THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology

The Graduate Program in Biochemistry & Molecular Biophysics

Student Handbook

2026–2027

Summer Quarter 2026 – Spring Quarter 2027

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bcmb.uchicago.edu

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Introduction to the Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics Graduate Program

Welcome to the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of Chicago. Our Department offers training for careers via the Graduate Program in Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics (BMB). Research encompasses all areas of modern biochemistry, including but not limited to the following topics: protein engineering, protein and RNA folding and misfolding, RNA catalysis, error biology, microbiology, DNA recombination, molecular endocrinology and immunology, cytoskeleton, molecular neurobiology, ion channels, and membrane protein structure, function, and insertion. In addition to more traditional biochemical approaches, techniques employed in the department include but are not limited to NMR spectroscopy, X-ray crystallography, cryo-electron microscopy, single-molecule techniques, computational approaches, display technology, electron paramagnetic resonance, and small angle X-ray scattering. Our Department is distinguished by its intellectual rigor and collaborative style. The interdisciplinary nature of the Department is further accentuated by the Institute for Biophysical Dynamics, which brings together biological and physical scientists to pursue common research goals and through NIH-sponsored training programs in Molecular and Cellular Biology and in Chemical Biology.

This handbook is to help you become familiar with our graduate program. We hope that it will help you get started. Good luck!

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Mission and Goals of Our Graduate Program

The Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics graduate program seeks to recruit highly motivated students and equip them with the skills that will be needed to recognize and solve the major problems in biomedical science in the coming decades. A major goal in our research enterprise aims to understand the molecular, structural, and energetic principles that govern function and behavior at the organismal level. Major advances in analytical biochemistry have led to an explosion of information regarding the parts that comprise cells, underscoring the richness and complexity of living systems. We seek to deliver a generation of scientists equipped with the skill set to unravel this complexity at the mechanistic level.

Our program therefore aims to instill a conceptual framework for how life works from a molecular perspective and to facilitate acquisition of a solid understanding of the principles that govern the structure, function, and energetics of biological macromolecules together with an appreciation of the methods and analytical tools used to address biological questions at a variety of scales. To that end, our program serves to train an important cadre of students whose interests bridge the physical and biological sciences.

To realize these goals, the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology has built a faculty and created courses and workshops that span a broad research agenda and bring to bear capabilities that encompass a wide range of biophysical and biochemical systems and techniques. Our program aligns its teaching and training closely with the Biological Sciences programs in the Molecular Biosciences Cluster. In addition, our research and training program is powerfully enriched by our interactions with an array of cross-divisional institutes and programs (Institute for Biophysical Dynamics, The Molecular and Cellular Biology (MCB) Training Program, The Chemistry and Biology Interface Training Program, and the Biophysical Sciences Training Program). For more information on Student Life and Conduct, please reference the Student Manual (link).

Requirements and Policies for Graduate Students in the Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics Graduate Program

Most students in the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology enter the graduate program to earn a Ph.D. degree, although a master's degree is also offered. The Ph.D. program requires generally 4 to 6 years of study. The first year is dedicated to completing course work, attending faculty research presentations and engaging in small research projects in several laboratories (research rotations) as a mechanism to become acquainted with research in the department. During the first year there are also many opportunities to attend the Graduate Student Seminar Series and departmental seminars and participate in the visits of invited speakers. After the Comprehensive Examination at the end of the first year, students choose a research advisor in whose laboratory they will carry out their Ph.D. research, culminating in a written dissertation, oral defense, and a public presentation. Throughout your graduate career, your research advisor, the department chair, your academic advisor, and the student program administrator and director are ready to help you achieve your goals and complete your degree in a timely manner.

Each student is required to complete the BMB core curriculum. The core curriculum includes at least two research rotations, seven didactic courses, and additional requirements listed below. Among the seven didactic courses, Protein Fundamentals (30400), Biophysical Properties of Biomolecules (32200), Cell Biology (31600), Fundamentals of Biological Data Analysis (33500) and one of the following courses: Molecular Biology I (31200) or Nucleic Acid Structure and Function (30600) are required (see course descriptions below; 31600 may be substituted with another course in Cell Biology). Two additional courses (BCMB 31900 – Introduction to Faculty Research, also known as "Faculty All Stars" and BCMB 31800 – Current Seminar Topics in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology) are required. BCMB 31900 is not for credit; BCMB 31800 is for ½ credit. Additionally, BMB students participate in Data Science with R Bootcamp that takes place in the Fall prior to the start of the first quarter. The Graduate Program also offers a course on Scientific Grant Writing for Biological Sciences (BCMB 33300) in the Fall Quarter of the second year. This course aligns well with submission of the thesis proposal as well as future independent grant applications. Students are strongly encouraged to enroll. Each student is required to serve as a Teaching Assistant for a total of two quarters, but this *requirement is fulfilled **AFTER** the second year of training*.

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1. *Full-time Residence* – Students must enroll in courses totaling 300 units of credit during each quarter after matriculation at UChicago. Both first year and more senior students receive the official holidays of the University. Time off during interim period between quarters is counted as vacation. If more time off is required students must petition the Curriculum Committee for a leave of absence.

2. *Course Requirements* – Students must complete the BMB core curriculum [Quantitative Analysis Bootcamp (in September), Protein Fundamentals (BCMB 30400), Biophysical Properties of Biomolecules (BCMB 32200), one course in Cell Biology (BCMB 31600), Fundamentals of Biological Data Analysis (BCMB 33500), and one of the following two courses: Molecular Biology (BCMB 31200) or Nucleic Acid

Structure and Function (30600)]. To fulfill full-time residence requirements, students complete at least two research rotations (see below) and elective courses from among many offered by BMB and other departments. In making these choices, students are welcome to consult their academic advisor or Curriculum Chair.

3. ***Submission of a Research Manuscript*** **–** In addition to submission of the research dissertation for approval by the thesis committee, students must submit to a peer-reviewed journal a minimum of one primary research manuscript on which they are listed as first or co-first author. Submission should occur before the private defense of the dissertation.

