Laboratory Assistant Job Description

Undergraduate Laboratory Program
St. John's College (Annapolis, MD)

The Area

You will work within St. John's College's undergraduate laboratory program, where students engage directly with experiments in biology, chemistry, physics, and related fields alongside close reading and discussion of primary scientific texts.

Laboratory classes are small, tutor-led, and span three years of study. Across all levels, the labs emphasize careful preparation, hands-on experimentation, thoughtful observation, and clear communication. The program supports a high volume of weekly classes and depends on advance planning, shared responsibility, and continuous improvement to function well.

The Role

As a Laboratory Assistant, you support the smooth, thoughtful operation of undergraduate laboratory classes by preparing practica and demonstrations in advance, collaborating with tutors, and maintaining laboratory spaces and materials.

You report directly to the Director of Laboratory and work closely with tutors leading individual laboratory sections. Tutors guide class discussion and pedagogy; you provide operational, technical, and preparatory support that makes that teaching possible.

This role is both practical and developmental. In addition to supporting labs, you receive professional coaching and mentoring from the Director of Laboratory focused on building experimental judgment, communication skills, and professional habits that will serve you well in graduate study, STEM careers, medicine, or other paths.

Why Be a Laboratory Assistant?

Being a Laboratory Assistant means taking part in the actual work that makes scientific inquiry possible.

Much of your work happens before class begins, when experiments are prepared, tested, questioned, and refined—so that when students and tutors arrive, the focus can be on observation, measurement, and understanding rather than last-minute improvisation.

As a Laboratory Assistant, you may help prepare experiments such as:

- Observing embryonic development and living systems
- Weighing air, measuring equilibrium, and testing material composition
- Investigating motion, force, and energy through classical mechanics
- Building and testing electrical and magnetic apparatus
- Measuring the speed of light through electromagnetic experiments

- Probing atomic phenomena, optics, and the limits of measurement
- Conducting genetics and evolution practica involving real organisms and microscopy

The laboratory program values preparation that tests assumptions and reveals weaknesses early. In this role, you learn to approach scientific work not as an exercise in persuasion, but as a disciplined attempt to discover where your understanding—and your experiments—might fail, and to improve them accordingly.

Laboratory Areas You May Support

Laboratory Assistants may support one or more of the following areas, depending on program needs and experience:

Freshman Laboratory

- Observing Living Beings
- Measurement and Equilibrium
- Constitution of Bodies

Junior Laboratory

- Mechanics
- Electricity and Magnetism
- Maxwell

Senior Laboratory

- Atoms and Measurement
- Genetics and Evolution

Onboarding expectations are consistent across all assistants, with increasing technical and conceptual demands at higher levels.

Responsibilities

Advance Preparation & Planning

- Prepare laboratory practica and demonstrations well in advance of scheduled classes, typically with plans understood at least one week ahead.
- Review procedures, test setups, and ensure required materials and equipment are available and functional.
- Take ownership of preparation timelines rather than relying on last-minute coordination.
- Navigate room availability and shared spaces as part of responsible planning.

Communication & Collaboration

- Communicate proactively with tutors to confirm the intent, flow, and timing of upcoming labs.
- Work in close collaboration with the Director of Laboratory to troubleshoot problems and improve systems.
- Surface questions, uncertainties, or potential problems early so they can be addressed thoughtfully.
- Participate in regular coordination meetings (e.g., weekly meetings during lunch hour).
- When assisting with laboratories you are currently taking, participate in additional preparation and check-ins as expected.

In-Lab Support

- Assist during laboratory sessions as needed by supporting setup, demonstrations, and equipment use.
- Maintain a calm, prepared presence that supports the tutor's leadership.
- Be able to explain what an experiment is doing and why, even when results differ from expectations.
- Refer pedagogical decisions to the tutor and operational or safety concerns to the Director of Laboratory.

Documentation & Continuous Improvement

- Take clear, useful notes during preparation and after lab sessions to document what worked, what didn't, and what could be improved.
- Complete short forms or other documentation tools to share updates and issues.
- Contribute to building shared institutional knowledge that supports future labs and the development of a Laboratory Assistant Handbook.

Laboratory Care & Chore Hours

- Participate in weekly Chore Hours as a required part of the role.
- Clean and reset lab benches, return equipment to proper storage, dispose of trash, and leave rooms neat (e.g., chairs pushed in, blinds aligned).
- Submit work orders or reports for broken equipment or room issues.
- Follow defined cleaning and organization standards, with additional details provided during onboarding.

Professional Development & Special Projects

- Complete one special project each academic year, defined collaboratively with the Director of Laboratory, that supports the labs and aligns with your interests or career goals.

- Bring individual skills (e.g., organization, photography, documentation, technical interests, other interests) to support lab improvement where appropriate.
- Seek out additional sources (library materials, external references, professional organizations) to deepen your understanding as an experimentalist.

Job Qualifications

Required

- Enrollment as an undergraduate or graduate student at St. John's College.
- Willingness to prepare work in advance, communicate clearly, and take responsibility for assigned tasks.
- Ability to work thoughtfully with laboratory materials involving chemicals, electrical systems, and experimental apparatus.
- Reliability, organization, and attention to detail.

Preferred

- Prior experience with laboratory coursework or hands-on experimentation.
- Interest in STEM fields, graduate study, or technical careers.
- Comfort asking questions early and documenting work clearly.

Physical & Environmental Expectations

This role is performed in active laboratory and classroom environments. Laboratory Assistants occasionally lift, move, or reposition laboratory equipment, supplies, or furniture as part of preparation, setup, and cleanup.

Assistants are expected to use good judgment, plan tasks in advance, and ask for assistance or use appropriate tools rather than attempting to lift items unsafely. Training and guidance are provided to support safe, confident hands-on work in the laboratory.

How Success in This Role Is Assessed

Your work is evaluated based on:

- Reliability of advance preparation and planning
- Clarity and timeliness of communication
- Quality of documentation and follow-through
- Care taken during setup, cleanup, and lab maintenance
- Willingness to surface questions or problems early

- Growth in judgment, responsibility, and professionalism over time

Feedback is ongoing and intended to support learning, development, and increasing responsibility. Strong performance and clear documentation enable the Director of Laboratory to provide meaningful mentoring and professional references for future career opportunities when appropriate.

Time Commitment & Appointment

- Academic-year appointment.
- Hours follow a fairly steady weekly rhythm, with occasional weeks requiring additional preparation.
- Most paid hours are typically spent on hands-on preparation, setup, documentation, and lab maintenance, with independent study supporting that work.
- Compensation is hourly and set by the College; details are shared during the hiring process.

Application Process

Applicants will be asked to submit:

- A résumé
- Names of three faculty references (preferably including a lab tutor)
- A short statement describing why you want to be a Laboratory Assistant
- A brief explanation of how this role supports your future goals
- A DISC assessment result (used to support mentoring and team development)

Equal Opportunity Statement

St. John's College is an Equal Opportunity Employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or any other protected status.

Our Laboratory Science Philosophy

> "Rhetoric" is trying to convince others that you're right.
>
> "Science" is trying—by every conceivable means—to convince others that you're wrong, and failing.

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Figure 1: Apply here!