

Rocking your Rotations – A First Year’s Survival Guide in MoGen

You’ve made it! Welcome to the fun and talented scientific community at the University of Toronto. The mix of excitement and anxiety that you and undoubtedly all first year’s experience can be quite daunting at times. But, fear not! To help guide you through the start of your scientific career, this article is designed to help you successfully navigate your rotations, and find the perfect lab for you.

Although a handful of departments have optional rotations, such as Medical Biophysics and Genetic Counselling, in the Department of Molecular Genetics rotations are a mandatory feature of our training program. Rotations are one way graduate programs give you the opportunity to freely discover your research interests, and make an informed choice about where to start your career as a world-class scientist. Throughout the fall semester, new students are required to rotate through at least three different labs before settling into their lab of choice, and attend the annual MoGen retreat that is organized every September by the MoGen Graduate Students Association (GSA). Not only is the retreat a great place to meet other MoGen students, but it also offers plenty of networking opportunities with Principal Investigators (PIs) and upper year graduate students through formal talks, poster presentations and unique social activities. While students are placed in their first rotation, the second rotation is now chosen based on mutual matches determined by a survey completed by you and PIs accepting rotation students. This means that getting noticed at the retreat and making the effort to speak with PIs is of utmost importance and increases your chances of securing a mutual match. Students are then free to independently choose their third rotation.

Graduate school is about creating your own opportunities, and with this year’s entering class being the largest in department’s history, there is no better time to learn how to make the most of your student experience. That being said, I have chosen to collaborate with Samantha Yammine, member of the MoGen GSA and PhD candidate in Developmental Neurobiology and Stem Cell Biology, and Dr. Julie Claycomb, Associate Chair and Graduate Coordinator of Molecular Genetics, to put together a series of important points you may want to consider as you begin to familiarize yourself with the scientific community at the University of Toronto. Finally, for those among you who are considering graduate school, you will also find these guidelines helpful in preparing yourself the future and enhancing your graduate school experience, wherever you choose to study.

In your search for the right lab, try to ask yourself:

1. **Do you want to pursue an MSc or PhD?** – This will not only help you pick the lab that provides the best opportunities for your success, but will also help your PI suggest the right graduate or doctoral project.
2. **What is the lab environment like?** – Lab culture, work hours, student dynamics and types of supervision are very important factors in determining your success.
3. **What is the lab demographic?** – How many students and techs are there? Are they willing to help you?
4. **Why am I, or am I not interested in this lab?** – This question will help you make an informed decision before picking your lab.

When you interview and during your rotation, try to always:

1. **Be professional.** - The way you carry yourself and interact with others can impact your relationships.
2. **Communicate with your supervisor.** – Let your PI know as soon as possible if you are interested in their lab. For every student a PI plans to take into their lab permanently, they can have up to 3 rotation students per semester¹. Early communication can increase your chances of securing a spot.
3. **Read, read, read.** – Reading papers and asking about other projects in the lab shows your desire to learn. Many upper year students and PIs say the best rotation students are those who are teachable and enthusiastic.

4. **Be social and friendly with your lab mates.** – Make the first step to approach them. They are there to help you, and show you the realities of their lab.
5. **Initiate regular meetings with your supervisor.** – Rotations are a two-way street. They are also for PIs to make informed decisions about the right students for their lab. Seize this opportunity to show them why you are the deserving of a position.

During your interview and rotations, try to always ask:

1. **How many students are you planning on taking full-time?** - This will give you a good idea of how many students could be interested in the same position.
2. **Do you have funding for this upcoming academic year?** – Keep in mind that it is always in your best interest to secure a scholarship; it's a great addition on your CV, you may also get a top-up on your stipend, and you can have pride in knowing that you're doing well as a grad student!
3. **Does the lab regularly attend conferences?** – Opportunities to present your research helps you network to advance your research career, and are also a great way to travel!
4. **What do you think about...?** – Scientists are curious by nature. Be encouraged to ask your lab mates and PI questions about their research or new findings you find interesting.

Rotation Do's and Don'ts:

1. **Be proactive and act early!**
2. **Always ask questions and don't be shy.**
3. **Take advantage of departmental workshops and seminars.**
4. **Don't pick all three of your rotations in the department's most competitive labs.**
5. **Get noticed at the retreat and speak up!**

Finally, as you embark on your new career, you may be asking yourself: What happens if I don't get placed into a lab after my 3rd rotation? Don't panic. According to MoGen departmental statistics, in some years up to 4% of students complete a 4th rotation for a variety of reasons, but ultimately choose a lab that they are happy with¹. At the end of the day, keeping an open mind and always seeking out opportunities to learn will no doubt increase your chances of success, wherever you may go!

1. Claycomb, Julie. Interview by Nika Maani. Toronto: 5 Sep. 2016. Online.