

GUIDE TO POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH



If you're a Penn student, you've probably heard over and over again that Penn is a "world-class research institution." Some of your friends might be involved in research, your professors almost certainly are, but the meaning of research isn't often immediately apparent.

So what is research? Research varies dramatically depending on subject area, mode of inquiry, and scope, but put simply, research is a systematic investigation into a question of importance aimed at drawing conclusions about the world, increasing scientific knowledge, and/or solving problems. While you might have a clear idea of the scientific method and how research in the natural sciences is conducted, for students in Political Science and other social sciences, getting involved in research may not be as clear-cut as finding a lab to work in.

There are two broad paths to get started in political science research: (1) assist faculty members with their ongoing research or (2) begin your own independent research project. Generally, no prior experience is needed to get involved in research at Penn – so there's no need to be concerned if you didn't have the opportunity to do research in high school. And while earlier is better to get involved, many people get started with research as late as their junior year. Read on for details about getting involved in political science research.

Benefits of Research

- Work on the cutting edge of Political Science, advance the field, and expand humanity's body of knowledge on political subjects
- Gain skills for a resume like problem-solving and qualitative and/or quantitative data analysis
- Connections and letters of recommendation from faculty that have worked with you closely in an academic setting

Pathways to Research

1. Participate in Ongoing Research

Many people aren't familiar with the research process, lack research skills, or don't know what topics they want to research. A great way for such people to get started with research is to participate in an ongoing project under the direction of faculty member. While a common way to participate in ongoing research is to serve as a research assistant, there's a number of programs at Penn that help students match with faculty who are working on projects of interest.

Pros

- Helps cultivate your research skills and see the steps of the research process
- Develops your area of research interest
- Gives the opportunity to work closely with a faculty mentor

Cons

- Provides less flexibility with scheduling and when research is conducted
- Gives less autonomy in direction and methods of the research
- Potentially researching a question outside of your area of interest

Research Assistant Positions

Many professors look for research assistants (RAs). RAs do a variety of tasks for professors, most often coding, collecting, and analyzing data, but sometimes assisting with administrative tasks. RAs are most useful for professors when they have distinct skills from what the professor can do or when the professor has intensive or difficult tasks he or she doesn't have the time to complete. Often, professors will look with students with the ability to process and work with data, so bolstering your statistics, foreign language, computer programming, and Excel skills is invaluable for getting hired as an RA.

“I love working as an RA and engaging with peers who are passionate about moving the field forward, and I like thinking critically about existing ways of conducting research.”

– Sophia Elliot, C'17

To find a job as an RA, some places to start would be looking on PennLink for positions, since many professors post opportunities there. In addition, don't be afraid to ask professors during office hours if they know of any faculty members who are looking for RAs. Finally, you can send emails to professors with whom you're interested in working. Follow the tips in the box on the next page for success with emailing professors. Above all, securing a RA position is by no means a guarantee but can be an excellent way to start your research career.

Programs and Internships for Research

In addition to serving as an RA, there are several programs that connect you with ongoing research. For example, the Penn Undergraduate Mentorship Program ([PURM](#)) provides students with a \$3,500 summer living stipend to work with a professor over the summer. Projects are posted in all 12 of

Tips for Emailing Professors

- Spend time investigating your professor's research to get a sense for their work. Then, be sure to individualize your email and explain why you want to work with them specifically and how your existing skills would benefit their research.
- Do not say that you're seeking paid employment, since it sounds presumptuous and paid positions are rarer.
- Attach your resume, and be sure to emphasize your critical reading, writing, verbal communication, and argumentation skills, along with

Penn's schools and are an excellent way to earn money and get started with research at the same time. Another opportunity is the [Summer Humanities Internships](#), which places students in the College in paid 10-week apprenticeship programs with organizations like the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Penn Museum, and Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts. Another great opportunity is [PORES](#), the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Electoral Studies, which provides fellowships to students to support travel and research expenses during the summer.

In case you're having trouble finding existing research opportunities, the Center for Undergraduate Research and Fellowships (CURF) provides one-on-one research consultations where students share their goals for research and CURF provides suggestions and resources for them to get started. Finally, CURF maintains a [Research Directory](#) of opportunities for

research that can be filtered by School, Department, whether or not the position is work study or paid, and whether or not freshmen are welcome to apply. All of these are excellent ways to get involved in ongoing research.

