

21 questions to get to know your rotation lab

Often when students are thinking about whether to join a given lab for their PhD they ask us: “Am I asking the right questions? Do I know enough about this lab?” If you’re wondering this too, this resource can help!

These 21 questions cover a wide range of information that will help you better understand the labs you’re considering joining. There aren’t necessarily right and wrong answers to these questions, but taken together the answers will paint a picture of what you can expect if you join that lab.

You can use this resource as a checklist – try to answer each question for labs you are considering joining. Reflect on what this process is like for you. Then discuss the answers with a mentor or in a career counseling appointment at the Office of Career and Professional Development. No lab is perfect, and a better understanding of what to expect can give you the agency to either decide it’s not for you, or get the support you need to succeed.

Your experience in the lab

1. When you imagine yourself in this lab, how do you feel? Why?
2. Who will train you in this lab? (ie, in technical skills, writing, presenting, scientific thinking, etc)
3. Who will mentor you in this lab? (ie, provide career development opportunities, guidance, psychosocial support – unlikely to be one person!)
4. What is your experience communicating with the PI? How often will you interact with them?

Opportunities and progress

5. What is the process of preparing for qualifying exams in this lab?
6. What skills would you use and develop in this lab? How would you develop them?
7. What career development or training opportunities are supported and/or expected for students? (ie, training course at Cold Spring Harbor, apply for an F31, join professional society, attend a certain conference, gain teaching experience, etc)

8. How will this lab help you develop your professional network? (Where have lab alumni gone? What contact does the lab have with professionals in fields/jobs you are interested in?)
9. What is the lab's recent publishing record? Are students first authors on recent papers?

The people and the lab environment

10. Do you work well with the people in the lab?
11. Do lab members make time to talk with you? Are they respectful when they talk to/about each other?
12. How often do 1:1, project-specific, and lab-wide meetings happen? How do those meetings feel?
13. How does the lab handle responsibilities? Ie, who do you see doing what?
14. How does the lab handle celebrations?
15. How is the lab funded?
16. Do you see lab members taking care of themselves? (ie, maintaining physical and mental health, family care duties, taking vacation)

The PI

17. Did the PI set reasonable and accurate expectations for your rotation? If things changed, did they acknowledge that?
18. Did the PI give you positive and corrective feedback? How did that go?
19. How does the PI manage student progression? (Do they offer regular IDP meetings? Are students' thesis committee meetings on schedule? How long does it take students to graduate?)
20. What support does the PI provide? Does it differ between grad students, postdocs, and technicians?
21. How does the PI interact with lab alums? (ie, is there evidence of support for career goals like yours?)