

For Prospective Graduate Students in the McCune Lab

The following list includes some of the criteria that I mull over when considering prospective graduate students. Following this list I give some other suggestions on how to apply (apart from the guidelines given in the departmental website, which you should read too). Keep in mind that different departments and faculty members have different approaches to selecting graduate student. So think of the following list as my personal preferences.

What I am looking for in a graduate student

1. Area of interest overlaps with mine. (See elsewhere on my website; look at my publication list; look at titles of my students' publications and their theses)
2. Demonstrated experience in research or field work beyond that associated with your undergraduate coursework. For example, if you say you are interested in lichens, let me know (either in your letter of interest or resume) some specific practical experience you have in that area. This could be undergraduate theses, undergraduate research projects, internships, working in someone else's lab as an assistant, or field experience (e.g. summer jobs). Many of my former graduate students worked for me or one of my graduate students as a field or lab assistant.
3. Good quantitative skills. I look at your math GRE scores and grades in math and statistics classes.
4. Good computer skills. Experience using commonly used science software (e.g. Excel, Word, ArcGIS, PC-ORD, Access, R, S plus, SPSS, etc.). Programming experience is even better (e.g., C, Basic, Fortran, Matlab, R, Python, etc.)
5. Coursework in basic sciences: math, statistics, chemistry, physics, and biology. Although our department has flexible coursework requirements, I prefer students with a strong science background. Ideally, students should have:
 - math through one or two terms of calculus
 - introductory statistics
 - a year of basic chemistry
 - two terms of organic chemistry
 - a year of physics
 - two years or more of biology (introductory biology plus substantial coursework beyond that).
6. Strong letters from references.
7. Good grades. Our department has no set minimum GPA, but the Graduate School requires at least a 3.0 GPA. Most of our students have an undergraduate GPA considerably higher than that.
8. Good GRE scores. We have no set minimum GRE scores in our department. Our median GRE scores are about the 70th percentile.
9. Good writing skills. Your letter of interest and correspondence with me are important, not only the content but also the details: punctuation, spelling, and grammar. I also consider your verbal and writing GRE scores. If you have some concrete demonstration of your writing ability, let me know and offer to send a copy to me electronically. This might be an undergraduate or masters thesis, publication, or manuscript.
10. Evidence that you will be a good team player and lab colleague.

How my students are funded

My grad students and grad students in our department in general are almost always fully funded, meaning that they have a 0.4 FTE appointment throughout the year. The stipend is sufficient to live on, but you won't get rich doing this. These appointments also carry tuition remission (i.e. you don't have to pay that). As long as you are making good progress, it is very likely that your funding will continue to completion, although we can't guarantee this. My students are mostly funded by graduate research assistantships (GRA), with occasional teaching assistantships (TA). I encourage each student to

experience both. The department requires PhD candidates to serve as a TA for at least two terms. Some grad students compete successfully for various OSU scholarships or fellowships after they join our department.

When to apply

Before applying it is best to have an email dialog with me. Send a resume and explain what you are looking for. Demonstrate that you have looked at my work in particular, rather than writing generically. Treat this as a professional communication (e.g., don't start your message with "Hey Bruce!").

If you are taken on as a graduate research assistant, then your position might be able to start at any term. This depends on a potential major professor having a funded project on which you could work. But to be considered for our TA positions and for many of our GRA slots, it is best to apply on the regular schedule (December or January), for a fall beginning.

Some additional considerations

Timing is important. I am looking for coincidences in funding opportunities and the availability of excellent prospective students. Very often I have to turn away fully qualified students because of limited time and/or funding. But new funding opportunities can arise almost anytime. This means that persistence can pay off. I may not be able to take you one year, but might the next. If you applied once but were not accepted, it is best to inquire first before reapplying.

Try to make a personal visit. Use your visit to talk about your research interests and career goals with me and other potential major professors at OSU. Feel free to meet with faculty in the various departments related to your interests. (It is fine to apply to more than one department or express interest in more than one major professor.) Visiting OSU is also a good way to meet my other grad students and get their perspective on me as a major professor, life in the department, at OSU, and in Corvallis. Another option is to visit with me at a meeting, for example in the summer at ABLIS or ESA or in March at NW Scientific Assoc/NW Lichenologists.