

Researchers

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Dear Randomista: How to get started as a young researcher



Over at the [World Bank Development Impact](#) blog, David McKenzie posts a question from a reader and some advice from Dean Karlan and Dean Yang.

As a young (I'd like to think creative) researcher, I would like to work with development NGOs, but I do not know the best way to approach these groups. Do you have any suggestions on how to get started in this world?

Here's [Dean Karlan's](#) advice:

My advice to graduate students keen on doing field work varies greatly depending on their situation, interests, and language skills. A few paths though stand out: (a) if you're at a school with faculty doing field work, then try to get involved in a project or two that can take you to the field, and have some free time when in the field to meet with other organizations to try to develop your own research, (b) internet! When I was in graduate school, I posted on the various listservers about microfinance to find partners, and to this day I'm working with some leads that came out of those posts. (c) IPA. One of my goals in setting up Innovations for Poverty Action was to help students exactly in that situation. We have a huge network, infrastructure in many countries, great staff in the USA to help bring in new researchers and maintain high quality of field work. Email Alana Rosenberg, arosenberg@poverty-action.org, if you are interested in finding out how IPA can help you locate projects.

Here's [Dean Yang](#):

I've found that the most effective way to establish new collaborations with partners overseas is simply to go there and talk to as many people as possible.

This is probably easiest to do if you are going to a country for some other kind of work such as field research with a professor. Once you are in a country working on something, it is easy to find time and make up reasons to meet with a variety of potential partners, even if the purpose of the meeting is only vaguely related to your current work. For example, my first research project in Malawi was on weather insurance. When traveling there for the work I met with a wide variety of institutions about the weather insurance project, but always made sure I devoted part of each conversation to exploring opportunities for future projects. In the years since I've parlayed those initial contacts into research collaborations on credit and savings.

While one needs to be careful about distractions from research, even consulting or non-academic work can be a useful foot in the door when trying to meet new organizations in a particular country. In the summer after I finished my PhD, I took on a consultancy for a think tank in El Salvador during which I visited the country and wrote a policy piece on migration and development. When gathering information to write the piece I met with a wide variety of institutions interested in migration and remittances. One of the contacts from my research there eventually became the CEO of the country's largest bank, and was my entry-point a few years later for setting up a randomized control trial on remittances and savings among Salvadoran migrants in the U.S.

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