

Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles

Navigating the Graduate School Interview

Planning Phase

- What are your short, mid, and long-term goals? (e.g., MS vs. PhD, career plans)
- What are your specific research interests (e.g., field, lab, computational, or combo)?
[How do I figure this out? Consider which classes, topics, or projects excited you most as an undergrad; ask faculty/staff mentors or current grads or undergrads involved in research for tips; attend professional meetings; read research papers on topics of interest and identify source labs.]
- Do you have any PI/mentor preferences (e.g., reputation, financially supportive, mentoring style, personal identities or expressed allyship, etc.)?
- Any preferences for institution type (e.g., large, small, R1, R2, PUI, minority serving)?
- Any geographic preferences or restrictions (e.g., local, in state, US only, international, socially progressive/conservative, affordability, climate, etc.)?

Introduction & Inquiry Letter (Email)

What to include:

- (1) Degrees earned or where you will be graduating from and by what date
- (2) Description of your research interests (general to specific)
- (3) Brief description of prior research experiences, including institutions or organizations, PIs/mentors/leads, and duration
- (4) Brief description of why you wish to join each lab, focused particularly on mutual research interests and how that lab would help you meet your short through long-term goals; could also include: proximity or access to habitats or organisms, reputation or identity of PI, reputation of grad program and/or institution, funding opportunities, advice from mentor(s) or colleague(s), or personal reasons
- (5) What you would contribute to the lab and program (research and analytical skills or experiences, interpersonal skills, unique facets of identity or diversity)
- (6) CV
- (7) Unofficial transcripts (optional; relevant for competitive recruitment awards and scholarships; if not included, note GPA when listing degrees earned/in progress)

Do not include:

- (1) A generic message that does not specifically address the details above
- (2) Emphasis on degrees or expertise irrelevant to research conducted by that lab
- (3) A message much more than a half-page long
- (4) Typos or grammatical errors (have a trusted mentor or colleague review)



Introductory Meeting (Zoom or in Person)

The format of these meetings, which may last from 15–60 min, varies widely among PIs. Instead, or separately, some PIs have prospective applicants join lab meetings via Zoom or meet in small groups or one-on-one with current students, postdocs. In each situation, generally be prepared to:

- (1) Restate information from your Introduction Letter (typically #s 1–5)
- (2) Describe your strengths, areas you would like to develop as a grad student, and how both align well with the lab
- (3) Emphasize what you would contribute to the lab and broader grad community
- (4) Ask questions that are important to you and not readily available on the PI, program, or institutional websites (see pages 3–4 for examples)
- (5) Follow up with a thank-you note to the PI and anyone else you met, citing specific things you learned and admired about them and the program and your continued interest in joining the lab

In-Person Meeting (e.g., Recruitment Day or Weekend)

The format for recruitment events also varies among labs and programs. They can last from a half day to an entire weekend. In most cases, you will live with current grads in the program during your stay but occasionally with your would-be PI. You will be given a schedule for small group or one-on-one meetings with the grad coordinator, other PIs in the program, and current grads. There are typically grad-only social events (meals, facility tours, local hikes, bars). Again, generally be prepared to:

- (1) Be your best self; others will judge how well you would integrate and get along with members of the current grad cohort
- (2) Read up on those you will meet so your conversations can focus on shared interests and experiences; learn and remember their names
- (3) Restate everything in your initial in-person meeting with the PI and/or lab
- (4) Ask questions that are not readily available on the PI, program, or institutional websites (see separate HO)
- (5) Take notes and follow up with emails to those who offered further information, resources, etc. on topics of interest
- (6) Send a gracious and individualized thank-you note to everyone you met (especially those hosting you in their homes) citing specific things you learned and admired about them and the program, your professional and personal fit with the broader community, and continued interest in joining the lab and program



Interview Questions for Prospective Advisors & Grad Programs

Many PIs provide guidelines for prospective students on their academic websites. Read those carefully to avoid asking for information that is readily available. Aside from the PI, who may give you an hour (rarely more and often less), interview appointments are typically in 15–30-min time slots. Consequently, creating a prioritized list of questions within each category below will make the best use of everyone's limited time. Some questions are better answered by current or recent graduates from the lab vs. the PI or other faculty. If granted the opportunity, ask the same questions to different groups (PI, other faculty, program coordinator, current and former grads, etc.). If the responses are similar, you can trust the information as widely applicable. But if responses differ, that suggests individualistic experiences to similar sets of circumstances.

