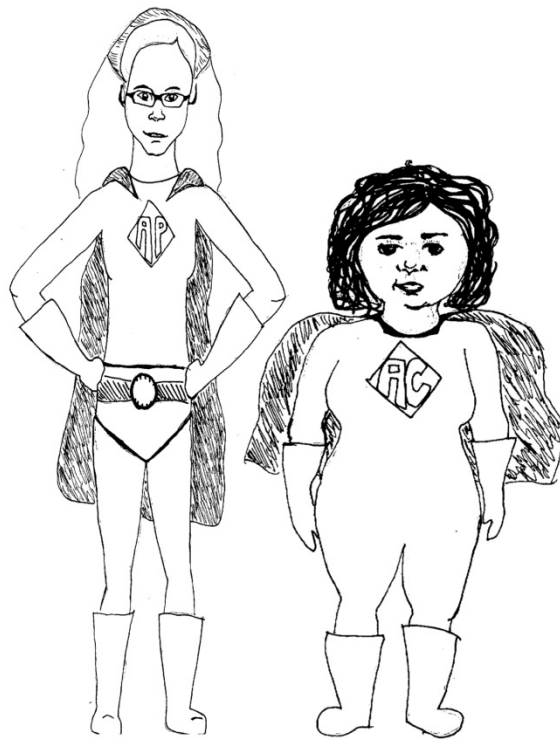


From one undergraduate researcher to another:

A handy guide to working with humanities and social
science professors



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Cover art courtesy of Beck Shillizzi.

. . . about me and my project . . .

If you think you might want to have the experience of paid work with a faculty mentor on a research project or creative collaboration of some kind, this zine is for you. I'm writing this zine at the encouragement of my own mentor, Alison Piepmeier, who has been an invaluable source of knowledge, encouragement, and scholarly advice. We've been incredibly fortunate to have a professional relationship that works so well for each of our personalities and talents. For example, I tend to be the detailed-plan and goals-oriented partner, while Alison fully grasps the larger picture and direction of her work.

Our summer research project explored the narratives surrounding prenatal testing as a medical practice that has become increasingly routine. We spent part of the summer interviewing parents of children with disabilities to find out their stories and reasons for making their choices. We also spent a lot of time doing research on statistics as well as looking for the narratives of other individuals who made different choices regarding their prenatal testing. Through the process, Alison and I have spent a lot of time together exploring the patterns emerging from this project and the direction that this project of Alison's might realistically take. It's been an amazing experience for me as someone who intends to pursue graduate school and academia in the future.

. . . tips for getting noticed . . .

When I came to College of Charleston, I had the fortunate experience of knowing from the beginning that I wanted to be involved in the Women's and Gender Studies program. I met the director (Alison) before school had even started my first year. I know that this sounds a little egotistical and silly, but Alison says that when she first met me, she thought about me as a candidate for the SURF grant. Although I had no idea that Alison was really involved in disability studies (or even what, exactly disability studies was), I had the personal autonomy or perhaps seriousness that made me stand out to a professor who regularly engages her students in these kinds of college-funded research projects.

I am an extremely independent individual, and I've always taken myself seriously as a person who is academically capable. We wouldn't be here if we weren't, right? Part of what I'm saying is that you need to have some confidence. If you want to work on a grant, you can make that happen one way or another. Between all the different funding opportunities and all the professors on campus, there is a combination that will work for you that combines your areas of interests with a fabulous professor who will mentor you through the experience of working on a grant.

When you interact with professors, take yourself seriously as an academic. Do all the important social things like making eye contact when you speak with someone, firm handshakes, etc. Be professional, respectful, and try to come across as an autonomous, capable individual when interacting with professors. You don't have to be super uptight and uncomfortable, but take these interactions seriously. First impressions are important.

. . . finding a professor – without a compatibility quiz . . .

-Get to know your professors (or other professors who just seem really interesting to you!) in office hours. Most professors will be happy to meet with you to talk about their research if they are doing any at the time. These professors can't possibly consider collaborating with you if they don't know you.

-If you're thinking seriously about declaring a major or minor – do it. You can always change your mind later, but this will get you into that department's system for emails, etc. Your advisor may also be a great resource; he or she can point you towards faculty who might be interested in meeting with you about grant funding and research projects.

-If you feel really shy and uncomfortable asking to meet with professors, send them an email asking about their research interests and letting them know that you are interested in getting this kind of research experience for graduate school. Most professors love to talk about their research. They make a living by talking, and their research is something they're totally passionate about. Then, here you are volunteering to be the perfect, captivated audience. You're practically a dream student come true if you've even gotten this far.

-If their research is on something that sounds interesting, but you know nothing about it, ask for some good starter materials! This kind of initiation on your part will make you more appealing. It won't hurt to read an extra article or three to find out if this research project might be a good fit for you. Plus, if you do decide to do the research project it will help you with the basic knowledge of the material for when you write the grant proposal. It's a win-win.

-Know your options for funding by using the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities site: urca.cofc.edu

. . . assembling the project . . .

