
iMESA Lab

Expectations of MS and PhD Graduate Students in our Lab

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The iMESA Lab

The iMESA Lab is led by two faculty members from the Department of Biology and Marine Biology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington: Drs. Erwin and López-Legentil. The iMESA research group usually has no more than six graduate students at one time. Most graduate students finish the program with a Master's degree (MS), but if their research progress is exemplary, and funding is available, they may be admitted to continue on for their Doctorate (PhD).

Graduate work in in the iMESA Lab offers the following advantages:

1. Research Assistantships (RA). iMESA faculty actively try to provide RA stipends to their students during the summer months so they can work full time on their own research projects. In general, new graduate students are brought in Fall and will be paid for 3 months the following summer. When not on an RA, graduate students are supported on a Teaching Assistantship (TA).
2. National and International Travel. iMESA faculty have established strong and fruitful collaborations with many national and international researchers, notably in Spain, the United Kingdom and Israel. Some students are provided opportunities to conduct some of their research in collaboration with them (pending funding). These opportunities are funded by research grants and cover the costs of travel, lodging and meals.
3. Scientific meetings. The iMESA Lab strongly encourages their students to present the results of their research projects at national meetings, in particular, the annual spring Benthic Ecology Meeting. In general, the abstract's first author is the presenting author. Travel costs associated with scientific meetings are generally covered by the Graduate School, the Graduate Student Association and the iMESA Lab.
4. Contacts. As mentioned above, the iMESA Lab has many contacts with researchers in the marine sciences both nationally and internationally. Students who complete their degree in an exemplary manner can expect assistance in furthering their careers (letters of reference, job contacts, etc.).
5. Mentorship Opportunities. The iMESA Lab usually has 2 to 6 undergraduate research assistants who are available to MS and PhD students for assistance with their research projects. Laboratory supplies, equipment, and facilities for conducting research are available, or will be provided if costs are reasonable.
6. Publications. Students are listed as first author on publications resulting from their thesis research, provided that they have performed most of the work themselves and submitted a high quality thesis manuscript. In addition, students may be listed as co-authors on publications arising from projects funded by research grants that require a group effort. These projects are usually distinct from student thesis projects and authorship is granted at the iMESA faculty's discretion based on the level of intellectual contribution.

What is expected of the iMESA Graduate Students?

Graduate students are expected to work **independently** and **responsibly** toward completing their degree within the normative period of time (2 years for a MS, 4 additional years for a PhD). Because thesis research is the most important, and most difficult, component of a MS degree, MS students should begin work on their research project as soon as possible. A student's thesis research project must fall under the broad topic area of marine biology, including microbial, molecular, and invasive ecology. Students are strongly encouraged to develop their own projects, but considering available funding and the time constraints involved, it is common for a project to be assigned by the iMESA faculty. Other expectations are as follows:

1. Degree requirements. It is the student's responsibility to fulfill all the requirements for their degree, including all the paperwork described in the [Graduate Handbook](#). The Prospectus should be formulated and signed by the end of the second semester (around April). Course work should be kept to a minimum, with maximum use of Thesis and DIS credits to reach the credit hour requirement.
2. Work ethic. The transition from course work to independent research is a difficult one, and requires **independence, creativity, and discipline**. During the academic year and while serving as a TA, graduate students are expected to put in at least 20 hours per week working on their thesis projects. Students on RA assignments during the summer are expected to work at least 40 hours per week, and can expect to have their salary cut if this level of effort is not evident. **Students shall not engage in additional part-time employment**: being a graduate student is a full-time job.
3. Analysis and presentation of research data. Graduate students are expected to work-up and write-up their data as collected, and to present their results at **weekly Lab meetings** for discussion by the group. These meetings are necessary for problem-solving and for generating new ideas: attendance is mandatory.
4. Applying for institutional or external funding. It is encouraged that students will apply for funding from UNCW and other sources to **support travel to meetings or for field work**, or to help pay for research supplies, equipment or summer salary. Competitive grant awards are important additions to a student's resume. Some award opportunities include: Grad Student Achievement Awards, Grad School Travel Funds, Lerner Gray Fund for Marine Research, Sigma Xi grant- in-aid, etc.
5. Completing the thesis on time and submission of manuscripts for publication. Funding for the iMESA's research program is dependent on high-quality publications in international journals. Generally, 1 publication is generated from a MS thesis and 4-5 from a PhD dissertation. Students should begin **writing manuscripts for publication as soon as possible** and not wait until the end of their graduate term to write up the whole thesis. This is particularly important to help build the resume of a MS student who intends to apply to PhD programs elsewhere, or a PhD student who wants to apply for postdoctoral fellowships.
6. Workload. Graduate students will **work as hard as needed** to complete their degrees within the allotted time (including weekend hours when necessary). Student should also take into account that iMESA faculty have numerous obligations and should submit any requests (reference letters, manuscript edits, etc.) with ample time for completion. Students should not expect active correspondence from iMESA faculty over the weekends (i.e. do not send requests Friday evening that are due Monday morning).