Successful admission to the Graduate School at SUNY ESF depends in part on identifying a graduate advisor - called a “Major Professor” in ESF lingo - who is willing to work with you throughout your graduate program. Thus, an essential part of applying for admission to SUNY ESF involves researching potential advisors and reaching to several faculty members who seem like they might be a good fit as your Major Professor. We know that this process can seem daunting! Here are a few tips.

- First, find the program(s) that most closely aligns with your interests. This will require identifying both a department (for example, Environmental and Forest Biology) and an Area of Study (for example, Conservation Biology). Make sure that the type of degree you are seeking (PhD or MS) is available in the Area of Study you have selected.
- Once you have located an Area of Study, skim through the bios of affiliated faculty members. Your MP must be affiliated with your chosen Area of Study. While skimming bios, ask yourself: does this professor’s research projects sound like once I would want to work on?
- After you have identified 2-3 potential Major Professors, it’s time to reach out and introduce yourself. Remember, this email is most likely your first interaction with a prospective advisor. You should use a formal style, addressing the professor as “Dr. X.” Key pieces of information to include about yourself include: your academic background, the name of the program you’re interested in, any prior research or relevant professional experience, and a sentence or two about why you think Dr. X would be a good fit as an advisor. In this email, you should clearly ask if Dr. X is accepting new advisees. You should also mention that you are applying to the Sloan Program, and that if accepted you would be funded through SIGP. This is very important - many faculty members have limited funding for graduate students, and will be more likely to agree to work with you if you have access to funding through a different source.
- The best introductory emails will reflect your familiarity with Dr. X’s work (for example, referring to their current research projects or past publications) and will also demonstrate that you have given considerable thought to your own goals and interests related to graduate study - the more specific you are able to be, the better. For example, it is preferable to write, “my summer internship with the US Forest Service has led me to be interested researching tribal co-management of forests” than “I am interested in learning more about environmental management.”
- While this may seem like a lot of information, try to keep your introductory email brief. If you don’t receive a response within 1-2 weeks, it is appropriate to send a follow-up email expressing your interest once again. If you don’t receive a response to this 2nd email, consider reaching out to other prospective MPs.
- Once you have received a positive response from a potential MP, you can set up a time to talk on the phone - or you can send a longer email with more details about your background and research interests, and more questions for your potential advisor. At this point, you should ask questions that will help you figure out if this potential MP is a “good fit.” This is a very subjective determination, and will require you to reflect on what qualities are most important to you in an advisor. Are you most interested in alignment of research interests and opportunities? Or are the personal qualities of your advisor more
important to you? Remember that your MP is someone with whom you will work closely over the course of several years!

- At this point in the process, you may also want to speak with other current or former students who have worked with Dr. X. You can ask Dr. X to put you in touch with their advisees, or you can ask staff at the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment for their assistance.

- Although the process of communicating with potential advisors is time consuming, you should try to speak with at least 2-3 potential MPs before coming to a decision about who you would like to work with. Once you have decided on a potential MP who seems like the best fit, you should communicate that preference explicitly, and ask if it’s ok that you list this person as your first choice MP in your graduate application.

- Remember to thank all the faculty members you speak with for their time!

- If you have more questions, feel free to reach out to Dr. Robin Kimmerer at rkimmer@esf.edu.