4. ***Research Rotations*** **–** Students are required to complete two research rotations with at least two faculty members (one of whom must be a faculty member of BMB). Rotations are performed during the first academic year. Each rotation lasts nine weeks, coinciding with each academic quarter. A third rotation is encouraged. Rotations in the following summer quarter are an option but requires approval from the Graduate Program. Research Rotations are graded as P/F. Rotation forms should be completed by both student and rotating faculty and submitted to the program administrator by the first Friday of the quarter.

5. ***Grade Requirements*** **–** Students must receive the letter grade A, B, or C, or the equivalent in all courses completed while a student at the University and must maintain a cumulative B average (3 on a 4-point system) at all times. Students who do not maintain a B average will not be considered a student in "good standing" and will be placed on academic probation. Any grade recorded as "I" (incomplete) must be replaced by a standard letter grade by the close of the next academic quarter. The BMB program follows the policies set by the University in regards to Academic Honesty and Plagiarism. For more information, please reference the Student Manual (link).

6. ***Academic Standing*** **–** To be designated as being in "good standing", students must maintain a B average and complete all departmental requirements on schedule. A student not in good standing may be placed on academic probation, may be restricted from registering for subsequent quarters of study, or may be asked to leave the program. Students that have been placed on academic probation a second time may, at the Graduate Program's discretion, be asked to leave the program.

7. ***Deadlines*** **–** Students who fail to meet the deadlines set for the submission of their thesis proposal and hold their yearly/semiannual thesis committee meeting(s) may be placed on academic probation.

8. ***BMB Seminars*** **–** Students are strongly encouraged to attend BMB seminars throughout their stay in graduate school; attendance at other seminars is encouraged.

9. ***Responsible, rigorous, and reproducible conduct of research: R3CR*** **–** All first-year students are required to take a course entitled "***Responsible, rigorous, and reproducible conduct of research***" for academic credit. Students enroll in this course in the Winter quarter of their first year. Students who are still registered 4 years after completing the initial ethics training must enroll in a second ethics course prior to graduation. This course is given in the Spring quarter.

10. ***Teaching Assistantships –*** The Biological Sciences Division requires that Ph.D. students engage in teaching. To fulfil this requirement, students can serve twice as a Teaching Assistant or serve once as a teaching assistant and enroll in the TA Training Course (BSDG 50000). BMB students are not eligible to start their teaching assistant requirement until their third year of residence unless the BMB Graduate Program is petitioned for a waiver. Teaching opportunities exist for more senior graduate students to participate (with extra remuneration) in teaching programs once the teaching assistant requirement has been met. Students must have the approval of their thesis advisor before they agree to serve as a teaching assistant in any course. Students must register for the Teaching Assistantship course, apply to TA for a course through Grad Gargoyle, complete the TA compact in Redcap, and attend the quarterly TA meeting in the relevant quarter.

11. ***Requirements for the Transitional Master of Science Degree –*** Students may apply for a transitional degree of Master of Science. The transitional Master's will only be awarded to candidates who have been matriculated for three quarters or more, successfully completed all course requirements for the Ph.D. and met the requirement for a B average, successfully completed the Comprehensive Examination and are otherwise in good standing at the time of application. To request the transitional master's degree, students must contact the Graduate Program Administrator and must submit their degree application online.

12. ***Comprehensive Examination –*** At the end of the Spring Quarter, students will begin the Comprehensive Examination process. A complete overview of student guidelines and faculty expectations can be found in the sections titled Comprehensive Examination—Student Guidelines and Comprehensive Examination—Faculty Expectations and Responsibilities.

13. ***Choosing a Thesis Advisor and Research Laboratory –*** Students are expected to choose a thesis advisor and research laboratory within one month after passing their Comprehensive Examination; they are required to do so by June 30th. Choosing a thesis advisor and research laboratory involves the consent of both parties, and that all such arrangements must be approved by the Program. Thesis advisors must agree to support graduate students performing satisfactory thesis research (by payment of stipend and tuition) should training grant funds not be available or after training grant funds have been applied to the student's pre-doctoral research training. If a student wishes to change thesis advisor, they must consult the graduate education administrator and the Program Director.

14. ***Scientific Grant Writing for Biological Sciences (BCMB 33300)****.* Second and third year students are strongly encouraged to take this course on proposal writing, as it aligns well with development and submission of the thesis proposal. *Course Description:* Establishing the skills to write clear and effective grants is an important skill for biomedical researchers, particularly those planning a career in research and development, including academia and industry. This course is designed to equip students with the skills to effectively craft successful biomedical grant proposals, specifically focused on the F31 NIH format. Throughout the course, students will learn the mechanics of a biomedical scientific fellowship grant, including writing specific aims, developing the research approach, including significance and innovation. Students should already have a research project in mind and will be expected to provide feedback to their peers. Prereq: 2nd years and beyond. *Hayne*

15. ***Thesis Committee, First Thesis Committee Meeting (Qualifying Exam), and Thesis Proposal Submission–*** Students (with the advice of their thesis advisor and the approval of the Director of the Graduate Program must name a Thesis Advisory Committee by the last week of November of their second year and hold their first thesis committee meeting by the end of Spring quarter of their second year. Considering the proposal writing course listed above (**BCMB 33300)** it is likely that students may want to name members of their Thesis Advisory Committee by October 1st in order to obtain their feedback on the Specific Aims that emerge as the course progresses. It is the student's responsibility to obtain the agreement of faculty members to serve on their committee before submitting the list for approval. The Thesis Advisory Committee must have at least four members (including the thesis advisor), at least two of which are members of the BMB program. If the student is co-mentored, both mentors should be members of the Thesis Committee. The written thesis proposal should be submitted no later than the fourth week of the Winter quarter of the second year. The oral presentation (First Thesis Committee Meeting) will be scheduled at that time and should be completed by the last week of the Spring quarter of the student's second year. A Chair of the Committee who is a member of BMB and who is someone other than the thesis advisor(s) must be chosen by the agreement of committee members.

For the first Thesis Committee Meeting, the student should give an oral presentation that is designed to last a maximum of 45 minutes, highlights the written report and covers the essentials of the proposal—the background and significance, scientific aims, experimental design, project status and a timeline for the remainder of the experiments. The first committee meeting should set the stage for the thesis project. Much of the time should be given to developing the background and significance, scientific aims, experimental design, and timeline. The committee will critically evaluate the merits and feasibility of the research project at this time. A successful thesis committee report counts as a passed qualifying exam.

