

Application to centralized versus department-specific graduate programs

Since biosciences cover a rather diverse array of biological specializations (e.g. Microbiology, Developmental Biology, Structural Biology, etc.), most bioscience graduate programs have moved to an “umbrella” structure. An umbrella program consists of multiple biosciences departments under a single administrative structure. Students are admitted through a centralized admissions process regardless of their subfield of interest. Students perform three-four short-term research projects (rotations) in multiple labs before choosing a lab/mentor for their graduate thesis project. In a few cases, the graduate programs are based on a departmental model, where students get admitted directly to a specific department. It is important to recognize what kind of model your graduate program of interest follows (umbrella or departmental), since the method of application would be different.

For umbrella programs, you do not have to directly contact professors to begin your application process. In fact, even if you do contact them, they’ll simply direct you to the umbrella admissions administration. You will follow a standardized application process and will primarily be in contact with an admissions coordinator. You do have the option to contact professors to show your interest in their work, but since the goal of an umbrella program is to give you access to different kinds of research, it’s best to keep an open mind about multiple areas of research you may be interested in.

For graduate programs having a departmental model, you would directly contact professors whose lab you are interested in, and would likely be required to find a graduate faculty advisor before beginning your graduate studies. (This would be similar to the guidelines provided for departmental programs in the Canada section below).

In either case, every graduate program will have their own website. The website will be the best place to get accurate information about the requirements and the structure of that graduate program. Program websites will also have more information about the application deadlines (which in many cases are earlier for international students), and the frequency at which students are admitted to the graduate program.