I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Avery Heo, a third-year student at the University of Michigan. She is studying neuroscience and plans to attend medical school after taking a gap year or two.

As a sophomore Avery participated in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, or UROP. This program is offered through the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA), and students from colleges all around the nation are welcome to apply, helping create far-reaching partnerships between undergraduate students and expert faculty members. She tells me that her favorite part of this program was how it was structured. Each student has a peer facilitator to help mentor them through the process, and the students submit reflection pieces to check in and make sure that they are enjoying the research experience. She says she also really enjoyed the different workshops she was able to attend, especially the resume-building workshop. It was through UROP that Avery found a research lab at the Kresge Hearing Research Institute, where she works to establish a behavioral test for hidden hearing loss in guinea pigs.

When I asked why she chose to participate in undergraduate research, Avery's response was twofold. "As classes become more advanced and more specialized," she tells me, "it is really rewarding to be able to use the information that I am learning about in class and apply it to real projects." Research labs, such as those through UROP, give many students the opportunity to do just as Avery describes: take class concepts and use them in real-life scenarios. She also tells me that working in a research lab gives her great experience and preparation for her future in medical school.

I was very curious to understand how working in a research lab during the COVID-19 pandemic differs from how it was working there the year before. Avery tells me that while many aspects are different, several features that are the same. Instead of attending her weekly journal club and lab meetings in person, she signs onto Zoom and participates virtually. "A lot of the data analysis that we do can also be done remotely which is really nice," she tells me. While her meetings have all been moved to a virtual format, Avery is still able to go into her lab twice a week and work in person. "This year in particular," she says, "it is especially nice to have a set routine of days that I go to the lab, and I really like having something in-person when all my other classes are completely online."

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I know being a research assistant while taking a full load of academic credits can be very time-consuming and overwhelming. Because she is planning on attending medical school after she graduates from U of M, Avery is also balancing studying for the MCAT on top of her research and classwork. So, I asked her what her tips and tricks are to staying on top of her workload. "Backpacking days before your registration date is the key," she tells me. "I always make sure to leave two to three days either completely open or with fewer hours in class to make sure that I can go into the lab at least four hours on those days." This past semester, Avery left her Mondays and Fridays class-free and went to her lab from nine in the morning to one in the afternoon.

At the end of our conversation, I asked Avery if she had any advice for both incoming and current students who want to get involved with undergraduate research. "Don't be afraid to cold email," she says. "Reaching out to faculty is so important because no one will know that you are looking for an opportunity in a lab unless you contact them." Moreover, it is always possible that labs are looking for undergraduates and might just not be publicly posting about the opening. She also says that when you cold email a research faculty member, make sure to have an updated resume and good explanation as to why you are interested in research and in that project in particular. "If you are an incoming student or a current freshman," Avery says, "you should definitely look into participating in UROP because that's what helped me make my own connections to research opportunities on campus."