The **background and significance** section should address several questions. What broad area of science does the research address and why is it important? What are the major unanswered questions in the field of study and why are they important? Where is the field now and how will the proposed research impact it? The **experimental design** should include the limitations of the proposed approach and what plans are given to address them. In addition, potential hurdles should be noted. The **conclusion** should include a discussion on how the proposed research will further the field and science in general, assuming a successful outcome.

⇒ Once a Thesis Committee has been established, its composition can be changed only by petitioning the Program Director, who will consider the petition and make a determination with input from the Program. Such changes may be necessitated by circumstances, including a shift in experimental focus of the candidate or unavailability of a faculty member.

16. ***Second and Subsequent Thesis Committee Meetings –*** Thesis Committee Meetings should be held annually at a minimum for students that are enrolled in their 3rd and 4th years. Students in their 5th year and beyond will be required to hold a committee meeting twice each academic year. It is the student's responsibility to schedule the meeting(s) in a timely manner. Students who did not hold their committee meeting(s) will receive a notification that they will become past due on their Thesis Committee Meeting at the beginning of the Spring Quarter. Students will have until the end of the quarter to arrange the meeting(s). If a student fails to hold a meeting by the end of the Spring

quarter,and submit a thesis committee meeting report, they will be placed on academic probation and receive a notice with the requirements necessary for their academic probation to be lifted, including but not limited to a timeline for when the student must hold their committee meeting. Students who do not meet the requirements provided to them in their notice will be administratively withdrawn from the program.

One week prior to a Thesis Committee Meeting, the student is expected to provide a written 2-page outline of their progress, goals, and directions ("Progress and Plans"). In addition to the outline the student must also outline their plans for manuscript submission. The student will be asked to address questions like the following: *Please list your major accomplishments to date, including publications and presentations? What are the plans for publication of your ongoing work? What is your timeline for completion of your thesis and graduation? What are your post-graduation career plans? What steps have you taken to explore these possibilities?* The exact nature of these questions will change depending upon their year in the program. The student will develop answers to these questions in collaboration with their Ph.D. advisor.

Changes in the project should be presented and justified. At the penultimate committee meeting (see next section) members will reach a consensus that the research has satisfactorily addressed the specific aims of the project. At this point, the student can begin writing their thesis. In between the formal meetings the committee members will be available as a resource for the student.

Meeting Structure: At the beginning of the meeting, the mentor provides a review of the student's progress; the student is not present for this review. The review is followed by the oral presentation of the experimental work by the student. The student should prepare a presentation that allows ample time for a thorough discussion. At the end of the meeting, the committee discusses the student's progress; the student is not present for this discussion. At the end of every meeting, students will also have time alone with their thesis committee for discussion without their advisor present.

17. ***Penultimate Meeting with the Thesis Committee –*** After completing a significant body of experimental work, the student should seek permission from the thesis committee to write and defend their dissertation. **One week** prior to this meeting, the student is expected to submit an outline of their proposed dissertation to the committee members, including a list of ongoing experiments to be completed before the defense. All committee members must be present for this meeting. In this meeting, the student summarizes finished or published work and provides details of any ongoing experiments to be completed for the dissertation. If the committee concurs that the student is ready to write and defend their thesis, the Chairperson will write a recommendation approving this action. The recommendation may include specific guidelines for unfinished experiments as well as for the structure and content of the dissertation. Approval to write and defend the dissertation does not constitute its acceptance.

18. ***Reports of Thesis Committee Meetings –*** At the close of each Thesis Committee meeting, the Chair of the Committee must meet with the student to apprise them of the view of the Committee and of any problems or difficulties that might have become apparent. The Chair of the Committee must also write and submit a brief report of the Committee attesting to performance, committee recommendations, and so forth. **This report must be submitted to Graduate Program Administrator, all**

members of the committee, and the student within one week of the meeting so that there will be no disagreement as to the conclusion of the meeting. This report will become part of the student's permanent file, which the student is welcome to view at any time. If unsatisfactory performance is identified, students may be asked by the Committee to undertake remedial activities to improve their standing. A student's committee meeting will not be completed until the form is returned to the graduate education administrator.

19. ***Annual Training Progress Reports –*** Students may be asked to prepare brief annual progress reports of their activities that are necessary to ensure compliance with Training Grant guidelines for performance during the years of pre-doctoral research training.

20. ***Individual Development Plan (IDP) and Progress and Plans –*** The Individual Development Plan is designed to foster communication in a variety of ways, primarily to ensure that the student and advisor are discussing short- and long-term training goals, and also that the student is receiving comprehensive guidance on how to best achieve these goals while making efficient progress toward earning his or her degree. Both research and training goals should be discussed, as well as the level of effort and commitment necessary to meet these goals. Training goals are expected to evolve over time. The Individual Development Plan is completed by 2nd year students and 3rd year students complete the Progress and Plans document.

While we encourage you to complete your IDP/progress and plans with your advisor you may choose to do it with another individual if you prefer. Alternative IDP/progress and plans mentors include your thesis committee chair, program/curriculum chair, training grant directors or BSD Career Advisor.

In the fall quarter of the second year, each student should complete the Individual Development Plan (IDP) with his or her advisor. In your third year, you will share your Progress and Plans document with your thesis committee ahead of each committee meeting. The deadline for submitting proof that you completed your IDP is at the end of August of each year; if you are unable to submit your IDP by the deadline, you must petition the curriculum committee for an extension.

21. ***Thesis Submission and Thesis Examination –*** The examination will involve a comprehensive evaluation of the thesis and related topics. The examination will occur in two parts (Private Defense and Public Seminar) that will take place on separate days. Students must submit well-formatted, complete copies of their thesis to members of their Thesis Committee a **minimum of two weeks** prior to the date of the meeting. Failure to submit the thesis in a timely fashion will require rescheduling of the closed session meeting.

Part 1 (Private Defense) is a thesis evaluation conducted by the Thesis Committee and involves a closed session Thesis Committee Meeting. All thesis committee members will have read the thesis before this meeting. If this has not happened, the meeting will be postponed until all members have read the thesis. During the meeting the student will summarize the major findings of their graduate research and if appropriate, update the committee on experiments completed since the penultimate committee meeting. Thesis committee members should be prepared to provide recommendations for revision of the thesis. In certain cases, it may be necessary to postpone the public seminar until the dissertation is considered satisfactory.

