

How to Prepare a Successful REU Application

REU sites typically host only 10 students each summer, so they can be quite competitive. Needless to say, the programs at desirable locations like Stanford, for example, will get the most applications. Don't overlook what you might consider to be less prestigious institutions; the mentorship at some of the smaller schools will probably be much more hands-on. You should apply to several of them, but tailor your statement to each site.

The **STATEMENT OF INTEREST** should be about 2 – 3 pages, single spaced. An REU program might provide specific guidelines but if not, your statement should include:

- **your research interests**, which should be somewhat tailored to the individual program.

Many of the REU websites list participating faculty, and some list research areas. Do your homework and explore these sites. For these applications, you want to state your interest in maybe 2 or 3 of the research areas and say why you're interested in those areas. If research areas aren't listed but faculty are, state which faculty have research interests that mostly closely align with yours. You can conclude this section with a sentence that states that as an undergraduate you're still defining your interests, and you would be open to any available project.

You have to show that you've developed interests, but don't define them too narrowly. It's better to list a couple of interests, preferably in areas that are somewhat related. We get some really strong REU applications which faculty reject because they say "He looks great, but I just don't think he'd be interested in what I do." At the same time, if you list interests that are too general, faculty might think that you aren't focused enough.

- **any relevant research, academic, or work experience**

"Relevant" is the key word here: do not list experiences you are pretty sure have no relevance to the REU program. Coursework can be included if a course really sparked your interest in a research area. If you have research experience, you need to describe the project and describe any outcomes. You should also state what you learned. Did you learn methodology that could be applied to other research? Did you learn or use any software programs to get data or analyze it? Did you learn how to use any other instruments? If you had any specific challenges you might describe how you overcame them. If you can get a letter of recommendation from the faculty member you worked with, you should state his/her name when introducing this section. ("During the summer 2015, I conducted research on _____ under the guidance of Dr. John Smith here at CU-Boulder.")

If you don't have any research experience, you should state that. REUs are an opportunity to gain research experience, so prior research isn't necessary. However, if something has prevented you from participating in research, you should explain this. For example, if you have significant financial need and have to work regularly to pay for your education, you should definitely include this information.

- **your goals and how this particular REU will help you achieve them**

A lot of REUs have the stated goal of preparing students for graduate school. If you are interested in graduate school (either a master's or PhD), then you should state this. Otherwise you could say that you don't know whether you're interested in graduate

school and that you hope the REU experience can help you decide that. What is it about this particular REU that interests you? How can this REU contribute to your academic/professional development?

- **the qualities that you would contribute to benefit the REU program and its participants**

This is something that most students fail to include, but it can be very important. REU programs invest a significant investment of time and money in students, and faculty want students who are interested, enthusiastic, work well in a team, and are hard working. At the very least, you can add that you will bring a strong work ethic to any research team you join. Aim to strike a balance, letting reviewers get to know you through your statement, without including an excessive amount of personal information.

You will likely need to get **LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION** from **FACULTY**. If you've had research experience, you should get a letter from your research advisor. Here's how to ask a professor for a letter of recommendation:

Contact the faculty member (email is fine) about 3 or 4 weeks before the deadline, and ask if he/she would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for you supporting your applications to REU programs. You should list the REU programs to which you plan to apply and the application deadlines, and you should attach your CV (you can find guidelines for this on this website:

<http://www.colorado.edu/GraduateSchool/DiversityInitiative/graduates/ColoradoAdvantage.html>). You should also ask for a meeting with the professor to discuss your plans and address any questions. The professors will submit their letters directly, and if you see that they haven't been submitted, a polite way to send a reminder (say, one week before the deadline) is to email the prof, thank him/her again for agreeing to write the letter, and let him/her know that you have submitted your applications in advance of the February 10 application deadline (or whatever the application deadline date is).

After your applications have been submitted, be sure to thank the professors who have written letters for you. When you've heard the results of your efforts, send the faculty members an update, especially if you are accepted and plan to attend one of the programs. They will be glad to hear about it.

One thing you do NOT want to do is ask for letters of recommendation and then not follow through with the applications. Faculty have enough to do without sending out unnecessary letters.

ONCE YOU GET OFFERS...

If and when you get offers, you will be given a deadline to respond and accept or decline them. You may only accept **ONE** offer; do NOT accept an offer and then turn it down because of a better offer somewhere else – keep in mind that when you accept a program, other students are turned down. If you get an offer but haven't yet heard from your first choice program, find out what the deadline is to accept or decline the offer. Programs should give students at least a week to make a decision, and if that week comes and goes and you still haven't heard from your first choice program, you can ask for extension (you may or may not get it). You can also call your first choice program and let the director know you have another offer, and that program might be able to tell you something about your chances.