

# Frequently Asked Questions about Applying to Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at UC Irvine

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**Target audience:** STEM students, first generation graduate students, prospective graduate students applying for the doctoral program in Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at UC Irvine.

## Glossary:

REU - Research Experiences for Undergraduates, [NSF funded program](#)

LOR - Letter of Recommendation

Scientific Conference: An event where researchers and scientists get together to present and discuss their work. It is a good place to network with labs that you might potentially apply to for grad school, and a good place to learn about different programs and get information about fee waivers for applications. Many programs have booths where you can gather information and talk with representatives from that institution.

Stipend: A paycheck that you will receive bi-weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly etc. that is not based on the hours you spend on the work you are doing (it is like a salaried paycheck).

NSF - [National Science Foundation](#)

PI - Principal Investigator: The director and lead researcher of an academic laboratory (a professor).

## QUESTIONS

**I am not confident in my record. Should I bother applying?**

- **Yes. The only way for one to absolutely ensure they won't get into the program is to not apply. Do not self-select against yourself beforehand.**

**Should I engage in research as an undergraduate to prepare for graduate school?**

- **Yes. Research experience matters:** If possible, get involved in research either at your university (at least a couple of quarters/semesters) or at a summer research internship that hopefully provides you with a stipend or other kind of funding. Yes, you can get all expenses covered AND get paid to do research during a summer program.
  - Don't be afraid to ask professors or instructors about where to find opportunities. Plan on applying to these programs. They want a diverse array of students and are not only looking for students with top grades and experience from well-known universities. The point of undergraduate research programs is to get people exposed to research.

- They are often funded as “Research Experience for Undergraduates” (REU). The applications for such programs usually close in the fall or winter, so search for them the summer BEFORE you want to apply to them. Some programs prefer students doing their first REU over those with significant experience. If you have no idea how to get started, you can search for NSF-funded programs here: <https://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/reu/>.
- Beyond REUs, there are other programs funded locally by universities or other entities (Cornell University has a nice list: <https://biology.cornell.edu/research/summer/>). If you are at an undergraduate institution with a strong research focus, there are likely funding opportunities to do research, and get paid, at your university. They are often called SURF (Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship) or something of that nature. The Ecological Society of America has a listserv called “Ecolog” where you can find opportunities (<https://www.esa.org/membership/ecolog/>). There are also resources through the Evolution Directory (Evoldir: <https://evol.mcmaster.ca/evoldir.html>), and the American Physiological Society (<https://www.physiology.org/ugsrf?SSO=Y>).
- Your institution or others in the area may offer workshops on applying for REUs or other undergraduate research programs. There may be discussions about it online on social media, blogs, or other services like Reddit.

### **Do I REALLY need to reach out to a potential professor in whose laboratory I want to work before I apply?**

- **Yes, contact a faculty member** you would like to work with: email several months before you apply. Given that our application deadline is 1 December each year, this means reaching out during the summer BEFORE you apply. Although we cannot call it a “requirement” to develop a working relationship with a potential faculty mentor ahead of time, it ensures that you have an advocate for your application. Very few students are admitted without having a potential faculty mentor advocating for their application.
  - Before you email: learn about your potential faculty mentor’s work from their website. Find some of their papers that you think are interesting and read them. If possible, discuss those papers with your peers and mentors at your current institution to gain a deeper understanding of the work as well as identify questions you may want to ask about the work in your email to the professor.
  - In the email: Tell them you were considering applying, and you are curious about the research opportunities available in the field. Because you have read some of their papers, you can share that you find specific aspects of their research interesting and ask any questions you may

have about the methods, conclusions, etc. (and the specifics can only be known if you read the papers, so they will know that, and it shows you cared enough to put in some effort ahead of time). Attach any research you have done (this can be as simple as a graph, Powerpoint slide, or link to current lab website), and briefly summarize your research interests. Online resources like social media, blog posts, etc, can be useful resources for samples/templates of what this email may look like.

o If possible, meet with them either virtually, on the phone, or in person and then send a follow up email in December/January after submitting the application.

### **Can I talk to my TAs and other current graduate students about applying to graduate school?**

- Build your network and ask TA's, grad students about grad school, you are encouraged and have permission to do this-get more targeted information on certain topics and people enjoy talking about themselves and are willing to do it. **Don't be afraid to ask questions!**

### **I have no idea how to get started with applying to graduate school. Are there programs to help me in this endeavor?**

- Programs have emerged to link students, particularly first generation (i.e., first in your family to go to college, and also pursue graduate education) and underrepresented students, with mentors to help them find the right programs and apply to them. The mentors range from current PhD students who have gone through the application process recently, to tenured professors who understand the admissions process from the institutional side. Please checkout the program here: <https://eebmentormatch.com/>.