Part 2 (Public Seminar) is a high-quality seminar delivered by the student. The public seminar should take place within 10-30 days after the thesis evaluation but not before or after that time frame. If circumstances require the public seminar to take place outside of said time frame, students may submit a written appeal to the Graduate Program Director. All thesis committee members are expected to attend the public seminar.

⇒ Both parts of the exam must be completed to the satisfaction of the thesis committee for the student to pass the examination.

Students must ensure that their thesis meets the guidelines and requirements of the University's Dissertation Office (https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/research/scholar/phd/students/).

22. ***Term of Graduate Research Training –*** Graduate students in BMB have a maximum term of 32 quarters for the completion of thesis research leading to their Ph.D. This includes defense, submission of their dissertation, and all other requirements needed for graduation. BMB, students who have not had their penultimate meeting by the beginning of Autumn Quarter of their seventh year are required to undergo a review to access research progress and potential for fulfilling degree requirements in a timely fashion. For the review, the student must provide the following information.

- A cover letter that includes a proposed timeline for graduation
- Curriculum vitae
- Detailed summary of graduate research and accomplishments including reprints of published papers, preprints of submitted papers, or drafts of manuscripts in preparation
- Outline of proposed dissertation
- List of ongoing experiments to be completed before graduation
- Signature of the thesis advisor

The review materials will be considered incomplete if any of the above is not provided. To ensure an accurate view of research progress, the Curriculum Committee may meet with students as part of the review process. Students who are unable to meet all requirements before the **maximum term of 32 quarters** will be administratively withdrawn from the program.

23. ***Leave of Absence –*** Under unusual circumstances (usually involving personal difficulties), students may request a leave of absence from their graduate studies. Petitions for leave of absence must be submitted in writing to the Dean of Students office for consideration in accordance with BSD (link) and university (link) policies. Such petitions must describe the relevant circumstances, the importance of the leave to the student, and a plan for returning to full-time study and completion of requirements. Leave of absence petitions are generally approved for students in good standing who express sound reasons for choosing to enter out-of-residence status. A leave of absence can be approved for a period of no longer than 12 months. Students who will be out of residence for a longer period must petition annually for an extension of their leave. Students on an extended leave of absence may be required to fulfill additional course requirements. A leave of absence will not be approved indefinitely and that a leave may alter the ability of students to resume their research upon their return to academic residence.

24. ***Vacation Policy*** – Graduate students who are fully registered and receiving a full stipend for four academic quarters are required to be on campus, in residence, and engaged in study or research during all four quarters, including summer quarter. During the first year in the graduate program, vacations generally coincide with the university's academic calendar. Prior to joining a laboratory, first year students who wish to take a vacation at other times, including during summer quarter, must obtain the approval of the Program Director. After joining a laboratory, the amount and the timing of vacation must be agreed by a student and their advisor.

25. ***Religious Accommodation*** **–** The BMB graduate program follows the University policies on Policy on Religious Accommodation for Missed Classes, Assignments, and Exams (link).

26. ***Graduate student support after the 6th year*** **–** Research advisors and the thesis committees must make every effort to help students complete their dissertation research within six years. If students plan to continue beyond the 6th year, they must petition the curriculum committee for an exception.

27. ***Waiving Requirements*** **–** The Program expects that its pre-doctoral students will follow the guidelines set forth in this handbook and meet the requirements of the program in a timely fashion. Under extenuating circumstances, students may petition the Curriculum Committee for a waiver of a requirement or for extension of a deadline. Such petitions must be in writing, must state the related background, and must explain why the request is being made. Petitions may be accepted (with a detailed schedule possibly being set for completion of responsibilities) or may be denied. The timely submission of a petition for waiver of a requirement, or for extension of a deadline, remains the student's responsibility.

28. ***Problems or difficulties*** **–** At various times during their stay in graduate school; students might experience a problem that concerns an academic or personal matter. The faculty and staff of the Department and the Program are here to help. On the one hand, a student's first contact in seeking help might be their thesis advisor or the graduate education administrator. On the other hand, a student might wish instead to contact the Chair of the Thesis Committee, the Graduate Program Director, the Chair of the Department or any other faculty member. Students should not hesitate to ask for assistance (be it advice or intervention) whenever they need it.

29. ***Grievances*** **–** The BMB graduate program follows the Biological Sciences Division policies on resolving graduate students' concerns about academic matters. Academic matters include but are not limited to such matters as course grades, teaching assignments, publication rights, timely feedback on academic work, timeliness of letters of recommendation, and application of policies and practices (link).

Other Complaints

Complaints about sexual harassment or discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, veteran status, genetic information, or other protected classes under the law are addressed under the University's unlawful discrimination and harassment policy. For more information, please see reference the Student Manual's Policy on Harassment, Discrimination, and Sexual Misconduct (link) and The University of Chicago Policy on Title IX Sexual Harassment (link).

30. ***Final Quarter Funding Plan –*** The final quarter funding plan is to confirm a student's plans regarding participation in the research lab, in consultation with the thesis advisory committee, and to confirm expectations for fellowship support. This document is to be finalized at the last thesis committee meeting before scheduling the dissertation defense.

31. ***Graduate Student Parent Policy –*** The BMB graduate program follows the Biological Sciences Division policies on Graduate Student Parent Policy (link).

32. ***Collective Bargaining Agreement*** – The terms and conditions of employment for certain graduate students at the University of Chicago who are employed to perform instructional or research services will be determined by a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) between the University and Graduate Students United ("GSU-UE") for the duration of the assignment to perform such services. Students can access the CBA and review frequently asked questions about graduate student unionization on the Provost's office website.

33. ***Listservs –*** All incoming graduate students will be added to program and departmental listservs by the graduate education administrator. Students may use these listserv to send out emails regarding events and information that are pertinent to the program/department but it is up to the discretion of the listserv administrator to approve messages for dispersal.

34. ***Room reservations –*** Students may email the graduate education administrator or the department administrators if they are in need of a room for a program/department related event. Rooms controlled by the department include GCIS W123C, GCIS W223C, and KCBD 3200. For all other room inquiries, please contact the graduate education administrator.

