What’s It Like to be a Research Assistant?

Morgan Quist, Erica Heetderks, Emily Heitsch

For a lot of undergraduates, research is a whole new area of academia, and many large institutions don’t offer research opportunities for undergraduate students. Calvin College, however, is small enough that undergraduate research is an option for interested students. Many faculty at Calvin lead research projects in their area of study, and often they employ research assistants in their projects. Women Supporting Women (WSW), a research project led by Dr. Mary Molewyk Doornbos, is conducted through Calvin College’s Nursing Department. Three research assistants (2 seniors, 1 junior) help to implement the study.

But what does the role of a research assistant involve? It looks different depending on the nature of the research study, the specific department, the number of assistants, and the leading researcher. Being a research assistant for WSW involves a variety of tasks.

- **Weekly meetings:** The WSW team meets on a regular basis (e.g. Friday afternoons) to keep in contact, go over new updates, brainstorm new ideas, trouble shoot problems, and set a plan for the following week. These meetings are typically 1-2 hours and involve the primary researcher and the 3 assistants.
- **Recruitment:** In order to have a successful research study, it’s important to have enough participants involved! Research assistants help faculty recruit participants by calling potential clients and informing them about the upcoming research study.
- **Data entry:** WSW measures participants’ depression/anxiety scores, knowledge of depression/anxiety, and level of empowerment. Once the data from pre-tests, post-tests, and six month follow ups have been collected, research assistants create a code book and enter the data into a statistical program. This allows researchers to analyze the data, look for trends, and come up with results.
- **Organizational details:** Research assistants help with details such as printing necessary handouts, organizing childcare and transportation for participants, making reminder calls to participants, translating materials into Spanish to promote cultural sensitivity, and e-mailing updates to all those involved in implementing the WSW program (communication is huge!).
- **Gaining the tools of a researcher:** When results are ready to be shared with the public, research assistants can be involved in disseminating the information. The WSW research assistants have participated in departmental seminars and helped publish articles in research journals. Research assistants also learn to conduct literature reviews and qualitative analysis as well as discuss research strategies.
- **Hands-on involvement:** As a research assistant, you have the opportunity to form relationships with study participants through face-to-face interaction in a community education groups.
- **Exploring your passions:** Each research assistant brings their own gifts and passions to the team. There are opportunities within research to explore your unique interests. Our current and past research assistants have been able to cultivate foreign language skills and/or artistic gifts in new ways.
The opportunity to be involved in research is a unique and rewarding experience. If you are considering Calvin and are interested in research, ask faculty about research opportunities in your field of study!