

## FAQ for prospective PEEC students – Fall 2022

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### 1) How are students in PEEC supported?

All PhD students are admitted to the Program with the guarantee that you will receive both a stipend (9-month appointment) and tuition waiver for 5 years, provided you continue to make satisfactory progress on your degree (MS students receive this offer for 2 years). Stipends and tuition waivers are provided through a combination of fellowships (external and university), research assistantships (RAs) and teaching assistantships (TAs).

### 2) How many students are on TA vs. RA vs. Fellowship?

Typically, approximately 10 students are on TA and 1 or 2 students are on a Program RA each semester. We currently have 13 students with fellowships. The remaining students are supported by their advisor on an RA.

### 3) What will my annual salary be?

That depends. Students who are supported by the Program on either a 50% TA or Program RA currently receive \$2,550 a month for 9 months (for a total of \$22,950). Students who are paid an RA from their advisor's research grant receive the same stipend. Students on fellowship earn what the fellowship pays.

### 4) What about summer salary?

The Program does not guarantee summer support. Some advisors have funds to pay their students summer salary (which can be for 1 or 2 summer months). Some fellowships are paid over 12 months. There are a few competitive awards for summer stipends (<http://sib.illinois.edu/graduate/grants>).

### 5) How much does it cost to live in Champaign-Urbana?

The University's Living Wage estimate for a graduate student is \$18,984 for a 50% appointment on a 9-month service basis. You can view Graduate resident costs at <http://www.osfa.illinois.edu/cost/graduate-professional-resident-cost>. Our program is listed under General Programs and then Chem/Life Sciences. Remember to take into account that tuition and most fees are waived provided you continue to make satisfactory progress on your degree.

### 6) What if I don't finish in 5 years (or 2 for a M.S.)?

The current policy states that students who require more than two years to complete the M.S. degree or five years to complete the Ph.D. degree must submit a written petition to the Graduate Committee, supported by their Advisory Committee or Doctoral Committee, to be considered for an additional year of support. Note that this applies only to students who are seeking TA or RA support *from the Program* in their 6<sup>th</sup> (or 3<sup>rd</sup> for M.S.) year. Students who are in good standing and who have a fellowship or a grant-supported RA do not have to petition to receive funding for that final year. Historically, all requests for a 6<sup>th</sup> (or 3<sup>rd</sup> for M.S.) year of support have been granted, but this is contingent on availability of funding.

### 7) What are the requirements for graduation?

There are both Program requirements and Graduate College requirements for graduation. See the Program handbook: <https://go.grad.illinois.edu/handbook>

### 8) How will my progress be evaluated?

Progress will be evaluated both by your committee and the Program. Each spring you will fill out an on-line form detailing your accomplishments over the past year and setting goals for the next. You will receive feedback on your progress both from your advisor and the Program Director. Please also see the Program handbook for a guide to benchmarks, <https://peec.illinois.edu/handbook/>.

**9) What are the fellowship opportunities?**

The Graduate College employs Dr. Vickery as the Director of External Fellowships, a position dedicated exclusively to helping graduate students win national and international fellowships. To help students gain proficiency in this mode of writing, Dr. Vickery conducts workshops throughout the year and works one-on-one with students to help them refine their proposals. The Graduate College's database of fellowships is listed here: <https://grad.illinois.edu/fellowships/about>. In addition, during your orientation seminar, we work with you on submitting a fellowship or grant application.

**10) How will my research be funded?**

This depends on your advisor. Some advisors fully support their student's research, whereas others expect students to gain their own research grants. The Program does provide limited summer support for research which is awarded on a competitive basis. There are also funds available through both the Program and Graduate College for travel to national and international meetings. This link: <http://sib.illinois.edu/graduate/grants> lists additional grant opportunities.

**11) Do I get to pick my advisor or will one be assigned? Can I change my advisor during my MS or PhD?**

Acceptance letters typically will specify an advisor, based on feedback received from both the faculty and the student. The Program aims to be as flexible as possible, and that includes allowing students to be co-advised or change advisors during their program should it become necessary.

**12) Will I belong to a Union?**

Maybe, it depends on your appointment. For more information see <http://www.uigeo.org/>

**13) What health care coverage can I expect?**

See <http://www.grad.illinois.edu/current/health>. Health insurance is required, either through the University or by purchasing a comparable plan.

**14) Where can I find out more about the Program and University?**

See the PEEC website here: <http://peec.illinois.edu/>

See the Graduate College website here: <http://www.grad.illinois.edu/>

See the School of Integrative Biology Graduate Student webpage here: <http://sib.illinois.edu/graduate.htm>

## **Questions to Ask as a Prospective Grad Student, Post-doc, or Faculty member**

(Source: Ecological Society of America)

The application processes for graduate schools, post-docs, and faculty positions are not transparent. Every program, department, and even advisor is different. Of course, finding the right project that interests and inspires you should be of utmost importance, but beyond that many factors could impact your happiness and success. Expectations, support, and requirements are highly variable, as are salaries and benefits. The following is a list compiled after soliciting the Ecolog listserv in January, 2011. It is undoubtedly not a complete list, but should at least help get you started thinking about what you would like to know about the next few to many years of your life. My own two cents is that the most important information you will likely get will be from your future peers, be they current graduate students, current post-docs, or current new faculty. These people know what they are talking about.

