

36-490: Undergraduate Research

On working with your investigator

In your data analysis project for 490, you are taking on a new role that many of you are unfamiliar with: you are working as a kind of collaborator with the faculty investigator who brought his or her project to the class. This is a professional relationship: you must show appropriate courtesy, respect and etiquette in all aspects of this relationship. That means both social courtesy and the intellectual respect of *both* working hard to understand what your collaborator (the faculty investigator) wants and needs, *and* communicating clearly and courteously your best advice, feedback and analysis for the project.

Please note the following guidelines for working with your faculty collaborators:

1. Plan to meet with them at least once a month. Some projects may naturally lead to more frequent meetings but you shouldn't meet any less than once a month. Be sensitive to the schedule of your collaborators, in frequency of meetings (and all things).
2. Schedule meetings well in advance. ALWAYS be up front, courteous and flexible about scheduling meetings, and ALWAYS be on time for meetings.
3. Be professional, polite and courteous at all times in meetings (with your teammates, and with your scientific collaborator). Your collaborators are accustomed to and are expecting professional collaborators. This doesn't mean you should be meek. It means you should be socially graceful. For example, it is possible (and necessary, across scientific and academic cultures) to be graceful while digging to get to the bottom of intellectual, organizational or other questions.
4. ALWAYS have paper and pencil (or laptop if you are good at using one) out during meetings, and ALWAYS be taking copious notes. Scientists and other professionals love to talk about their work, so you won't have any trouble getting them to talk. Afterwards, study and organize your notes, so you know what to follow up on (or not) in future meetings, email, phone calls, etc. The times your collaborators will get impatient if they have to give the same lecture twice or three times. On the other hand, engaging an old issue with new or deeper questions or in new directions is an activity your collaborators will enjoy.
5. Find out how your collaborators like to communicate between meetings. Some are more tuned to email, some are more tuned to the phone. Be sensitive to how often your collaborators want to be contacted between meetings. Some people like questions saved up in batches that only come occasionally, others like to address each little question as soon as you think of it. People who like one style typically don't like the other. Be flexible yourself and adapt to your collaborator's style.

Always feel free to come talk to either of us about about any aspect of the project. We will set up regular meetings for to meet with one of us every week or two, but don't wait for our regular meeting if you are concerned or uncertain about anything (social, scientific, statistical, etc.). Drop by our offices or send email. If we don't know the answer we'll help you find it.

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