

How to Seek a Research Assistantship:

Overcoming Your Comfort Zone

Approaching professors can be nerve-wracking and stressful, but if you see human interaction as opportunities for meaningful connection rather than self-benefitting transactions. Here are the words of encouragement I give myself:

1. Aim for social connection

Professors (especially social science professors) are experts at detecting who is visiting to learn more outside of the classroom and who only visits and engages when they want a favor. By adopting a "social connection" mindset rather than a "social networking" mindset, this also relieves you from the pressure to perform.

2. Recognize that growth lies in the discomfort

The term "growing pains" exist for a reason! The experience of nervousness signals that you are on the verge of facing something possibly greater than yourself.

3. Your practice matters more than your talent

Socializing is an entirely etiquette-based, learned skill. It is a process of continual trial-and-error, not a game entirely of talent. Remember the diligent tortoise who outran the hare: Steady progress bears more weight than resting solely on natural talent. You can absolutely learn how to be good at interactions through practice, even if it doesn't feel natural to you at first.

4. Remember that you have already paid your dues

The ability to reach out to your professors is technically covered in your tuition fees. You only get to be a student for a temporary amount of time, so make the most of it.

5. Say it with me: this is not the end of the world

Professors interact with so many people in just one day, that one interaction most likely isn't that personal or entirely memorable unless you were awfully rude or awfully genius. Don't sweat the small stuff--reflect on them and move forward with what you've learned.

It doesn't necessarily become easier, but with practice it can definitely become less difficult.