



# A STUDENT GUIDE TO THE MAIN RESEARCH PATHWAYS



If you are new to research, the terminology can feel confusing and gatekept. USRAs, directed studies, volunteer roles, co-op. They all sound official, but they mean very different things. This guide breaks them down in plain language so you can decide what fits you best, right now.

## Undergraduate Student Research Awards (USRAs)

### What it is

A USRA is a paid, **full-time research position** for undergraduates, usually during the summer. You work on a real research project under a faculty supervisor, often in a lab or research group.

### What it looks like day to day

- 35 to 40 hours per week
- Research tasks like data collection, experiments, coding, analysis, or literature reviews
- Regular check-ins with a supervisor or grad student mentor

### Who it is best for

- Students who already have some academic or research experience
- Students who can commit to full-time research for a term
- Students interested in grad school, medicine, or research careers

### Key things to know

- You must find a **supervisor willing to support your application**
- There are internal deadlines at each university, often earlier than the national deadline
- Very competitive, but incredibly valuable

### Why people love USRAs

They give you funding, structure, and credibility. A USRA on your CV signals that a professor trusted you with real research and that funding agencies believed in your potential.

## Directed Studies or Independent Study Courses

### What it is

A directed study is a **for-credit research course** where you work closely with a faculty member on a small research project or part of a larger project.

### What it looks like

- Counts as a course toward your degree
- Flexible hours depending on the project
- Usually includes a final paper, report, or presentation

### Who it is best for

- Students who want research experience during the academic year
- Students who cannot commit to full-time summer research
- Students building experience before applying for funded research

### Key things to know

- You usually need a **minimum GPA**
- You and the supervisor agree on expectations ahead of time
- Not paid, but you earn academic credit

### Why directed studies are powerful

They show initiative and independent thinking. They are especially helpful if you are aiming for grad school and want strong reference letters.

## Volunteer Research Assistant Positions

### What it is

This is the most common way students first enter research. You volunteer your time to help with a lab or research group.

### What it looks like

- A few hours per week
- Tasks like data entry, participant scheduling, literature searches, lab prep
- Often supervised by a graduate student or senior undergrad

## Who it is best for

- First-and second-year students
- **Students with little or no research experience**
- Students exploring whether research is right for them

## Key things to know

- These roles are rarely posted publicly
- Most are obtained by emailing professors directly
- Commitment and reliability matter more than experience

## Why volunteering matters

Volunteer roles are often the gateway to paid positions, directed studies, and **strong references**. Showing up consistently builds trust fast.

## Co-op Research Positions

### What it is

A co-op research position is a paid, full-time job that is part of your **university's co-op program** and often takes place in a lab, hospital, government agency, or industry setting.

### What it looks like

- 4 to 8 month placements
- Structured job with formal expectations
- Often interdisciplinary or applied research

### Who it is best for

- Students enrolled in a co-op program
- Students looking for longer, immersive research experiences
- Students interested in applied or industry research

## Key things to know

- You must be registered in co-op
- Positions are competitive and posted through co-op portals
- Often include professional training and evaluations

## Why co-op research stands out

It combines research with workplace skills. It is especially valuable for students interested in industry, policy, or applied science careers.

## How These Pathways Connect

Many students move through more than one of these. A common path looks like this:



Volunteer in a lab → Directed study → USRA or co-op

There is no single correct route. What matters is consistency, curiosity, and showing that you can contribute.