Compiled by Kyla Dahlin (Stanford U.), Aurora MacRae-Crerar (U. of Pennsylvania), Zurijanne Kelley (zjoww.wordpress.com), Candan Soykan (NRC, Southwest Fisheries Science Center), Peter Alaimo (Seattle U.) and many other anonymous contributors.

### **For Prospective Graduate Students (& Post-Docs)**

Ask yourself:

- Can I work well with this faculty member for 5 or 6 years on a day-to-day basis, and have the work be of good quality, and not cause myself undue stress?
- Do I find the work of the lab and my proposed project interesting and compelling?
- Are the logistics in place to support my work adequately to successfully complete my degree?
- Throughout the process- Does the advisor share information easily, or do you have to ask specific and direct questions to get any feedback? How the prospective advisor acts when you first meet and /or interview are great indicators of how they will act as an advisor.

### **Ask your potential advisor:**

- What qualities or experience type do you look for in a graduate student?
- How many other students do you currently have? Where are they in their programs?
- Are you new, nearing retirement, or taking a sabbatical soon? Are you tenured? If not, where in the process are you?
- How available are you for consultations? What kind of management or guidance style do you think you have? What is your mentoring style? How often do you typically meet with graduate students?
- Do you have regular lab meetings? What are they like?
- How much does the professor know about funding opportunities, course requirements, etc.? If not much, they might not know other important details that would help you along the way.
- Do you expect to be at this institution for the next X years? Do you have any plans to leave this university? If offered a job at a more prestigious University or one closer to your preferred place to live, would you leave your current university?
- Is the advisor looking for someone to work on a specific project? If so, what are the expectations?
- What is your funding situation currently and in the near future?
- Do you have a grant or other resources to support my research project?
- Will I be expected to TA throughout grad school, or do you have salary support for some or all of my time?
- Will we, or can we, co-write grants to expand/support my research? If we're depending on those, and they're not funded, is there a backup plan?
- What is your policy on students/post-docs listed as first authors on their manuscripts/ reports/ publications?
- What are your past students doing now? How long did they take to graduate?

Funding questions will give you a sense of how entrepreneurial you will have to be in seeking outside funds, as well as how independent you can be in devising a research project. Lack of funds does not necessarily mean a bad fit, just that you're going to have to work harder for your project, you're going to have to think harder and deeper more quickly. That can be good--if you succeed, you have an invaluable set of experiences to take with you into post-docs and faculty jobs--you know how to get grants, you know how to devise a project. But, it can be scary and stressful. So you need to know how risk tolerant you are.

Figure out if you have someone who will meet your needs--one person may find a very hands-on weekly meeting approach great for scientific growth, while another finds it completely stifling. Some faculty can be bullies, some are very nice, some ignore you, some will practically smother you. Know what you can take, what your lines are.

**Ask current graduate students (in your prospective lab and beyond):**

- Speak to a current or former advisee if possible- find out what it's like to work with them, how much freedom you have in designing your project, if they're a hands-off advisor or micromanager...
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professor (mentoring, administrative, research, interpersonal communication and ability to work with colleagues)?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the department, school, college and University?
- What is the general working atmosphere at the school?
- How does your professor get along with other faculty members and students?
- What are the other professors in the department like?
- How supportive/ helpful/ friendly is the administration at the University?
- How effective/ useful/ well equipped is the library?
- Do faculty members interact with their students both in professional and informal settings?
- How is the general social atmosphere of the lab/ department? Do people share equipment and supplies well, or does everyone have their own separate supplies?
- Do grad students generally hang outside of the lab, or do people have very separate social lives?
- How easy/hard is it to collaborate with other labs?
- What is the thing that stresses you out most about your advisor?
- What is the thing that you most appreciate about your advisor?
- How well supported do you feel as a grad student (financially, intellectually...)

**Ask administrators:**

- Specifically, what/how much cost is the student responsible for? (For example, tuition waivers often don't cover student fees, which can often be \$1000 or more per semester)
- What scholarships are available through the college, and what are the application deadlines/ requirements?
- What kind of careers will this program prepare me for?
- What have other students gone on to do after graduating from this program? (If the administrators don't know, that says something, too.)
- Will funding be ensured throughout the term of the degree? Or, will the student need to be writing grants to procure it?
- What knowledge and skills will a student in this program graduate with?
- Are there course requirements? Is the curriculum likely to change soon?
- Are students guaranteed funding (via teaching or research assistantships) while in good standing in the program?
- What is the mean/median time to graduation?

Bug Gwen, at Wordpress.com, wrote a great article called "Choosing a Graduate Program and Advisor" at:

<https://membracid.wordpress.com/2011/06/26/choosing-a-graduate-program-and-advisor/>

More helpful hints from the Ecological Society of America:

<https://www.esa.org/career-development/apply-and-get-into-graduate-school/>