

The Truth About 'Open' Labs

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When underclassmen decide to join a research lab, many ask the wrong questions: “Which lab is the easiest?” instead of “which lab is the best fit for me?” It is a typical assumption among students that the “open” lab is less demanding, but they are later shocked to find it is, in fact, no less of a challenge. So here it is — the truth — about open lab settings.

The open lab operates based on the research interests of project leaders, usually graduate students, who explore their field of research. Under the direction of project leaders and close supervision of faculty advisors, undergraduates join in whichever projects they wish to work.

One of the greatest advantages of working in this type of lab is the peer mentorship that results. When students work directly with a faculty member on a research project, that advisor becomes a student’s greatest resource. The same is true in an open lab, however the information and guidance that graduate students have to offer often is given greater consideration. As a result, undergraduates appreciate the role and responsibilities of project leaders, who themselves learn valuable management and leadership skills.

The variety of research opportunities this nontraditional setting offers is also another advantage. Even the novice undergraduate has the opportunity to learn from many bodies of literature and see projects through from beginning to end, including convention presentations and journal submissions. Students at all levels have higher expectations of their peers, as they collaborate with each other.

It should be noted, however, that the greatest advantages of an open lab sometimes become disadvantages. Everyone likes to have options, but the freedom and desire to choose from so many possible projects can leave new lab members sacrificing depth for breadth. Additionally, students who fail to meet their obligations may have a greater impact on their peers. In traditional labs, those who fail to carry out their responsibilities frustrate the faculty advisor and lab coordinators, but minimally affect other student researchers. Since project members share responsibility, and tasks are delegated among them, even one person’s poor performance can impede a project and impact all students involved.

Ultimately, research is one of the most personally and professionally rewarding ways to prepare for careers in psychology, regardless of the type of lab you are in. The best lab is one that consists of a close-knit group of individuals who share in the overall experience. When you find yourself asking, “To which research lab should I apply?” do not look for the easy way out. Instead, evaluate your strengths and weaknesses, and choose a lab that will provide an environment in which you will thrive. Talk to faculty and current lab members, and heed their words of advice and caution. It’s not just a matter of which lab will provide the greatest benefits at the lowest cost — what matters is where you can do the most to further both scientific research and your own professional development.