### **Should I use social media to find professors I might want to work with at UCI?**

- Science Twitter has emerged as a useful resource for sharing ideas and finding scientists in similar fields. Find professors whose research you like and follow them on Twitter or other media. This can also provide insight into their other interests and whether you will fit with them. Not all faculty members have an online presence, but many do.

### **How can I build connections with my current professors at my current institution to learn about their path through graduate school, and possibly secure a letter of recommendation from them?**

- Build connections with professors early by going to office hours, asking for help or career advice, etc. This helps you build a list of potential recommendation letter writers. Try and allow them to get to know you. **Involvement in research**

**(discussed above) is probably the most effective way to get excellent letter writers on your side.**

- Choose recommenders carefully, try and think about if they will remember you and write you a strong letter
- These are also the people you could ask about different things you might be naïve about (how to get to a certain career goal)
- Ask the professor for a letter of rec when it is fresh from completing the class
- Go to office hours and make yourself a known entity to get a letter
- Explain your understanding of the material, as there is usually something more to gain from the material when talking to the professor. They can point out different key components of the material that they may not have time to cover in class. You can also ask them about their graduate school experience and potential programs that interest you.
- A professor knows more about a specific topic than what is presented in lecture. Ask them about it, especially if it is a topic near to their own research interests (could be a good way to find a lab in which to work as an undergraduate or as a future graduate student).
- Talk to current graduate students! Your TAs, graduate students in your communities, graduate students in your research group, etc. They will all be happy to demystify the experience.

**Who should I ask for letters of recommendation? How many do I need?**

- **Letter of Recommendation:** We require three letters. Having a fourth letter is not bad, but does that fourth letter actually add anything great in terms of describing your strengths as a prospective graduate student? Quality of letters most important.
- At least one letter should be from a professor. A letter from your professor will be on official letterhead and should include how long they've known you, how well they know you. Many professors will ask you for some basic information that they like to use to write you the strongest letter. However, if there is something in particular that you'd like them to highlight, it's completely appropriate to mention that! Letters from community college professors are totally appropriate, especially if you got to know that professor.

- You can ask graduate students/ your TAs for letters of recommendation. This may be the first letter of recommendation this person has written-- you can suggest they co-write it with a professor and you can ask if they have a letterhead on which to write it.
- Situations may arise where it is necessary to have a letter from non-academics. For instance, an athletics coach, community organizer, etc., with whom one has closely worked. These are fine, as they can speak to one's character and work-ethic, but two of the letters should probably come from people in an academic setting.
- Ask for the letter well in advance (at least a month) of the deadline, and stay on top of the person from whom you are asking a letter of rec. Set up boundaries, ask them what schedule would be good for them to make sure you will not be annoying them and make sure they will remember. Communicate the hard deadline (day/time) of the letter and where to send it clearly and repeatedly in your communications with your LOR writer. Check in with them two weeks, one week, and the day before the deadline to make sure the LOR is still on their radar. Even if the LOR hasn't been sent a few hours before the deadline, as long as you have checked in with your letter writer the day before, they will very likely submit it, even if it's at the last minute (many academics submit things right at the deadline).
- Be very clear about the programs to which you are applying. Some programs may allow you to use a letter service (e.g., Interfolio) to send a common letter to all of the programs to which you are applying. But, this may not be the case for more ecologically/evolutionary focused graduate programs, which likely require direct letter submission from the letter writers. Thus, give your writers a spreadsheet with a list of the programs, deadlines, links to departmental websites about the program, and links where the letters are to be submitted. This will save a lot of time down the road as deadlines approach.

### **How are graduate students funded while at UCI?**

- In Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at UCI, we have guaranteed Teaching Assistantships for PhD students. This means that you don't pay tuition, and you actually get paid to teach undergraduate level laboratory classes, or assist a professor with a lecture course. We encourage our students to apply for external research fellowships (e.g., the Graduate Research Fellowship Program through the National Science Foundation, The Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship, as well as others from specific societies). Research fellowships allow you to get paid as a graduate student without having to teach. The lab to which you are applying may also already have research funding for you to be a "Research Assistant". That will vary by laboratory, so be sure to ask your potential faculty mentor about how they typically fund their students. We have a minimum salary of \$25,500 per year for our PhD students, but fellowships and other support (from

faculty grants) usually push that above \$30,000. Is it enough to live on? We suggest talking to our current graduate students. At the minimum salary, housing can account for a significant part of your monthly budget (~50% or above), but this can vary depending on where one lives.

- There are internal UCI Fellowships that offer funding ranging from a \$5000 signing bonus for choosing to come to UCI, to four years of funding (that's a lot of money!). But, those are applied for AFTER you are accepted into our program and your potential advisor will be contact about those fellowships. Many of these have been limited due to COVID-19.

