The Interdisciplinary Scientist Training Program

The Interdisciplinary Scientist Training Program (ISTP) is a doctoral-degree granting program within the Division of the Biological Sciences at the University of Chicago, awarding a Ph.D. degree in biology. The core mission of the program is to train graduate students in interdisciplinary approaches and foster novel, multi-faceted analyses of biological systems and processes.

Central to the program is the recruitment of unusual students with an aptitude and demonstrable interest in interdisciplinary biological science. Coursework is flexible and individually tailored depending on the student’s background and interests. Students are strongly encouraged to pursue research projects that involve interdisciplinary collaborations between two or more members of the training faculty. A subset of ISTP students are part of a strategic training partnership between Chicago and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Janelia Farm Research Campus (JFRC).

In addition to the BSD application requirements, students must submit a brief description of a proposed Ph.D. research project, designed to span the research interests of two or more participating faculty trainers. The applicants selected for interviews for the ISTP will be highly committed, well-prepared and ready to pursue challenging research projects. During the interview process, candidates will be provided extensive opportunities to discuss their proposed research with their potential advisors and will present their proposals orally to a committee. Selection into the program will be based on academic credentials, letters of recommendation, preparation and motivation for interdisciplinary training and quality of research ideas.

Incoming students are advised by the program director in consultation with a relevant member of the steering committee or program faculty to select courses and formulate individual programs of study. This steering committee or program faculty member provides oversight and guidance for the trainee in their first year. New trainees are introduced to the ISTP in an annual orientation session. Members of the steering committee and current ISTP trainees also participate in the orientation session.

All students are strongly encouraged to pursue research projects that involve interdisciplinary collaborations between two or more members of the training faculty. Students choose two faculty mentors as advisors from among the program training facility. Once the advisors are chosen, a thesis committee is constituted which is typically comprised of four members of the faculty. The chairperson of this committee is a faculty member other than the thesis mentors. The thesis committee is responsible for evaluating the thesis research proposal and its defense as well as monitoring the student’s progress on a yearly basis. ISTP trainees participate in an annual symposium—the venue for the symposium involves both the UC and JFRC campuses. Both participating students and faculty present research talks.
Further information about the program is available from:

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