35. ***Questions concerning requirements and milestones –*** Students with questions may contact the Giovanni Tolentino Ramos (BMB graduate education administrator), Stephanie Laine (Cluster Director), Chaevia Clendinen (the Dean of Students), or Amanda Young, (Director, Graduate Student Affairs) in UChicagoGRAD.

Recent updates to BSD graduate policies

The Biological Sciences Division maintains graduate policies that apply across programs. Policies without "PhD" in the document name apply to all graduate students.

Recent updates include the following:

New policies. Two new policies have been added:

- Residency Requirement Policy
- PhD First Year Academic Engagement Policy

Leave of absence. Students who request a personal leave of absence after the fourth week of the quarter must remain on leave the following quarter as well.

PhD defense and graduation. The quarter in which a student defends is the student's last quarter of enrollment.

Please contact the program administrator for the full policies or with any questions.

Molecular Biosciences Curriculum

2026–27

Requirements for students registered in the five units in the Cluster will be as follows:

Biochemistry & Molecular Biophysics: Four required courses: Protein Fundamentals (Fall), Biophysical Properties of Biomolecules (Spring), one course in Cell Biology, Fundamentals of Biological Data Analysis (BCMB 33500), and one of the following: Nucleic Acids Structure and Function OR a course in Molecular Biology

AND Current Seminar Topics in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.

AND Comprehensive Exam (beginning of Summer Quarter)

Additional recommended courses: Membrane Proteins, Evolution of Biological Molecules, Simulation, Modeling and Computation in Biophysics, Methods in Structural Biology, Molecular Immunology, Scientific Grant Writing for Biological Sciences

Development, Regeneration, and Stem Cell Biology: Three required courses: One course in Cell Biology, One course in Genetics, One course in Molecular Biology

Genetics, Genomics & Systems Biology: **EMPIRICAL TRACK:**

Four required courses: Genetics Analysis of Model Organisms, Genomics & Systems Biology, Molecular Biology (I or II), and one of the following courses: Fundamentals of Molecular Evolution, OR Principles of Population Genetics I OR Evolutionary Genomics OR Human Variation & Disease

COMPUTATIONAL TRACK:

Three required courses: Statistical Theory and Methods, Fundamentals of Computational Biology: Models and Inference, Fundamentals of Computational Biology: Algorithms and Applications; **AND**
Three of the following core elective courses required: Human Genetics I, Genetic Analysis of Model Organisms, Introductory Statistical Genetics, Principles of Population Genetics I, Evolution of Biological Molecules, Biophysics of Biomolecules, Human Variation and Disease, Genomics and Systems Biology, Quantitative Analysis of Biological Dynamics

Human Genetics:

EMPIRICAL TRACK:

Two required courses: Human Genetics I **and** Human Variation & Disease
AND
Two of the following required core elective courses: Intro Statistical Genetics OR Evolution of Biological Molecules OR Fundamentals of Computational Biology: Models and Inference OR Principles of Population Genetics I OR Genomics and Systems Biology OR Molecular Biology II OR Genetic Analysis of Model Organisms OR Developmental Mechanisms

COMPUTATIONAL TRACK:

Three required courses: Statistical Theory and Methods, Fundamentals of Computational Biology: Models and Inference, Fundamentals of Computational Biology: Algorithms and Applications; **AND** Three of the following core elective courses required: Human Genetics I, Genetic Analysis of Model Organisms, Introductory Statistical Genetics, Principles of Population Genetics I, Evolution of Biological Molecules, Biophysics of Biomolecules, Human Variation and Disease, Genomics and Systems Biology, Quantitative Analysis of Biological Dynamics, Systems Biology, Quantitative Analysis of Biological Dynamics

Cell and Molecular Biology: Four required courses: One course in Cell Biology, One course in Genetics, One course in Molecular Biology, and an additional course in one of these areas.

* Students who are undecided about which of the five units they would like to join are advised to take the following courses during their first two quarters to facilitate their transition from one unit to another:

FALL QUARTER WINTER QUARTER

Cell Biology Molecular Biology I

Genetic Analysis

Protein Fundamentals

Human Genetics I

Biochemistry & Molecular Biophysics Courses

2026–27

Autumn Quarter Courses

BCMB 30000 – Exploratory Data Analysis in R: This course will introduce students to exploratory data analysis in the sciences using the R programming language. We will begin with exploration of example datasets, using plotting tools in R to visualize distributions of measured values and relationships between measured variables. We will learn to use basic tools in R to import and clean up messy datasets encountered in the wild, represent these data within standardized data tables, and then manipulate data within these tables to compute or extract features of interest. We will introduce simple programming techniques involving flow control, direct indexing of data structures, and user-defined functions, to tackle more advanced situations, and we will learn to refine our graphical presentation and prepare figures for publication. Throughout the course, we will introduce ways to organize code and methods in scripts, notebook-style documents, and projects to create reproducible analysis workflows. Finally, we will learn how to work with a personal computer or a remote system from the command line when more computational power is needed for a given problem. The course will be taught in a flipped format, with prerecorded video lectures followed by in-class live programming exercises. The majority of the work will occur in these live group sessions, with additional problems assigned as solo homework. Grading will be P/F. *Rock*

BCMB 30400 – Protein Fundamentals: The course covers the physical-chemical phenomena that define protein structure and function. Topics include: the principles of protein folding, molecular motion, and molecular recognition; protein evolution, design, and engineering; enzyme catalysis; regulation of protein function and molecular machines; proteomics and systems biology. *Sotomayor, Araç, Piccirilli*

BCMB 31400 – Genetic Analysis of Model Organisms (=MGCB 31400): Fundamental principles of genetics discussed in the context of current approaches to mapping and functional characterization of genes. The relative strengths and weaknesses of leading model organisms are emphasized via problem-solving and critical reading of original literature. *Bishop*

BCMB 31600 – Cell Biology (=MGCB 31600): Eukaryotic protein traffic and related topics, including molecular motors and cytoskeletal dynamics, organelle architecture and biogenesis, protein translocation and sorting, compartmentalization in the secretory pathway, endocytosis and exocytosis, and mechanisms and regulation of membrane fusion. *Turkewitz, Glick*

