HOW TO FIND A MENTOR

Where do you start? Perhaps you’ve already met a potential mentor during a clinical rotation, lecture, or meeting. Although these are perfectly acceptable ways to start the mentor selection process, not every Vanderbilt researcher may be prepared or have time to mentor a student. The Inquiry Program streamlines the process to help connect VMS students with mentors who are actively seeking students.

Most students will identify a mentor and project during the FCC Phase; others will continue to explore possible mentors during the Immersion Phase. Either approach is fine. However, you must have an approved mentor and project prior to enrolling in the PLAN course (a prerequisite for your Research Immersion months).

Choosing a mentor and preparing for your Research Immersion

1. Identify your research area and possible mentors.

Before you choose a mentor, you need to identify a research area that’s a good fit for you:

- Bench2Bedside
- Biomedical Informatics and Epidemiology
- Community and Global Health
- Ethics, Education, and Public Policy

Your interests may be quite specific or rather broad. Whatever your interests, reach out to the Research Directors to discuss your ideas, interests, and possible projects. They are content experts who will guide you toward potential mentors. Also, make sure to meet with a Research Director before asking anyone to become your official Research Immersion mentor.

Each research area has a list of approved mentors who have been vetted to work with VMS students. If you would like to work with someone who is not on one of the lists, you must gain the approval of a Research Director before you develop a project with that potential mentor.

2. Identify your mentor.

This is an exciting time when you will meet one-on-one with cutting-edge Vanderbilt researchers! You will engage in conversations about their research, your interests, and what role you might play if you joined a research team. Hopefully every conversation you have will be enriching, whether or not you find your Research Immersion mentor match.
Before you start meeting with potential mentors, you’ll need to engage in self-reflection. Examine your hopes and expectations. Ask yourself:

- What intrigues me in medical research?
- Which research questions do I have that might turn into a potential project?
- What are my research strengths?
- Which research skills do I need to develop?
- What kind of work environment is best for me?
- What are my career aspirations at this point in time?
- What project might complement that career trajectory?
- Which qualities and characteristics would be ideal to find in a mentor?
- What are my expectations and hopes for the Research Immersion experience?

It’s important to have realistic expectations—while it’s perfectly normal (and admirable) to want to solve a major problem, 3 to 6 months is a limited amount of time. Think about how you might examine one piece of that larger problem. If you enjoy your research, you never know where it might take you in the future!

Research and contact potential mentors. Review each potential mentor’s past and current work to see whose research aligns with your interests and Research Immersion goals. Reach out formally to prospective mentors via email to schedule a meeting. Please remember to be respectful of their time and understand that faculty members have many responsibilities that require significant time and effort. Establishing a successful mentoring relationship depends very much on how prepared you are, even from the beginning, so be sure to spend time learning about each mentor’s research before sitting down for a meeting.

During your exploratory meetings, identify mutual interests, goals, availability, and expectations. Consider the fit between you and a potential mentor. Recognize that your first meeting may not be the last, and that’s fine! You may speak with several potential mentors before choosing the mentor and project that works best for you.

After you choose your mentor (with Research Director approval), be sure to ask formally (i.e., via a face-to-face conversation, phone call, or email). As always, be respectful and frame your message as a request, not a demand. Understand that if a faculty member is unable to mentor you, it probably has to do with his or her demanding schedule. Regroup, discuss your options and next steps with a Research Director, and look for a new potential mentor.

*Finally, be sure to follow the Pathway2PLAN process outlined on the Discovery Learn course site and the OMSR website. You must complete all 5 steps via REDCap surveys. Questions? Email vms.research@vanderbilt.edu any time!*