### **Is there graduate housing at UCI?**

- Yes! In fact, we have a four-year housing guarantee for our doctoral students (you can live in on-campus housing for four years). That is the best in the UC system. Our on-campus apartments are significantly cheaper than the surrounding area, and we do have family housing.

### **Do I have to pay tuition as a PhD student in EEB at UCI?**

- No. We have tuition waivers for US Citizens and other programs for international students. There may be some fees depending on the quarter, but they are not exorbitant. UCI is a Sanctuary Campus, which means we provide safe spaces for undocumented students. Funding is available for undocumented students, so be sure to ask before applying.

### **Are there resources for doctoral students pursuing careers outside of academia?**

- Yes! There are workshops several times a year to allow for networking in various areas and learn about opportunities. We also have the Ridge to Reef program which is oriented towards science policy. Read about it here: <https://r2r.bio.uci.edu/>. You don't have to know your career path before applying, though. Many students figure it out along the way.

### **How can I find out about the lab to which I want to apply? What are the current students up to? What is the lab culture like?**

- **Reach out to the current graduate students in the lab** you are interested in and talk about: the lab and department environment, advisor mentoring style, their research and how it might connect with what you are interested in, how they are funded (fellowship, teaching assistantship, graduate research assistantship), the city and culture around the campus
  - Talk about the advisors mentoring style if it will be suitable for you (if you need more guidance, you might want a more hands on advisor, do they expect you to be in lab a certain number of hours or at certain hours of the day, etc)

- Is the lab a cohesive group that works together, or a bunch of individuals? What kind of environment does the PI foster for the students? Do they engage in outreach? What is the lab culture? If you are from a group traditionally underrepresented in the sciences, will you feel supported in that laboratory and the department as a whole?

- Can the students afford to live on their salaries?
- What does health insurance look like?
- Also consider how the prospective lab is funded or what grants the lab is applying for: does the lab have a grant for lab materials and be able to support your research, or would your project even involve materials that aren't readily available, what collaborations are possible through the lab that may support your research if your materials can't be obtained under current lab funding?

**EEB at UCI uses direct admission into a specific professor's laboratory as a policy (we don't do rotations). What if things don't work out and I decide to leave that professor's laboratory before I complete my degree? Can I move to another laboratory within the EEB Department (or in a different department at UCI)?**

- This is a challenging question and one of the more difficult circumstances to deal with in a direct admission model. Yes, in theory, one can move to another professor's laboratory to pursue their degree, but whether another professor will welcome a student to their laboratory is dependent on many factors (e.g., space, funding, research fit), especially if they didn't recruit that student to their laboratory in the first place. We have seen examples of both: students finding new homes in new laboratories and flourishing, and those not finding new laboratories and leaving the program. The bottom line is that if a graduate student doesn't have a professor to act as their mentor, they cannot stay in the program. So, moving from one laboratory to another is not advised unless it is a final option. This also reinforces the point that it is important to talk to as many personnel from a professor's laboratory about their experiences before deciding to join that laboratory. Don't just get a single graduate student's opinion, for example.

**Will I be provided with health insurance as a PhD student in EEB at UCI?**

- Yes! Our students are guaranteed health insurance.

**The application fees are expensive. Can I apply for a fee waiver?**

- Yes, application fees can be high. For our department, it is \$120 for US Citizens, \$140 otherwise. You can apply for a **fee waiver** during the application process. However, that waiver application needs to be complete and processed **BEFORE** you formally submit your actual graduate application at the end of the process.

Allow at least one week for the fee waiver application to be approved. Do not expect a fee waiver if applying the day of the application deadline.

**I am worried about my GRE scores and my GPA. Do these disqualify me from applying to EEB at UCI?**

- **Don't let grades or the GRE score discourage you** – EEB at UCI no longer requires the GRE for admission. We also do not emphasize GPA in our initial application screening.
  - If you've built a connection with a potential faculty mentor already and they are interested in having you in their laboratory, then you definitely should apply.

**COVID-19 really impacted me. Should I be worried about my grades from spring and fall 2020?**

- COVID-19: Spring and Fall 2020 grades will be deemphasized in any evaluation process.

**Should I only apply to one university?**

- It is expected you will be applying to multiple institutions.

**Should I go to scientific conferences before applying to graduate school?**

- If you can, go to scientific conferences because it is good for networking and most UCI faculty attend many conferences each year. Many institutions offer funding support for students to attend conferences, and the conferences themselves offer travel support. This is usually fairly easy to find on the conference website. If you engage in an REU program, there is usually funding built into that program to pay for your conference travel to share your research with the scientific community.