

Rotation Guidelines:

Purpose of a rotation:

Rotations are the primary mechanism for students and professors to evaluate each other and to decide if they will work well together in a mentor-mentee relationship. An extension of that is whether you feel comfortable with the lab environment and the rotation advisor's lab leadership/mentorship style. Some advisors cultivate a lab culture with numerous personnel and healthy competition, while others prefer shared work and collaboration. Some professors are very hands-on and participate in day to day lab activities, including bench work. Others take a more high-altitude approach, setting general guidelines for research, writing grants, publicizing the lab's work at meetings etc. In such labs, post-docs and/or technicians, rather than the advisor, may have leadership roles for day to day activities, including resolving conflicts in the lab and supervising junior lab members, including graduate students. All of these styles can create great overall environments for training a PhD student, but some styles will work better for you than others. Doing a rotation will allow you to observe the lab dynamics around most of these factors, giving you the information that you need to make decisions on longer-term lab commitments.

Another important benefit of lab rotations is that they will give you the opportunity to try out different types of neuroscience. Some of you enter graduate school with strong ideas about exactly the type of research you want to do, while others are less sure. For those who know what they want to do (and may have even already selected a dissertation lab), rotations provide an invaluable opportunity to learn about different types of neuroscience research and techniques, and also to be exposed to different types of lab cultures. It is not uncommon for students with strong expectations about the type of research they want to do to change their plans after a particularly successful lab rotation, so, keep an open mind!

Things to consider:

Rotation advisor communication: Is the communication between you and the rotation advisor relatively easy? This is perhaps the most important factor since communication with your advisor is a primary way to learn and an essential way to avoid diversions into non-productivity and longer-term hard-to-fix issues. Please ask your advisory to set up a set time (typically at least once a week) to discuss your specific project and the rotation in general.

Rotation project: Your advisor should define a specific research project for you with a defined timeline and metrics for accessing progress. The timeline and metrics can be quite general or very specific, depending on the advisor. In either case, they often need periodic adjustments based on the scientific results. That is to be expected and does not indicate a problem. The important thing is to start with a plan. This initial plan should be written in the rotation agreement form and sent to the NGP administrator.

Lab members communication: Learning about the research being done by all members of the lab is an important part of the lab rotation experience. Are the lab members willing to discuss their work with you? Does the lab have specific times to discuss research projects such as at lab meetings?

Lab environment: Is the lab environment along the lines of what you think will work for you? Some labs have a strong sense of comradery, while in others the interactions are more personally and/or professionally distant. Dynamics in large labs can be different from those in smaller labs. Some labs thrive on fast-paced and/or high-pressure research, while others do not. Each of these and many other styles have their benefits and weaknesses. There is no single correct approach and no single style that will fit you perfectly, so focus on choosing a lab style that can work for you rather than seeking a perfect fit. You might find, for example, that a lab's environment is workable if less than ideal, but the science really motivates you. That would be considered a good fit!

If something goes wrong: On occasion, your scientific or mentoring expectations might not be met, a conflict might arise between you and the advisor or a lab member, or other events could occur that disrupt the rotation. In such cases please come to Tony Morielli, the NGP Director, to discuss your concerns. If you are not sure if you want to discuss it with Tony, please ask either Jom Hammack, the Assistant Director, or Haley Olszewski, the NGP administrator, for help. Remember, the NGP, Haley, Tony and Jom are here to help you!

The rotation process:

1. Laboratory rotations occur in the first year of the program.
2. All students must engage in two distinct rotations. All First year students will complete a 9-week rotation upon arriving on July 1st or August 1st. There is a 15 week window in the spring, prior to the start of NSCI 395, during which a student may choose to do one 15 week rotation or two 7/8 week rotations. Students who choose to, may undertake a final rotation following the Neural Science course, but are advised to join a dissertation lab by August 31st. **It is perfectly fine if that does not seem feasible. In that case please discuss it with the NGP Director (Tony Morielli).** Third and subsequent rotations typically last 7-14 weeks, with specific timing being by agreement with the student, the mentor and the NGP.
3. Faculty are polled prior to the start of the Fall and Spring semesters and asked to update their availability to serve as mentors. They can indicate that they are available to serve as both a rotation and dissertation advisor, a rotation advisor only, or neither. Faculty also indicate whether they are available to serve on committees. This information is on the NGP website and should be consulted as you begin the process of selecting a rotation lab and eventually a dissertation lab. Later, you can use this site to check for faculty available to serve on your committees.
4. During your first few weeks in the program you will attend a series of "chalk talks" given by faculty who are interested in having new students join their labs. This is the best way to find a rotation lab. However, it is possible that some potential mentors will not give chalk talks and so if there is a lab that you are interested in, you should seek that person out and ask them if they would take you as a rotation student.
5. Your selection process should be based on your interest in the project and if that lab seems like a place you would like to do your dissertation work. However, with a rotation you are not committing to anything in that regard. Asking more senior NGP students is a great way to learn about a lab's environment.

6. Once you have found a rotation lab, you and your rotation advisor together fill out the Rotation Agreement Form (also on the website). This provides an estimated rotation duration, the basic outline of the project, learning objectives for the rotation and any other expectations that the advisor might have.
7. During the rotation it is critical that you discuss your progress with your advisor, preferably weekly.
8. At the end of the rotation **your advisor** will complete a Rotation Evaluation Form for you. This rotation evaluation form is important as it will be available to the NGP to make informed decisions about your progress and potential to continue in the program.
9. At the end of the rotation **you** will complete a Rotation Evaluation Form for your advisor. Your evaluation of your rotation mentor is important as it will help the NGP make informed decisions about whether faculty should be offered advice on adjusting their mentoring style. They will also be considered in those cases where the NGP is, for a variety of reasons, reviewing a faculty's suitability for continuing as a mentor to NGP students.
10. Students present an oral summary of their rotation work in Student Journal Club in the spring semester.
11. When a dissertation advisor is identified, a Mentor Agreement Form will be acknowledged by mentor, student, and the mentor's Chair. It is advised that students also notify former rotation advisors of their decision.