

# Undergraduate Research Opportunities: Expectations and Process

Stephen D. O'Connell

15 May 2025

*If you have questions about student research after reading this document in full, or about the Honors Program in Economics after reading [this page](#) carefully, you may **e-mail me** your questions. I am unfortunately unable to respond to e-mails with requests to meet to talk about these topics. High school students from Decatur High (GA) or Boston College High (MA) may get in touch with me for summer opportunities.*

I regularly work with undergraduate students, both during the academic year and in the summer. Most undergraduate research opportunities are based on research I am conducting. I also work with students on their honors theses, but typically only if they have worked with me previously. Emory undergraduates work with me during the year and summer, and students from other institutions may apply for summer roles. I welcome students who are curious, motivated, and want to invest in learning how to do research. Meaningful research experiences require time, focus, and consistency. Working with me as an undergraduate is an opportunity to learn how research works, test your interests, and build foundational experience. This document outlines what I expect from students, and how to get involved.

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Where to start? Academic-year opportunities</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	Academic year: General expectations for working with me in a 4-credit research course as a Research Assistant . . . . .	2
1.2	Academic year: Time commitment . . . . .	2
1.3	Academic year: What to expect . . . . .	2
1.4	Academic year: Expected long-term commitment . . . . .	3
<b>2</b>	<b>Summer Research - Emory Students</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1	Summer: Time commitment . . . . .	3
2.2	Summer: Nature of Work . . . . .	3
<b>3</b>	<b>Summer Research - Non-Emory Students</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Apply? There is no application.</b>	<b>4</b>

# 1 Where to start? Academic-year opportunities

I prefer to start working with students in their Freshman or Sophomore years who have a strong interest in economics and are just beginning to develop technical skills. The first advice I have for freshmen and sophomores is to take ECON220 and ECON320 as soon as possible. I also work with juniors and seniors whom I know from class or previous RA work, or who have demonstrated a high level of capability and interest.

A starting point usually involves some credit-based exposure to working together. Most students enroll in an undergraduate research (ECON499) course with a group of similarly minded students seeking research experience, although others have worked on research after taking ECON320 or ECON385/485 when I have offered them in the past. Experience in ECON499 typically serves as a “trial period” during which you will learn if you enjoy the type of work I do and the standards I set, and I figure out similar in your direction. I typically offer these when (a) I have a volume of work that I need done, and (b) 2-4 high-performing students coordinate as a group to approach me looking for research experience. This trial period does not require prior research experience with me. At the end of the trial period, we will discuss whether to continue with a for-credit or paid arrangement, depending on your interests and availability and my project needs.

## 1.1 Academic year: General expectations for working with me in a 4-credit research course as a Research Assistant

Students must be proactive, self-directed, and communicative. Tasks typically include literature review, simple data handling, and other data prep or analytical tasks. I’m looking for consistency and follow-through, technical skills and/or demonstrated learning ability, initiative, clear communication, and ownership of tasks. Students should attempt to solve problems before asking for help, but also know when and how to bring issues to me so that they can make efficient and effective progress.

## 1.2 Academic year: Time commitment

Students must be able to commit 15 hours per week to research during the semester, which is the equivalent of a substantive three- to four-credit course when taken seriously. If you cannot consistently make this time available, working with me will not be a good fit during the school year. I do not believe students can contribute meaningfully to faculty-led projects without a sustained level of engagement, and I look for students to make tradeoffs in other areas if they want to pursue interests in research. I look for students with the flexibility and discipline to manage a higher-than-average workload.

## 1.3 Academic year: What to expect

Semester projects tend to be group-based, allowing students to collaborate and learn from one another. Most individual students rarely have enough time to make meaningful progress on research projects that are meaningful to me, so having a group makes things go faster and you are (ideally) also kept on your toes by each other. Tasks can include literature

reviews, data collection, data cleaning, data analysis, or other tasks. Exceptional students with strong skills may be invited to take on more individual responsibilities or slotted for other research opportunities. Students should have basic technical proficiency (Stata, R, or Python) or demonstrate a strong ability to learn independently. Research tasks often involve ambiguity—you will need to troubleshoot, ask questions judiciously, and propose next steps.

## 1.4 Academic year: Expected long-term commitment

It is generally my goal to work with students across multiple semesters and years to help grow them into researchers. Developing skills, independence, and a deep understanding of research takes time and consistent effort. I prefer to build long-term mentoring relationships that allow for sustained intellectual development, rather than offering opportunities to many students concurrently. I don't take students for whom there is no possibility to continue working with me into a subsequent semester or summer due to academic or personal constraints or preferences.

## 2 Summer Research - Emory Students

Summer is the best time for students to immerse themselves in research; it also signals that you are willing to forgo other attractive opportunities to pursue your interest in research. In summers I can usually take on a small number of students for focused, full-time research experiences. These are best suited for students who are seriously considering graduate study or careers involving data, policy, or academic research. These can also work for students who wish to do fieldwork in other countries, likely focused on qualitative data collection.

There are multiple opportunities for summer research. SURE is the best one, which typically has a deadline in early January. I can take only one SURE student per year, and will typically support the application of someone with whom I have worked before. There are other options as well, all of which require early planning in the December or January prior to prepare for. *You should be in touch with me ideally by December, but latest by the start of spring semester, if you are interested in summer research opportunities. There are things with deadlines that we should be aware of for summer work that require this early coordination.*

### 2.1 Summer: Time commitment

Students must be available for a minimum of 40 hours per week over at least 10 weeks in person in Atlanta. I do not offer remote opportunities unless a student is engaged in fieldwork. Summer research is a job; students should not have other major time commitments during this period.

### 2.2 Summer: Nature of Work

Tasks include data cleaning, analysis, writing up results, and supporting research outputs. Students often work more on a 1-on-1 basis with me, with frequent interaction, presentations,

and work reviews. Students are expected to take on greater responsibility and independence and to communicate progress regularly. Summer opportunities are only open to students with whom I have worked before in some capacity. I can usually find office space in the Econ floor where I sit, although this is not guaranteed.

### **3 Summer Research - Non-Emory Students**

I receive compelling cases for summer research assistance from Atlanta-based students who are undergraduates at an institution other than Emory increasingly often. I am open to these, but my capacity to support them is limited in various dimensions. The best situation would be where you would apply (either beforehand, or after speaking with me) for some form of internship grant from your home university which would cover some or most of your summer costs. Other arrangements may be possible. These are considered on a case-by-case basis and depend on available resources and project needs.

### **4 Apply? There is no application.**

There is no formal application. Most will reasonably consider sending me an e-mail if this document has been carefully considered and you still wish to pursue potential opportunities. If you do so, and your e-mail goes unanswered, it means either there are no opportunities currently, or your e-mail does not make a compelling case to pursue, or does not reflect a comprehension of the points in this document, or your e-mail is clearly written by AI.