Depending on whether it's a faculty member's brainchild or your own creative enterprise, you'll need to figure out a research plan. The plan should have deadlines, clear goals and expectations, and some wiggle room in case things change. The URCA website is a good

resource for what successful grants look like. For example, the SURF grant is very specific, and you'll need to be very aware of exactly what the directions ask for. Again, this is all good practice for you, though. If you're going to grad school, grant forms and applications will probably be at least a little more familiar now that you've got one under your belt.

When grant writing, be sure that you have a clear grasp of the project. I can't stress this enough: *ask for clarification if you need even the slightest bit*. It's so important for you to understand what's happening. The process of writing the grant really will set the tone for the rest of project in terms of how you and your mentor will work together. If your mentor has singlehandedly written the grant, you might have a lot of problems when the grant work begins because you don't have a say in the direction of the project. For example, when writing the grant with Alison, I had already read several key articles about prenatal testing and feminist disability studies (which I knew absolutely nothing about previously) and I wrote parts of the grant and gave my opinion on what things I was interested in, like doing interviews. I asked for articles to read because if I am going to collaborate on a project, I need to know what key researchers/scholars are writing. I need to be familiar with the arguments being presented around the topic of my grant project. In part, it's your responsibility to make sure that you understand enough about the subject to be a partner on the project. Your mentor is there to work with you, not teach you a private class about a topic.

. . . attitude adjustment . . .

This point builds on my prior argument that you have to actually collaborate (work *together*, not just *for*) in order to have a successful partnership. Now that you're in this project, you aren't just a student learning in a classroom anymore. You're a researcher, and that means that your opinions and insights matter because you're half the team. You still have to do some of the not-so-fun-stuff, like transcribing interviews, but if you show that you are taking some initiative, you will be treated as an equally intelligent and capable voice in the project. It makes for an infinitely more rewarding and enriching experience.

Take some ownership and pride in what you're doing. When I think about the project Alison and me did, I think of it as mine too (at least for the summer). Doing funded undergraduate research on grants like the SURF grant is pretty prestigious on campus. It's okay to feel a little pride in that accomplishment. Actually, for a long time now, I have always pictured Alison and me as super heroine and sidekick. (She's really tall and thin, and I am really short and round. We make for a fun pair). It makes me literally visualize us as collaborators working together.

. . . effectiveness as a rule . . .

So, with all this project ownership in mind, consider the idea of effectiveness. If this were solely your project, you wouldn't spend time doing a lot of research that you didn't actually plan on using, right? Everyone's time is valuable, so make sure that you are spending your time and effort on a project that 1) you actually enjoy and 2) doing things that are useful. How exactly will you know if what you're doing is useful? It's a good question, but one which could have several answers. Some of the following strategies might help:

-COMMUNICATE- Express your interests, concerns, confusions, and frustrations. If you have a problem, say it! For example, if you've transcribed interviews until your fingers fall off, it's not unreasonable to ask for a different project to do so that you can have a break. If you want to focus on one particular area that fascinates you, say so! Alison will often ask me to perform tasks that are pretty ambiguous, where I just go off on a researching expedition not knowing what exactly I'll find. But, I will persistently ask questions until I understand what I need first. It's better to ask questions than waste your time researching something that wasn't needed in the first place.

-MAKE FRIENDS- Although this sounds like silly advice, you and your mentor are going to be spending a lot of time and working closely together. Have lunch, get coffee, and spend a little time getting to know each other. It's incredibly important that you feel comfortable expressing yourself around your mentor regarding the project and your work. If you can't imagine having coffee with the person that you are considering working with, I'm not sure how well the project is going to go for you. You might need "research collaborator's therapy" so that you two can communicate.

-ORGANIZE- Professors are notorious for being a smidgen spacey. Although Alison isn't a space cadet, sometimes her ambiguous requests can make me a little bonkers. My overachieving self can't stop looking for *all* the examples I can find of feminists who talk about parenting disabled children as being too difficult. So, I have to ask for how many examples Alison might like, and where to look first. I keep all my findings in labeled folders so that I can keep track of all the research that we've assembled. Make sure that the project is happening in a way that makes sense to you. If you need a more structured (or less structured) day, or a more specific list of tasks – ask for it!

. . . enjoy the experience . . .

I have had such an amazing time this summer working with Alison on this project. Not only have I learned a lot about prenatal testing and disability studies, but I've become a better researcher, a more discerning listener, and academically stronger and more confident in my work.

Working so closely with a professor can be intimidating. Obviously, Alison has had years of experience in terms of producing scholarly research and writing, where I have had few by comparison. However, she treats me like I have valid thoughts and opinions on this project- her brainchild. I feel completely comfortable telling her that from my perspective, this project is leading to a book about prenatal testing, rather than just one chapter in another work about parenting and feminist disability studies. Maybe parenting will be in there too, but the information and interviews that we've uncovered this summer have been so rich with so many different stories and experiences. Alison says that I might be right. The point is that it doesn't matter if I'm right or wrong; Alison can obviously present her research in whatever format works best for her. But - I can give my opinion on how this is actually going to work, and that's ok too.

So, that's the end of this zine. I do hope it's been helpful for anyone interested in pursuing this kind of academic work. I can only wish you as much success as I've had on this summer research and SURF grant. It's been an invaluable experience that I have truly loved and learned so much from, personally and academically. Best of luck on your own projects!