

SNRE Admissions Guide

Adapted from the EGSA Admissions Survival Guide at UC Davis-many thanks to those who put this together!

Introduction

You probably are looking at a lot of grad school applications that all look the same. The School of Natural Resources and the Environment is DIFFERENT. We're one Major with Areas of Emphasis that are treated like separate majors. This means when you apply to an option or emphasis in the school, the reviewers are the faculty working within that program area.

The information and tips you find here are designed to provide you with the ESSENTIAL elements of a successful application. It's no guarantee, but we've found that a significant portion of admissible applicants miss out because of potentially avoidable errors.

STEP I. Getting Started

1. Application materials - it's your responsibility to make sure that all materials are received by the graduate coordinator on time. Disregard deadlines posted through the Graduate College, follow SNRE deadlines!! If you are not sure if something has been sent (i.e. Transcripts), you may email the grad coordinator to check up on things. You can check if references have been sent in the online application itself.

2. Application content -

a) Make sure you haven't left anything blank on the application, especially in the Summary of Coursework. It's particularly important that you include the list of faculty you have been courting (see BELOW for much more detail on "FINDING A MAJOR PROFESSOR")

b) Your statement of purpose is your biggest opportunity to stand out and show how you think. It should reflect your interests in your Natural Resources option and the direction you'd like to take in the future. It isn't necessary to explain what inspired you to pursue this field. It's more helpful to include what specific areas of our major fire you up - e.g. it's not enough to write that you are interested in conservation of predators.

Step II. Finding a Major Professor (translation - the critical step!)

It would be great if all you had to do was to send in a great application and wait for the acceptance letter to come to your mailbox. We receive far more applications from qualified students than we can possibly admit, therefore, a professor must agree to advise take you before you can be admitted.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS:

1. Timing: You need to be in the final stages of securing a professor by the time you submit the application. Even though final decisions often are not made for a few months after the application deadline, getting started as soon as you decide you want to apply will really help you out.

2. Strategy:

- You will need to know what area of research you want pursue before you try to convince someone to accept you to their lab. You can do a much better job of finding a professor to accept you if you have some concrete research ideas to present.
- Once you have clarified your own scientific interests, and have identified potential faculty advisors, familiarize yourself more thoroughly with each professor's interests. You should do a literature search for their recent publications, check out their websites, and talk to professors at your own school who might have some additional insights. This process will allow you to eliminate professors from the list whose interests may not be compatible after all, and get you ready for one-on-one contact with the professors.
- The next step is to contact the professors whose research focus matches your interest. This can be intimidating and sometimes frustrating, but keep two things in mind. First, it is part of their job to talk with applicants. Second, remember that many faculty are contacted by many applicants, so if you want to maximize the chances that you'll get a reply, you absolutely need to let them know that you are familiar with their recent work and that your research interests align with that work.

Here's one possible route to take in contacting professors:

1. Your first contact with faculty should be by e-mail or letter. E-mails are usually easier to answer. Briefly explain your interests and background/experience and why you think you'd be a good match. You should not ask them what they do, because that information is available elsewhere (see "Strategy" section, above)! Your goal is to put your best foot forward concisely. Ask them if they will be accepting students and if they would be willing to talk with you.
2. Allow 7-10 days for a reply, but if you don't hear back, send another e-mail or letter. Briefly re-state your interests and refer to your previous letter. Politely re-ask the professor if they are accepting students next year and if they would be willing to talk with you.
3. One indication of a professor who might be a good advisor is their willingness to respond to applicants' inquiries. If you encounter enthusiasm from professors, don't hold yourself back because of fears that research interests don't perfectly match up. Take the enthusiasm as a sign that the professor has recognized some overlap in your interests and is potentially a good mentor. Don't take it personally if you never hear back from a professor or if, in the course of discussion, a professor decides it's not a good match. Ask for feedback and suggestions for other professors.

Once you've found a major professor: It's important to talk openly with the professor about funding, potential research projects, personal support funding, working styles, and expectations. It is also useful to talk with graduate students who are currently being mentored by your prospective professor. They are an excellent resource and are usually happy to help you out. They will help you understand what to expect from the professor, and what not to expect. You will be in a much better position to make the most of the relationship, and therefore get the most out of graduate school, if you are prepared for all aspects of the interaction.

More Stuff you Should Know

One question all applicants ask is "How am I going to support myself while I'm in grad school?" Since the SNRE does not guarantee funding to any of its graduate students, as is common at other universities and in other programs, this is another area that you need to be prepared to deal with yourself, and early on.

Funding: There are many different ways students can be funded throughout their graduate career. Some faculty won't take students without having funds available or in the works. Others consider the student's likelihood of securing their own funding as part of the selection process-this is more true for students pursuing a PhD. It's very important when you are talking with potential major professors that you understand their approach to graduate student funding. Another way to find out a faculty member's success in funding students is to talk to their current students!

Here are the primary ways students are funded:

- Some folks come in with funding (e.g. NSF pre-doctoral, Fulbright, host country sponsorship, CALS Fellowship awards, other fellowships).
- Many faculty fund an incoming student within an existing grant. This means the faculty provides a job for a new student or the new student agrees to perform the research as their own graduate project. This is the most common situation in SNRE as we don't have departmental funds to support students.
- Some students supplement the funding they receive from faculty or TAs with grants and fellowships during grad school. You'll find out more about how to apply for them, who is eligible, application deadlines, etc., once you are here.
- Some students in SNRE teach as a teaching assistant (TA). Unlike other schools, TA jobs aren't guaranteed because of the lack of funding for TAs. Most faculty in the department will give a TA position they have to their own students, but not always. Many students seek TAs in other departments. The General Biology courses usually hire about 30 TAs each semester and our students often get at least a few of those positions.