



Molecular and Cell Biology +

Plant Microbial Biology Ph.D.

RECRUITMENT GUIDE

FOR ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS WITH FACULTY

Something else to read before my recruitment visit—really?

We're thrilled that you are coming to check out the Molecular and Cell Biology/Plant and Microbial Biology Ph.D. programs at UC Berkeley. From the faculty perspective, recruitment weekend is something we are accustomed to and excited about. By contrast, for a prospective student like yourself, in addition to the excitement, since the process is likely to be a brand new experience it could seem potentially challenging (or just plain freaky). With this document and a webinar workshop that we'll alert you about separately, our goal is to provide you with guidance in terms of what to expect from and how to be best prepared for your virtual recruitment visit to UC Berkeley.



The structure of a grad recruitment visit

During the visit, you'll talk to lots of faculty about research. You will also have two other kinds of meetings: (1) presentations from leadership about the program structure; and (2) discussions with current students to give you a sense of our social climate, which we include to help you judge whether our program is a good fit for you. The core of the visit, though, is (3), one-on-one meetings with faculty. Just you and them, talking science.

Focusing on research in meetings with faculty

Grad school is about doing research. Given this, it makes sense that grad programs explore the fit of applicants for their programs based on how ready they are for scientific independence. We can't do experiments during the recruitment visit itself. So the next best thing is to talk about big-picture ideas that drive experiments and the data they generate.

That is, you are going to talk about big-picture ideas and data, in each conversation with a faculty member. In a successful meeting, you do more than listen. You engage in a two-way research conversation, of which you'll have 5-10 over the course of the visit.

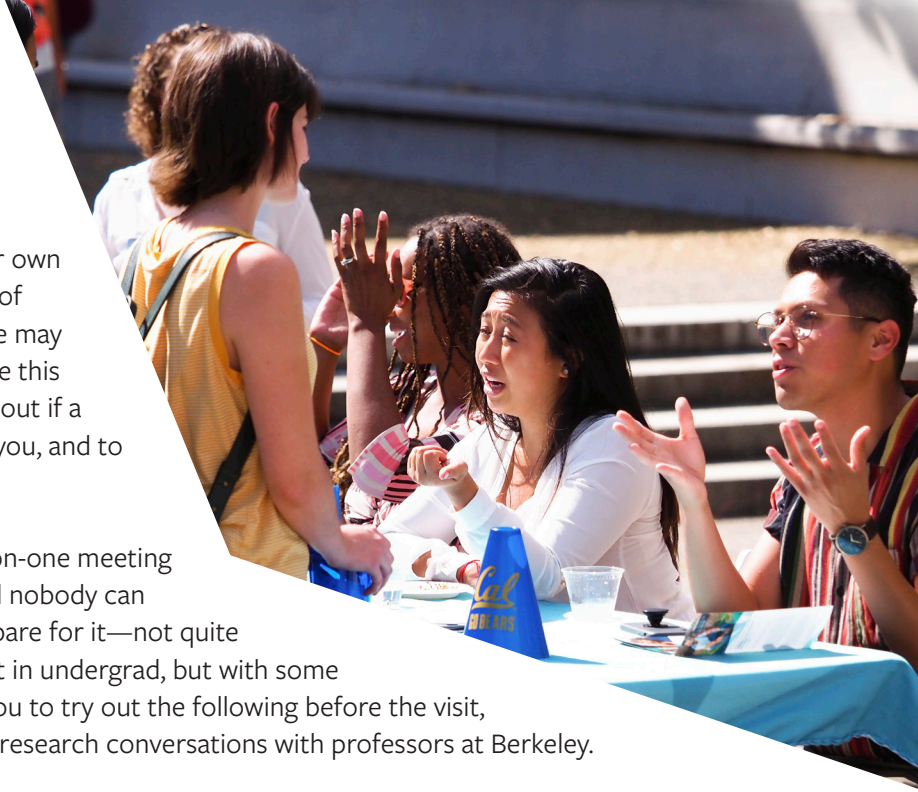
Now, that may sound like a tall order. Speak confidently to an expert in the field before you even enroll in grad school? Multiple times? But here's the thing: having made it this far in the application process means that you are equipped to do this already. You have your own previous or current research experience. When it comes to the work you did when you were an undergrad, master's student or a tech, you are already an expert. You can talk to any faculty member about what you did and how, what you discovered, and most especially, why it was worth studying. It could only take one or two minutes—some people call this an “elevator pitch.” Faculty will often break in with questions, which you can mull over to give an informed answer. All told, in the meeting you showcase all the hard work you've put into your research so far and the passion you have for what you do.