2. Conduct Independent Research

The second major way to get involved in research is to create and conduct your own independent research. Most research of this form begins by writing a research paper on a topic for a class, and this option entails more experience with research, which you can gain in a number of ways, all of which are detailed later in this section.

Pros

- Total autonomy and flexibility in when you work, how you conduct your research
- Multiple grant opportunities for independent projects
- Generally more ownership over your project

Cons

- Higher barriers to entry (need to have research skills, experience with the process)
- Can be overwhelming place to start
- Solid research question & area of interest necessary to get started

Develop a Topic of Interest

The first step to conducting your own independent research is to find a topic about which you're passionate. An excellent way to do this is simply to take courses that interest you. Eventually, as you read the assigned books and articles for your courses, you should gain an understanding of the broad arguments and debates in your area of interest. This should allow you to pick a research question that hasn't been adequately examined and to understand how scholars have addressed the topic you're studying.

Another way to clarify your subject is to find professors working in your field of interest. Professors can suggest books and articles for you to read and talk through your research question. Don't be afraid to email a faculty member to see if you could drop by their office hours sometime to talk through your research interests. They can provide feedback about whether your research question is specific enough and some suggestions about methods to answer the question. There's no reason to be nervous about attending office hours, and if it makes you feel better, you can prepare a list of a few questions to ask your professor to make sure you won't run out of things to talk about!

Bolster your Research Skills

Another important component of conducting independent research is ensuring you have the necessary skills to answer your research question. All of the programs and opportunities in the first section are great ways to bolster your research skills, but another great way to gain experience with research is through coursework. As noted above, courses can help you refine your research interests, but coursework can also hone your knowledge of the research process. There are two broad categories of classes that can help you with your independent research: (1) methods courses, and (2) research-based courses.

Methods Courses ...

- Provide training in methodological approaches to research (e.g. statistical analysis, qualitative data analysis).
- Will often contain the word "methods" in the course title.
- Can help you with the technical details of addressing a research question.
- Provide a broad array of tools for collecting and analyzing data.
- May be limited in methodological scope (e.g. solely qualitative or quantitative)

Research-Based Courses ...

- Usually culminate in a research paper for the final assessment for the course.
- Are usually seminars or serve fewer than 30 students.
- Will often focus on a particular subject (e.g. civil wars, social movements) and ask students to prepare original research within that body of literature.
- Give opportunities to work closely and receive feedback from faculty.
- Might not give methodological background to students.

Opportunities for Independent Research

Political Science Honors Program

The Honors Program offers the Political Science Department's seniors an opportunity to complete a substantial work of original research. Honors students have the opportunity to share their research with the campus community at the department's annual Honors Poster Session Luncheon and nationally at the annual conference of the Midwest Political Science Association. Students who complete their thesis with a grade of at least an A- are awarded Distinction in Political Science upon graduation.

Independent Studies

Independent studies give students the opportunity to conduct independent research and receive course credit at the same time. In independent studies, students work under the guidance of a faculty member and conduct research into a subject of their interest. Assessments for the independent study often consist of a final paper presenting the findings of your research.

College House Research Fellows

Each College House selects a Research Fellow (RF) who is given academic and monetary support to pursue an 18-month research project of their own design. In conjunction with House faculty and staff, every College House RF serves as a resource to other undergraduates, particularly residents of their House. They plan and organize one or two informal research events for College House residents and contribute to the Quaker Days Research Conference.

"I really value the intellectual community that our thesis seminar fosters. It's really exciting to engage and discuss with my peers as we all embark on these meaningful academic projects."

– Jeremy Golant, C'17

University Scholars

The University Scholars program provides a community of students in all four undergraduate schools through mentoring, research funding and scholarly events. In order to aid students in doing creative and in-depth research, the University Scholars has a fund with which to help students defray research expenses. Funding is meant to cover the expense of the research itself; this most often pertains to room and board costs over the summer months, but sometimes pertains to travel related to research. The University Scholars meet weekly for lunches at which they present and discuss their research.

Penn Program on Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism

The Penn Program on Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism (DCC) awards undergraduate research fellowships for projects addressing any one (or more) of the program's three themes of democracy, citizenship, and constitutionalism. Students may receive grants of up to \$2500 for research expenses, participate in a year-long DCC Undergraduate Research Seminar, and present their work in a public conference at its end.