The EGSA Handbook: A Guide to Engineering Graduate Life at Cornell University

The Engineering Graduate Student Association
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Introduction

Welcome to version 2.3 of The EGSA Handbook, the Engineering Graduate Student Association’s “by grads, for grads” guide to being a graduate student in Cornell’s College of Engineering. We have compiled a range of facts and opinions about Cornell, Ithaca, and academic life in engineering, focusing on what grads need to know. In this book you’ll find information about Cornell’s degree programs and their requirements, resources you can use in doing research, Ithaca’s stores, restaurants, and housing options, and recreation around Cornell and Ithaca.

We also try to share some of what we have learned from our experiences. We give some suggestions on how to navigate graduate school at Cornell throughout the handbook chapters, and in particular in our special essay and “Grads Speak” sections (Chapters 9 and 10). No one piece of advice is right for everyone, though. In compiling this handbook, we learned that there are probably as many ways to run your graduate career as there are graduate students. Some students work traditional 9–5 hours, with only occasional all-nighters before a big paper deadline. Others work 18 hour days a few weeks at a time and then take off for a week to travel. Most grad students probably fall somewhere in the middle of that continuum, both by choice and by their advisor’s preference.

One thing that almost everybody agrees on is that the person who will most influence your life while you are a graduate student is your advisor, so choose yours carefully! Ask what they expect from their graduate students. Then, talk to students they already have. You might not be able to find an advisor who has perfectly compatible research interests and work styles, but you’ll be better off knowing about any mismatches up front. When making the decision of who to work with, you should probably sit down and think about why you’re in graduate school and what you want to get out of the experience, and then consider who can help you meet those goals. Even after you have and advisor and a project, go back to these questions and re-evaluate what you’re doing. You might find that your reasons for pursuing a Ph.D. have changed, or that your goals don’t involve having a Ph.D. anymore.

Finally, remember to take some time to enjoy yourself while you’re a graduate student. Most people can’t work productively non-stop, and even if you can, there’s a lot to see and do in Ithaca. As a student, you can still be a part of the Cornell community, but, being older and less campus-centered than most undergraduates, you can also explore the Ithaca community and find friends who aren’t engineers or even students! Graduate school isn’t easy for anybody, and having a full life outside of your research can support you through the difficult times. As hard as graduate school is, many people find that in the end they had fun. So if you find yourself in your office or your lab on a Friday night or a sunny Saturday, we hope you’ll flip through this handbook and find something new to try.

This handbook is, of course, a work in progress. We’ve tried to keep all of the information accurate, but policies change, stores close, and web sites change URLs. If you spot an error or if something has been left out that you think should be included, please let us know by contacting egsa@cornell.edu — we’ve already started our list of improvements for the next version of the handbook!