In addition, during a usual conversation, the faculty member will also lay out some of their own data and ideas, highlighting future directions of their work and where a prospective candidate may find an exciting dissertation topic. You can see this part of the process as an opportunity to find out if a faculty member's research is the right fit for you, and to ask questions as they come up.

Together, this exchange makes up each one-on-one meeting with faculty. It's a free-flowing discussion, and nobody can predict where it will go. Even so, you can prepare for it—not quite by studying as you would have done for a test in undergrad, but with some different strategies. We want to encourage you to try out the following before the visit, at home and in lab, as you get ready for your research conversations with professors at Berkeley.

Tips and tricks for one-on-one meetings with faculty

- **Bone up on the rationale for your own projects.** Know why your previous research was important. For each project, why did you and your PI think it was worth doing? How will the field change when your project is done? Make sure you have the answers to these questions nailed down in your own mind. If you missed some of them when you were doing work several years ago, it's not too late; reach out to your PI and ask.
- **Bone up on the context of your own projects.** Know who else in the field has done work like your (old and current) projects. Review the papers that came before each one. Make sure you really get what's in these papers. Don't be afraid to mine your PI and labmates for details if you need things explained. In most cases it'll actually be fun to steep yourself in the science. So go for it, even if it takes a bit of extra time.
- **Practice your elevator pitch.** Once you find the answers to the above, practice saying them. Out loud. We know it feels a bit silly talking to yourself. Sorry about that. Stick with it anyway!
- **Practice fielding questions.** After you've done your reading and practiced on your own, ask your previous or current labmates to mock-interview you. Have them pretend to be a faculty member, asking you questions about your previous projects that you answer on the spot. Maybe about experimental details, or new interpretations of the data, or picturing where the project will go next. If they ask a question that you don't know the answer to, go look it up afterward. When you've done as many of these as possible, then do one with your PI. Again, have them drill you with questions and answer each one as though it were the real meeting with Berkeley faculty.



● **Remember details of your own projects.** Know the technical details of your experiments, including controls. Refresh yourself with your old lab notebooks. Faculty in your meetings may ask about something very particular, and it's great if you can be ready. We know you are proud of what you have done in the lab, and rightly so. Make sure you can spell it all out to the faculty you meet.

● **Explore new fields.** Besides asking about your previous work, a faculty member in a meeting may also want to hear about your research interests for the future. Prepare for this by reading review articles about one or two potential fields that you hope to jump into (try the Nature Reviews or Annual Reviews journals). Pick out some big ideas that are as yet untested, which you could imagine yourself working on in grad school. Don't worry, no one is going to hold you to these later. Just use them now as examples for the meetings, so faculty members can see how you think. Yup, you need to practice explaining these out loud too.

● **Stay on message.** Having done all the above—did we mention practicing a lot?—you will be maximally ready for your faculty meetings. Visualize yourself during each conversation sticking to your well-informed ideas about research. Of course you may have some non-scientific questions too (like how many students the faculty has in their lab, what they are looking for in a student, and so on). Totally fine; but our advice is to focus mostly on science. And it turns out that this will come naturally after all your prepping and practicing. You will be hungry to talk at a deep level about experiments.

● **Remember, we're only human.** In a meeting it could happen once or twice that you are stumped with a question you can't answer, or run into topics you don't yet have experience in. This is totally OK. In science, all of us (faculty, current students, and applicants like you) are pushing the unknown. You're definitely allowed to say "I don't know." That said, let us emphasize again that the cool stuff that you do have mastery over is the main point of these conversations. You, and the faculty you meet, will focus almost entirely on that.

In conclusion...prep is worth it

We know that you are pulled in a lot of directions during the grad school recruitment season. We also know that the prep we've suggested here takes time. But it will help you during your visit, and it will also help set the model for your whole graduate career. Digging into big ideas in science, and learning to communicate them, is a main part of what you'll do from now on. Starting now is the right move.

Have fun and we'll see you in the spring.