BCMB 31800 – Current Seminar Topics in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: This course will expose students to current research topics in biochemistry and molecular biology by highlighting a selection of speakers from the weekly seminar series. Prior to each highlighted seminar, we will discuss relevant papers and subsequently, we will review the seminar. **This is a required ½ credit course for all BMB first year students and will be graded as Pass/Fail.** *Kossiakoff*

BCMB 31900 – Introduction to Faculty Research: Lectures on current research by departmental faculty and other invited speakers. This is a required course for all first-year graduate students. *Staff*

BCMB 33300 – Scientific Grant Writing for Biological Sciences: Establishing the skills to write clear and effective grants is an important skill for biomedical researchers, particularly those planning a career in research and development, including academia and industry. This course is designed to equip students with the skills to effectively craft successful biomedical grant proposals, specifically focused on the F31 NIH format. Throughout the course, students will learn the mechanics of biomedical scientific fellowship grant, including writing specific aims, developing the research approach, including significance and innovation. Students should already have a research project in mind and will be expected to provide feedback to their peers. *Hayne*

BCMB 39800 – Selected Reading Topics in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: Subject matter for individual tutorial-based study is selected through prior consultation and is given under the guidance of a faculty member. The student and faculty member must indicate at time of registration whether the course will be taken on a letter grade or pass/fail basis. Prerequisite: Consent of Program and Instructor. *Staff*

BCMB 40100 – Research in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: The student conducts original investigation under the direction of a faculty member. The research is presented and defended as a dissertation in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Prerequisite: Completion of course requirements and Comprehensive Examination at the Ph.D. level. *Staff*

Winter Quarter Courses

BCMB 30600 – Nucleic Acid Structure and Function: This course focuses on the biology, biochemistry, and biophysics of nucleic acids. Topics include nucleic acid structure, folding, chemistry and interactions with proteins, the mechanisms of CRISPRs and other biotech tools, non-coding RNAs, and the enzymology of key processes such as DNA replication, repair, and recombination. Emphasis is placed on primary literature and methodology. Prerequisite: Courses in Biochemistry, molecular biology, and organic chemistry. *Rice, Fei*

BCMB 31100 – Evolution of Biological Molecules: The course connects evolutionary changes imprinted in genes and genomes with the structure, function and behavior of the encoded protein and RNA molecules. Central themes are the mechanisms and dynamics by which molecular structure and function evolve, how protein/ RNA architecture shapes evolutionary trajectories, and how patterns in present-day sequence can be interpreted to reveal the interplay data of evolutionary history and molecular properties. Core concepts in macromolecule biochemistry (folding and stability of proteins and RNA, structure-function relationships, kinetics, catalysis) and molecular evolution (selection, mutation, drift, epistasis, effective population size, phylogenetics) will be taught, and the interplay between them explored. *Thornton*

BCMB 31200 – Molecular Biology I (=MGCB 31200): Nucleic acid structure and DNA topology; methodology; nucleic-acid protein interactions; mechanisms and regulation of transcription, replication and genome stability and dynamics. *Rothman-Denes, Bishop*

BCMB 31358 – Simulation, Modeling, and Computation in Biophysics: This course will develop skills for modeling biomolecular systems, proteins, membranes, ion channels. Fundamental knowledge will cover basic statistical mechanics, free energy, and kinetic concepts. Tools will include molecular dynamics and Monte Carlo simulations, random walk and diffusion equations, and methods to generate random Gaussian and Poisson distributions. A term project will involve writing a small program that simulates a process. Familiarity with a programming language or Math lab would be valuable. Prerequisite: BIOS 20200 or consent of instructor. *Roux*

BCMB 32300 – Structure and Function of Membrane Proteins: This course will be an in-depth assessment of the structure and function of biological membranes. In addition to lectures, directed discussions of papers from the literature will be used. The main topics of the course are: (1) Energetic and thermodynamic principles associated with membrane formation, stability and solute transport (2) membrane protein structure, (3) lipid-protein interactions, (4) bioenergetics and transmembrane transport mechanisms, and (5) specific examples of membrane protein systems and their function (channels, transporters, pumps, receptors). Emphasis will be placed on biophysical approaches in these areas. The primary literature will be the main source of reading. Students will be responsible for presentation of each assigned paper and discussions of the significance of the papers. *Perozo, Arac, Keenan, Sotomayor*

BCMB 33500 – Fundamentals of Biological Data analysis: The primary goals of this course are to provide first-year trainees in MCB graduate programs with a common grounding in the core tools of modern quantitative data analysis as used in molecular and cellular biology and a shared quantitative mindset and commitment to rigorous reproducible science. Our goal is not to be comprehensive, but to provide students with the conceptual foundations and practical skills they are most likely to need, regardless of research area. The expectation is that they will build upon these foundations through advanced courses, workshops, and in-lab training. The course will emphasize building reproducible "data analysis workflows" that go from raw data to insights about biological process and function, and presenting those insights in rigorous and informative ways. The course will use R as the primary programming language because of its widespread use and suitability for quantitative statistical data visualization and analysis, but most of the skills students learn will be readily transferrable to other programming languages.

Key elements will include: (a) data import and manipulation, exploratory data analysis using graphical methods, programming methods for assembling these elements into efficient reproducible workflows, (b) using statistical methods and simple models to describe patterns in data, infer relationships, and assess differences across different conditions, over time, etc, and (c) presenting the results of these analyses in publication quality figures, accompanied by rigorous descriptions of methods, results and conclusions. Again, the goal is not mastery per se, but rather an understanding of how one follows multiple paths from raw data to rigorous biological conclusions in a sequence of reproducible steps, each of which can be mastered with further practice. *Munro, Rust, Drummond*

BCMB 39800 – Selected Topics in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: Subject matter for individual tutorial-based study is selected through prior consultation and is given under the guidance of a faculty member. The student and faculty member must indicate at time of registration whether the course will be taken on a letter grade or pass/fail basis. Prerequisite: Consent of Program and Instructor. *Staff*

BSDG 40100 – Non-Thesis Research: The student participates in one of the research programs of the Department. Prerequisite: Consent of Program Chairman and individual faculty member. *Staff*

