

# PhD Rotation Guide for Incoming Students

Department of Biological Sciences — Purdue University  
Academic Year 2026–2027

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*While some of the graduate students in our department are directly admitted into a lab, many students do laboratory rotations to find the permanent lab in which they will work towards their doctoral degree. This guide is intended for students who start their graduate program without a permanent faculty advisor assigned and will be doing rotations during their first year.*

## Welcome to Rotations

Laboratory rotations are one of the most important experiences in your first year. They give you the chance to explore different research environments, develop new skills, and find a lab where you will conduct your dissertation research. This guide is designed to help you navigate the rotation process strategically and with full information about how placement decisions are made.

We want you to succeed in finding a home lab that is a strong mutual fit for both you and the faculty mentor. The policies and resources described below are designed to make that process as transparent and fair as possible.

## How Rotations Work

The program offers a maximum of four rotation slots across your first year as described in the table below. If you do not have a lab for your first rotation yet, please contact potential faculty mentors right away. Feel free to reach out to the Graduate Coordinator, Patti Dimmitt ([poliver@purdue.edu](mailto:poliver@purdue.edu)), for support.

| Period            | Timing     | Status                           |
|-------------------|------------|----------------------------------|
| Fall Rotation 1   | Weeks 2–8  | Required                         |
| Fall Rotation 2   | Weeks 9–15 | Required (unless already placed) |
| Spring Rotation 1 | Weeks 1–8  | Required (unless already placed) |
| Spring Rotation 2 | Weeks 9–15 | Required (unless already placed) |

## Lab availability information is published

During orientation week, you will receive a **Lab Availability Sheet** listing which faculty have open PhD positions, how many students they plan to accept, which rotation slots they are available for, and what skills or background they are looking for.

## What You Need to Know About Lab Placement

We want to support you finding a lab that is a strong match for you and allow you to start working on your research in a timely manner. If you rotate in a lab that is right for you, have a conversation with the faculty mentor about joining their research group before the end of that rotation. If there is mutual agreement between you and the mentor, submit a placement request to the Graduate Coordinator.

### Placement is not guaranteed

Completing a rotation in a lab does not guarantee you a position in that lab. Placement requires mutual agreement between you and the faculty member, **and** final approval from the Chair of Graduate Programs and the Business Office.

#### **Important: Students can join a lab after completing their first rotation.**

The goal of rotations is to identify a strong mutual fit, not to complete a predetermined number of rotations. Once you and a faculty mentor agree that you have found the right match, you may join that lab without completing additional rotations. Because lab availability may change as students are placed, we encourage you to explore your strongest interests early in the rotation process

### You will receive structured feedback

At the end of each rotation, your faculty mentor will complete a **Rotation Performance Evaluation** that assesses your work across four dimensions: scientific communication, technical proficiency, reliability and independence, and intellectual engagement. This evaluation will be shared with you and discussed in a brief meeting.

This feedback is designed to help you grow as a scientist, regardless of whether you end up joining that particular lab.

### Strategic Advice for a Successful Rotation Year

1. **Prioritize your top-choice labs early.** If you have a strong interest in a specific lab, rotate there during Fall Rotation 1. Labs with limited capacity may fill positions before Spring.
2. **Use the rotation slots to find a good match.** While choosing a lab during early rotations gives you a head start with research, additional rotations broaden your exposure and provide a backup option. Ultimately, the goal of rotating is to help you find a lab aligned with your research interests and doctoral goals.
3. **Talk to current graduate students.** Ask students already in the lab about the environment, mentoring style, expectations, and workload.
4. **Communicate openly with your rotation mentor.** Ask what they are looking for in a student. Discuss funding, project availability, and timelines.
5. **Review your rotation evaluation carefully.** If you receive feedback about areas for improvement, take it seriously and work to address it in your next rotation.

6. **Seek help early if placement is uncertain.** If you are approaching your third rotation without a clear path, contact the Chair of Graduate Programs (Dr. Ximena Bernal, [xbernal@purdue.edu](mailto:xbernal@purdue.edu)) or the Graduate Coordinator (Patti Dimmitt ([poliver@purdue.edu](mailto:poliver@purdue.edu)) immediately.

### What Happens If I Don't Secure a Home Lab?

If you have not secured a home lab after four required rotations, you will meet with the Chair of Graduate Programs to discuss options, including placement in a lab with open capacity (if available and a good match).

Not securing a home lab after your initial rotations does not mean you have failed. Lab placement depends on many factors beyond your control, including lab capacity, funding availability, and research fit. The Graduate Office tracks these factors and works proactively to identify solutions.

### Key Contacts and Resources

| Resource                                    | Contact                                                                        | For Help With                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Chair of Graduate Programs</b>           | Ximena Bernal<br><a href="mailto:xbernal@purdue.edu">xbernal@purdue.edu</a>    | General oversight, placement difficulties, policy questions, extensions |
| <b>Graduate Coordinator</b>                 | Patti Dimmitt<br><a href="mailto:poliver@purdue.edu">poliver@purdue.edu</a>    | Forms, scheduling, rotation logistics, TA assignments, student records  |
| <b>Your Faculty Mentor</b>                  | Assigned at orientation                                                        | Rotation strategy, career advice, lab choices                           |
| <b>Research Area Conveners</b>              | See graduate website                                                           | Area-specific lab recommendations, course planning                      |
| <b>Assistant Head for Academic Programs</b> | Linda Girouard<br><a href="mailto:lgirouar@purdue.edu">lgirouar@purdue.edu</a> | Orientation week oversight, TA performance, student ombud               |

This guide complements the PhD Program Handbook, which contains the full policies governing rotations and all other program requirements.