Lab Culture | Mentoring Philosophy, Style, & Expectations | Prior Successes

- Can you describe the lab culture and its major strengths?
- What is your mentoring philosophy or mentoring style?
- What are your expectations for graduate students? Are there any competencies or special skills would you like your students to develop during their time in your lab?
- In general, do you assign students to specific projects, work with them to develop an idea, or have them create their projects entirely on their own?
- What ongoing or forthcoming projects are you particularly excited about?
- How often do you meet with your students? Are these group or one-on-one meetings? What do you typically discuss? What is your preferred mode of communication?
- Are there other labs in the program or at other institutions with which you and your grads routinely collaborate or interact? Who are the faculty most commonly serving on the committees of your students? [Check them out too, as they may become important sources of support in the future.]
- What are your thoughts about work–life balance?
- How have you supported former students who identify with a gender, race, ethnicity, and/or other identity that is different from your own?
- How long does it take for grads to finish in your lab (mean, range)? Have any students left your lab without finishing and, if so, what were the circumstances? Have you ever asked any students to leave your lab and, if so, what were the circumstances?
- How do you determine if one of your grads is struggling and what might you do about it?
- What jobs, careers, grad programs, postdocs, etc. have former grads in your lab pursued after earning their degrees?



Culture of Program & Institution

- What are the department/program strengths? Weaknesses? What would you say is the reputation of the grad program from the perspective of an external reviewer?
- What courses in the program do grads enjoy and which do they fear, avoid, or dislike?
- Are grads, faculty, staff, and undergrads generally happy at your institution, program, and living in this region/town/city?
- Are grads generally supportive of one another and is there a sense of community among them in the department or program spanning across labs (vs. siloed)? Do the grads engage in off-campus socializing (e.g., shared extracurricular activities)? Are there regular opportunities for social interactions between grads and faculty?
- What is the campus attitude/atmosphere toward diversity, equity, and inclusion? Has there been a recent program assessment of the success of grads from historically marginalized groups relative to traditionally served grads?
- What things do you encourage visitors to do when they visit your campus, region/town/city?
- Have grads from where I come from experienced any problems transitioning to life on your campus, region/town/city?
- Are there any people in your department or program who you dislike or avoid? Why?

Financial Opportunities & Concerns

- Do grads at your institution belong to a union? If so, please describe.
- Are there tuition waivers? If so, what do they cover? What is their duration? Are they contingent on any expectations or conditions? Do they cover non-resident fees? How do I establish residency in your state (if applicable)? Do grads receive health insurance?
- What are the known or likely sources of funding for my project? Will I be expected to use personal funds if I/we are unsuccessful securing extramural funding?
- Are there TA/GA/RA positions available in the department or program? If so, are they assigned or can grads select their preferred courses, days, and/or times?
- Is your lab currently receiving extramural funding for any projects? Are there any grant proposals in review or soon to be submitted? How do you anticipate the funding situation in your lab changing during my time as a graduate student?
- What is the general cost of living in the region? What is the housing situation near campus in terms of pricing, availability, and sharing homes or apartments with roommates? Are there campus or program resources (e.g., web-based bulletin boards) for grads seeking housing or roommates?
- Are there campus or program funds available for grads to travel and/or register for professional meetings? Are there campus or program funds to support graduate research? Are there other forms of financial aid, awards, honors, or scholarships commonly received by grads in your program?