BCMB 40100 – Research in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: The student conducts original investigation under the direction of a faculty member. The research is presented and defended as a dissertation in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Prerequisite: Completion of course requirements and Comprehensive Examination at the Ph.D. level. *Staff*

Spring Quarter Courses

BCMB 31300 – Molecular Biology II (=MGCB 31300): The content of this course will cover the mechanisms and regulation of eukaryotic gene expression at the transcriptional and post-transcriptional levels. Our goal is to explore with you research frontiers and evolving methodologies. Rather than focusing on the elemental aspects of a topic, the lectures and discussions will focus on the most significant recent developments, their implications, and future directions. Enrollment requires the equivalent of an undergraduate molecular biology course or consent from the instructors. *Staley, Ruthenburg*

BCMB 32200 – Biophysical Properties of Biomolecules: The course will cover the properties of proteins, RNA, DNA, and their interactions. Emphasis will be on interplay between structure, thermodynamics, folding and function at the molecular level. Topics will include cooperativity, linked equilibrium, hydrogen exchange, electrostatics diffusion and binding. *Sosnick*

BCMB 32600 – Methods in Structural Biology: This course aims to provide students with the theoretical and applied knowledge on the use of modern structural biology methods, namely x-ray crystallography, cryo-electron microscopy, and nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy. Basic knowledge of protein chemistry (as provided in BCMB 30400) strongly recommended. *Zhao, Özkan, Meredith, Sachleben*

BCMB 39800 – Selected Topics in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: Subject matter for individual tutorial-based study is selected through prior consultation and is given under the guidance of a faculty member. The student and faculty member must indicate at time of registration whether the course will be taken on a letter grade or pass/fail basis. Prerequisite: Consent of Program and Instructor. *Staff*

BSDG 40100 – Non-Thesis Research – Introduction to Research: The student participates in one of the research programs of the Department. Prerequisite: Consent of Program Chairman and individual faculty member. *Staff*

BCMB 40100 – Research in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: The student conducts original investigation under the direction of a faculty member. The research is presented and defended as a dissertation in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Prerequisite: Completion of course requirements and Comprehensive Examination at the Ph.D. level. *Staff*

Summer Quarter Courses

BCMB 39800 – Selected Topics in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: Subject matter for individual tutorial-based study is selected through prior consultation and is given under the guidance of a faculty

member. The student and faculty member must indicate at time of registration whether the course will be taken on a letter grade or pass/fail basis. Prerequisite: Consent of Program and Instructor. *Staff*

BCMB 39900 – Introduction to Research: The student participates in one of the research programs of the Program. Prerequisite: Consent of Program and individual faculty member. *Staff*

BCMB 40100 – Research in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology: The student conducts original investigation under the direction of a faculty member. The research is presented and defended as a dissertation in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Prerequisite: Completion of course requirements and Comprehensive Examination at the Ph.D. level. *Staff*

Comprehensive Examination—Student Guidelines

1. Overview

All first-year BMB Ph.D. students are required to take an oral comprehensive exam during the Summer Quarter of their first year. Before the exam, students should have completed the following requirements:

- Protein Fundamentals
- Cell Biology
- Biophysical Properties of Biomolecules
- Fundamentals of Biological Data Analysis
- Either Nucleic Acid Structure and Function or Molecular Biology
- At least two elective courses
- Two rotations
- Scientific Integrity and the Ethical Conduct of Research
- Attendance at All Stars series

2. Exam Format

Students will be assigned to a comprehensive exam committee consisting of at least three BMB faculty trainers. A date and time for the exam will be set once the committee is formed. One week prior to the exam, each student will select a pair of research articles from a list generated by the faculty. The exam format is as follows:

- The student initiates a chalk talk presentation (no PowerPoint presentations), fielding questions from the exam faculty as they arise.
- The research papers serve as a starting point for questions and discussion that may extend beyond the immediate field of research.
- The evaluation will focus on the student's critical understanding of concepts, methods, experimental design and interpretation, and their ability to synthesize and integrate knowledge both within and outside the immediate field of research represented in the exam paper.
- Students will know the results of the exam by the end of the day.

3. Preparation

Students taking the Comprehensive Exam will prepare by doing the following:

- Select Articles: One week prior to the exam, select a pair of research articles from the list provided by the faculty.
- Review and Understand: Thoroughly review and understand the articles, focusing on the background, objectives, methodologies, results, and conclusions.
- Identify Key Points: Identify the key points and significant findings of each article.

- Propose Future Research: Develop ideas for follow-up experiments or research goals based on the findings of the articles.

4. Presentation Format

The student should begin by introducing the selected research articles, including their titles, authors, and the primary research questions they address. It is important to provide sufficient background information to help the audience understand the context and significance of the studies. Each article should then be summarized, highlighting the research objectives, methodologies, key findings, and conclusions. Following the summaries, a critical analysis should be conducted, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the studies, evaluating the experimental design and data interpretation, and assessing the validity of the conclusions. A comparison of the articles should be included, noting any discrepancies or complementary findings. The student should then integrate knowledge from relevant coursework and other scholarly sources to offer a broader perspective and explain how the research fits into the larger context of the field. Based on the findings, future research directions should be proposed, with a clear justification for their significance and feasibility, along with a description of the proposed experimental approaches. Throughout the presentation, the student must be prepared to respond to questions from the committee, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the research and the ability to engage with the topic critically and creatively.

5. Intent of the Comprehensive Exam

The purpose of this examination is to encourage students to synthesize their knowledge and understanding of biochemistry and molecular biophysics, fostering the development of critical thinking skills. It serves as an opportunity for students to integrate the concepts and information learned during their first year of study, while also identifying and addressing any gaps in their knowledge before moving on to more specialized research projects. Additionally, the examination aims to highlight areas of weakness in a student's comprehension, allowing for timely intervention and correction to better prepare them for advanced study and research.

6. Duration

The exam will last 90 minutes. It is probably best to plan a chalk talk presentation that would last about 30–40 minutes when delivered without interruption (but expect to be regularly interrupted).

7. Outcomes

- **Pass:** No revision or subsequent updates required
- **Conditional Pass**: The student is asked to address one or more perceived weaknesses by providing a short write-up. For example, short write-ups could be requested to demonstrate understanding of a particular concept or method or to address potential issues with the proposed future experiments.

