

Making the most out of your Caltech visit weekend

Welcome to Caltech! Congrats on making it this far.
We're happy to have you and hope you have a great visit.

What does this document contain?

This is a simple guide to navigating the whirlwind that is a graduate school visit weekend, developed by the Caltech Chemistry Graduate Studies Committee (CGSC).

In this guide, you will find:

- recommendations on how to select the professors for the 30-minute meetings scheduled during your visit weekend
- good questions to ask the students you meet this weekend
- advice on what you might consider before joining a lab

Some basic information for your Caltech visit

Is this visit weekend an interview?

No! You're already admitted—we want you here. The visit weekend is meant to help you figure out if you will fit into our division and succeed here.

Since it's not an interview, you don't need to worry about talking yourself up to everyone you meet.

Take a step back and listen. This is your time to gather important information about Caltech. Observe how professors discuss their research and their students. Ask questions about work/life balance, mentoring styles, and how students blow off steam.

As you select professors to speak with during your visit, select at least one professor for whom you might not work but in whose research you're interested.

Your visit will include many 30-minute meetings with Caltech chemistry professors. These meetings are usually the professor talking about their research so you don't need to feel like you have to prepare for these meetings. You might find that you'd really fit into that lab or that something you didn't expect interests you. A Ph.D. is a study of a very small fraction of knowledge so it's a good idea to investigate widely before you choose what tiny fraction you want to study. Making these meetings is a great way to start that!

At the poster session, check out posters of groups you don't want to work for in addition to the groups, in which you're really interested.

It's a great way to get to know research happening in the department, or to prep for your meeting with that professor. It also might help you realize you would love to work on something different.

What should I ask professors during my meetings this weekend?

General topics to ask about:

- What is their mentoring style (hands-on, hands-off)?
- How often do they check in with their students?
- What are they looking for in a student?
- Do most students come in knowing the field already, or are they able to train novices well? For example, if you've never synthesized polymers before, will the polymer lab welcome you?
- What type of programs do the students in the lab come from? Chemistry? Materials science, chemical engineering, etc.?
- What do students in this lab do after grad school? Beyond academia, do some students go into industry or non-traditional careers?
- What's group meeting like? How often do students present? Is there a journal club?

What questions should I ask the students I meet this weekend?

General topics to ask about:

- Work/life balance
- Weekly hours in a group
 - What about holidays?
 - Do people take vacation?
 - Does everyone feel pressured to work on Thanksgiving?
- Collaboration (both at Caltech and beyond)
- Useful coursework to take
- Candidacy exams

Questions to ask individual students:

These questions are good to ask individual students during the social events if they seem hesitant to speak in large groups.

- Is the environment cooperative or competitive within the group?
- How much do you interact with students in other labs?
- Who do you go to when you need help? This could be for help with your research or a personal issue.
- How does the group deal with interpersonal conflicts?
- How does their professor support struggling students?
- What is the current funding situation for the lab?
 - Are your experiments hampered by the lab's budget?
 - Are you able to travel to conferences to present your work?

Ask students what groups they considered joining, but ultimately did not.

You'll learn a lot from these conversations, but keep in mind that another person's reasoning might not resonate with you.

Ask students about their opportunities to present their research—both to the division and at conferences.

Many Caltech students are involved in inviting speakers for the weekly seminars. This key networking event helps grad students build relationships at other schools and also organizational and event planning skills to show off on a resume.

Ask students about their living arrangements and the cost of living in Pasadena/Los Angeles.

Think about how you would choose to do it. Caltech students commute via walking, biking, bussing, and driving. What's the average commute time?

Are you in a long-term relationship or married? Do you identify with a minority group? Seek out grad students who have similar experiences and ask for their advice.

If you want to talk to someone with a specific experience (e.g. religious identity, LGBTQ+, has a child, etc.), ask grad students you meet to point you in the right direction. Most students are happy to speak with you about their experiences.

Take anyone's experience with a grain of salt.

Think like a scientist. A sample size of $n=1$ is not a pattern! Make sure you talk to lots of people to get statistically significant information about labs or professors.

Final thoughts

Even though it's not an interview, remember that first impressions are important. Treat everyone with respect and behave in a professional manner. Even if you don't come to Caltech, these people will be your colleagues in the future.

Relax! Your hard work is paying off. You've made it to Caltech and now all that's left to do is figure out if you will be happy here. Graduate school is a long, hard road, so do your best to gather information and make the best decision.

Feel free to reach out to the CGSC (chemgsc_studentreps@caltech.edu) if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about your upcoming visit weekend. We're looking forward to meeting you!