Finding an SIR Advisor

Students in the Student Inquiry and Research (SIR) program work independently, doing research to answer significant questions in areas of science, the arts, and the humanities. The first step of the program is to find an advisor and an investigation or research topic. As with research, the SIR student is expected to independently accomplish this task, with guidance from the SIR staff. Here are some basic steps and things you should do that will help you in this process.

1. **Don’t Procrastinate!** The deadline for signing on with an advisor is in mid-September, and this process takes time. Start **early** and be persistent in pursuing options and interests.

2. **Choose an area of interest that you want to study.**

3. **Find potential advisors** at IMSA or in the Chicago area that have a current interest in your area of interest. You can find ideas of investigations by searching past SIR abstracts on the SIR website: [https://www3.imsa.edu/learning/inquiry/Outcomes/SIR/Abstracts](https://www3.imsa.edu/learning/inquiry/Outcomes/SIR/Abstracts). Once you have identified a few names, find the potential advisor’s institution website. Do a literature search to see what this investigator has recently studied.

4. **Write your biography and introductory email.** In this document you should a) introduce yourself briefly; b) indicate what specific skills you have obtained, and how you obtained them (IMSA class, science fair, and so forth); c) indicate (demonstrate knowledge) that you know some specific information about what the research investigation is that you are applying for; d) tie these two things together, stating how your skills would be a benefit to this project. The SIR staff will be happy to review your emails and provide feedback before you send them. Biography examples are included in this document.

5. **Proof your emails!** No one is impressed by typographical errors and grammatical errors!

6. **Send out the email, to one investigator at a time.** Give the investigator 24 to 48 hours to respond. If there is no response, then you can either follow up with another email or a phone call. Be persistent but **polite.** Remember that these investigators (potential advisors) would be investing a significant amount of their time if they agree to take you on as an advisee.

7. If the investigator says “yes,” you must also say “yes.” It is not appropriate to tell the advisor that you have changed your mind, or that you will get back to him/her after you follow up on some other leads. At this point, you should get all of the contact information for the advisor (name, address, phone, email) to Dr. Scheppler (quella@imsa.edu). **Don’t fish!**

8. If the investigator says “no,” respond with a brief “thank you for your consideration” email, and move on to the next person on your list.

9. Investigation openings (advisors seeking SIR students) are posted regularly on the window outside the Grainger Center in the fall. Check these postings daily to see if there are any in your area of interest.

10. **Argonne National Laboratory** and **Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory** have very specific application procedures that you must follow. Do not directly contact staff at these facilities. Information about applying to ANL or FNAL will be emailed to you in late April or early May. Application does not assure placement, and if you apply to either of these places you are expected to accept that placement if offered. You may not apply elsewhere until you have a response. If you are not placed, we will do our best to assist you with finding another placement.

11. **Use IMSAloquium wisely.** The date is usually late April, and all IMSA students are expected to participate fully. The abstract book describing the investigations that IMSA students are currently undertaking will be posted on the SIR web site in early April. Use it to review areas of interest. Many off-campus advisors are present at IMSAloquium, and this is an opportune time for you to make an initial face-to-face approach, but you should email the potential advisor in advance to set up a meeting time at IMSAloquium. We suggest that you use the above process to find out more about specific investigations and investigators that interest you. Writing your brief biography before this point will also help you be organized, focused, and articulate.
12. **Begin approaching potential advisors in May and June.** Make an appointment to visit them over the summer, and perhaps spend a week (or more) working with them during the summer to increase your familiarity with their work. This can be especially important with lab-based investigations, as one day each week is not optimal when some experiments require multiple days to complete. **Summer SIR credit** is available, providing you meet SIR standards and program requirements.

**SIR Recommendation**
If you are seeking an off-campus SIR placement, it may be beneficial for you to have one recommendation on file in the SIR office. We have a simple form that IMSA teachers can complete and email to Dr. Scheppler. Do not wait until May, when your teachers are very busy, to ask them to complete this. You can ask the SIR office/Dr. J to send this recommendation along with some SIR information to potential advisors.

**Brief Biography**
Write about yourself and your skills and abilities. What did you learn in your MSI investigation? In your classes at IMSA? Other relevant experiences? What are your objectives in obtaining an investigation with this specific advisor? What career are you interested in pursuing? How can a placement with this advisor assist you with this? Remember – **Demonstrate**, don’t tell.

**Sample Biography**
My name is Joe Smith (jsmith@imsa.edu) and I am a junior at IMSA. I am inquiring about a Student Inquiry and Research investigation related to physics, electronics, and/or engineering. I am very interested in all types of physics and math and am open to many areas. Last year, I took my first physics class and I thoroughly enjoyed it. The mix of math and science was very fun to me. I am very interested in exploring many new areas in physics as I am creative and love to learn about new things. This year I am taking an Advanced Physics class and an Electronics class. I am also planning on taking an engineering class my senior year. I work fairly well with computers and I learn quickly when it comes to using new programs. I have some experience in Java programming and wouldn't mind doing something that involved programming. I am looking forward to working hard this year.

Working with an SIR advisor is a tremendous gift from them. They want serious and hard-working students, but they really do want to support you and encourage your interests in their field. Occasionally you may find that the experience is not what you expected. Maybe it’s much better than expected, or maybe it’s not. In any case, you should accept it for a learning experience and try to make the best opportunity from it that you can. Many things have a way of coming back and rewarding you when you least expect it.

**Email tips**
- Use your IMSA email address for credibility
- Use a good email subject line
- Don’t fish!