- **Retake Required:** Repeat the examination with a different pair of research articles.

8. Confidentiality

Once students have access to the list of publications, they should not share this information with other students to avoid compromising the integrity of the exam.

9. Tips for the Comprehensive Examination

- **Be Clear and Concise:** Present your points clearly and concisely. Avoid unnecessary details and focus on the most important aspects.
- **Use Visual Aids:** While PowerPoint presentations are not allowed, you can use the whiteboard to draw diagrams, experimental setups, and other visual aids to support your presentation. You will not be penalized for weak drawing skills, but any drawings should be accurate.
- **Practice:** Practice your presentation to ensure you can deliver it smoothly and confidently.
- **Engage the Committee:** be receptive to their questions and feedback.

Comprehensive Examination—Faculty Expectations and Responsibilities

Before the exam:

All members of the comprehensive exam committee are expected to thoroughly review the articles selected by their respective BMB students prior to the start of their exam. This preparation will ensure that the committees will be able to provide feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the student's chalk talk presentation.

After the exam:

The exam committee should fill out the student evaluation form and recommendation an outcome to the Curriculum Committee. *Please indicate the outcome to the student immediately after the exam.* In addition, the chairperson of each exam committee should prepare a written assessment of the student's performance discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the oral exam. This written feedback will be given to all students after the outcomes are decided. The evaluation form and the written assessment should be brought to the Graduate Student Administrator.

Following all the exams, the Chairperson of each exam committee will then be responsible for communicating the outcome to the student and providing them with the written assessments (not the evaluation forms).

If the committee is recommending revisions before the student can pass the exam, indicate what the student needs to do to earn a pass and the date by which the revisions are due. If revisions are sought, clearly indicate what weaknesses need to be addressed. In most cases, students should be given 2 weeks to prepare written revisions. Students are required to orally re-defend the revised proposal with all or a portion of the committee before a pass can be granted. In cases where the student's initial performance is particularly weak, they should re-defend a new set of articles. For the re-defense of a new set of articles, an additional faculty member will be added to the exam committee. Students should be given 4 weeks to re-defend. In both cases, students should write a cover letter addressing the changes they have made.

Comprehensive Examination Evaluation Form

Student:

Committee Members: (chair)

1. Does the student demonstrate sufficient background knowledge pertinent to the

proposed project?

outstanding good average poor

2. Does the proposed research test a significant question in the field?

outstanding good average poor

3. Will the proposed experiments test the question? (E.g. Does the student describe possible outcomes and their interpretations; does the student identify potential difficulties and alternative approaches?)

outstanding good average poor

4. Is the proposal well organized and clearly written?

outstanding good average poor

5. Does the student demonstrate sufficient knowledge of experimental techniques pertinent to the proposed project?

outstanding good average poor

6. Does the student demonstrate creativity and innovation?

outstanding good average poor

7. What are strengths of the proposal and/or oral examination?

8. What are weaknesses of the proposal and/or oral examination?

Recommendation to the Curriculum Committee (circle one)

pass revisions needed

If the student does not pass, what should be done to remedy weaknesses listed in #8? Please be explicit. Due date for revisions?

Chair: _____

General Timetable for a Ph.D. Degree in Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics

Your thesis will receive four levels of review prior to the time that it is accepted by the University to fulfill requirements for the Ph.D. degree. These levels of review include (a) evaluation by your thesis committee (which has primary responsibility for considering the content of your thesis with respect to academic standards), (b) evaluation by your thesis advisor (who must indicate satisfaction with your thesis and must ensure that any changes suggested by your Committee have been incorporated into the thesis), (c) evaluation by the Department (the Chair of which is responsible for certifying that the thesis meets the academic and other standards of the department), and (d) evaluation by the Dissertation Office (which has primary responsibility for considering your thesis with respect to physical standards of format and style).

TIMETABLE

1. Do your research.

2. Write your thesis.

3. Get all the help you can! Pass as many drafts of your thesis as you feel conscionable past your advisor. Ask your colleagues to read your thesis. Confer with anyone else you can think of (valued faculty mentors, significant others, or whomever). Look at (and read) the theses of other graduate students who have recently received their Ph.D. degrees.

4. Submit semifinal, high-quality copies of your thesis to members of your Thesis Committee a minimum of two weeks prior to the date of your thesis examination (Private Defense). At the same time (or even earlier), take a copy of your thesis of the Dissertation Office for its preliminary review. (This saves time and effort later in case any errors in physical make-up are discovered.)

5. Successfully pass your closed-door thesis examination and successfully present your public seminar.

6. Make all needed changes in your thesis (including those required by your Thesis Committee and any required by the Dissertation Office).

7. Obtain a Departmental Thesis Approval form from the university's Dissertation Office (link) at or the program office. Ask your advisor or the chair of your thesis committee to send an email confirmation to Program Education Administrator and Program Director indicating that your revised thesis meets with his or her approval and that all changes required by your Thesis Advisory Committee have been incorporated into the final document.

8. Submit the signed Departmental Thesis Approval form to the program office for approval by the Program Director. (This usually requires only a day.)

9. Submit the final version of your thesis to the Dissertation Office.

Financial Support

All Ph.D. students are supported on divisional funds, training or research grants. All graduate student stipends are paid via direct deposit on the last business day of each month while tuition and fees are paid directly to the student's account. Stipends paid to Research assistants supported by the research sponsor on a research grant are subject to monthly tax withholdings. Stipends supported by a training grant, NSF, or F award will not have taxes withheld monthly and students are required to make quarterly estimated tax payments to the IRS and State of Illinois.

Training grant support, for those appointed, usually begins in year two and lasts about two years, after which the student is supported by the research sponsor on a research grant or other approved awards.

Above and beyond the stipend, some students may work as a Teaching Assistant or Study Group Facilitator. Such added work is subject to approval by the student's research advisor and the departmental chair.

In keeping with its long-standing traditions and policies, The University of Chicago, in admissions, employment, and access to programs considers students on the basis of individual merit and without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national or ethnic origin, handicap, or other factors irrelevant to fruitful participation in the programs of the University. The Affirmative Action Officer is the University official responsible for coordinating its adherence to this policy, and the related federal and state laws and regulations (including Section 505 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended).