Adapted from John Boothroyd's "Finding the Right Postdoc for YOU," Preparing for Faculty Careers, and "Questions to Ask When Choosing a Postdoc Advisor," Pathways to Science.