Weill Cornell Medicine
Graduate School of Medical Sciences
A partnership with the Sloan Kettering Institute

Graduate Program in Neuroscience
Student Handbook 2025-2026

Graduate Program Personnel

Program Chair: **Dr. M. Elizabeth Ross**
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Program Director: **Dr. Teresa Milner**
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Program Co-Director: **Dr. Jacqueline Burre**
email: **jab2058@med.cornell.edu**

Program Manager: **Ms. Maullika Dua**
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Individualized Flexible Program

Neuroscience by its very nature is a multi-disciplinary field, and our students therefore explore their varied research interests through a combination of activities in the lab and in classroom, as well as personal study. The curriculum is flexible and is developed by each student through consultation with the Director and with her/his Advisor to include basic coursework and lab rotations completed during the first 2 years, followed by an Admission to Candidacy Exam (the ACE), and then completion of a thesis.

Courses

Each student must complete 8 required courses and at least 2 electives that complement each student's areas of interest by June 30th of their second year.

Mandatory Courses in Neuroscience:

1st Year Fall

- *Fundamental Principles and Methods of Neurobiology and Pharmacology (Q1-Q2)*
- *From Neuron to Brain: An Introduction to Neuroscience (Q1-Q3)*
- *Advances in Neuroscience (Q1-Q3)*
- *Neuroscience Faculty and their Research (Q1-Q3)*
- *Progress in Neuroscience Seminar (PINS) (Q1-Q4)*

1st Year Spring

- *Neuropharmacology I: Genes, Drugs and Behavior (Q3)*
- *Addiction and Society (Q3-Q4)*
- *Responsible Conduct of Research: A Tri-Institutional Program for Research Trainees* **Mandatory Graduate School Requirement**

2nd Year

- ***Introduction to Biostatistics*** *(Q3-Q4) **

**Mandatory requirement to take in 2nd Year.*

Elective Courses in Neuroscience (suggested – varied years):
Clinical Genetics for Neuroscientists (Q3 or Q4)
Current Topics in Neurodegeneration (Q3-Q4)
Introduction to Neuroimmunology (Q3-Q4)
Mathematical Structures in Neuroscience (Q3-Q4)
Neural Control of Organ Degeneration & Regeneration (Q3)
Developmental Neurobiology (Rockefeller University- varied years)

Other Elective Courses in the Graduate School:
Introduction to Pharmacology (Q 1,2)
Molecular Genetics (Q 1,2)
Biochemistry and Structural Bio Core (Q 1,2)
Principles of Developmental Biology (Q1)

Please also view the 2025-2026 course catalog for alternative course offerings

LABORATORY ROTATIONS & EXPECTATIONS

1. All students must complete 3 lab rotations during the first two years (Students must start their 1st rotation **no later than December in the most extreme circumstances**). The student will choose a Thesis mentor based on the lab rotation experience and acceptance by the faculty member directing the lab.
2. Laboratory rotations last 2-3 months each, the average student spends between 10-14 weeks rotating in a lab. The minimum is 8 weeks, the maximum is 16 weeks. **3 months is recommended**.
3. Students are expected to begin their laboratory rotations **no later** than November of their 1st year. If you will be starting past November, you **must notify Neuroscience Program Leadership**.
4. Please consider your lab rotations carefully, each student must complete 3 laboratory rotations and by their 3rd most students are aware of their thesis lab. If a student has not found a thesis lab, a 4th lab rotation is encouraged. **By the beginning of September, students are expected to have a thesis lab, complete 2nd year course work, and begin research on their ACE.**
5. Laboratory Rotations can be done with Neuroscience Graduate faculty members and/or labs from other programs in the graduate school (i.e. Immunology, BCMB, etc.) or at Memorial Sloan Kettering; as long as the student's research is tied to Neuroscience. If you have questions about rotating with faculty or becoming part of a lab that does not have a Neuroscience appointment, please consult with the program director.

Students should decide on laboratory rotations by discussing opportunities with individual faculty members. Rotations allow students to get hands-on experience with experimental approaches that interest them and **provide an opportunity for students to get to know faculty with whom they may wish to do their thesis work**. Most importantly, they provide an opportunity to learn how to design

controlled experiments, evaluate data, present their data to scientific colleagues, and make new discoveries!

RECRUITMENT

To enhance the state of the Graduate Program, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd years are expected to participate in recruitment days (February of each year). Students will be paired with prospective candidates as an opportunity to help promote the program.

Recruitment Dates:

- **February 2026 (to be confirmed)**

Additionally, all forms and handbooks are accessible via the Graduate School website. It can be located: http://gradschool.weill.cornell.edu/student-experience/student-forms

ACE (QUALIFYING) EXAM

Prior to July 1st of year 2, students must successfully complete the ACE (admission to candidacy examination). The ACE is designed to test the student's general knowledge of neuroscience and includes preparation of an original written research proposal. In consultation with the thesis advisor and with the consent of the director of the program, the student chooses an ACE topic and committee.

Guidelines: The ACE topic MAY deal with the topic of the proposed thesis, but it is not required that the topic of the ACE should eventually be incorporated into the student's PhD dissertation. No preliminary experimental data are required for the ACE. The written and oral are expected to be grounded in the published literature, not the student's own data. The topic may differ from the thesis in model system, methodology or question. The student can meet with the committee about the proposed topic and the thesis advisor can give general feedback on the appropriateness of the aims and design. The format follows the instructions to the individual NRSA NIH graduate fellowship application, except that no experimental pilot data are required or expected in the ACE.

The committee should consist of at least 4 examiners, 3 of whom must be on the neuroscience graduate faculty. These members will include a designated neuroscience faculty member to serve as chair of the committee, the student's thesis advisor and two other faculty members. **The written ACE should be submitted to the graduate school and program administrator 2 weeks before the oral defense** of the ACE. The format of the ACE should be the new NRSA format, with a complete abstract for the proposal, a 1 page specific aims and 6-page research plan and separate pages for references. Please be sure to read and cite empirical studies rather than reviews. Please reference the "ACE Checklist" form for further information on formatting and your committee.

ACE Exam must be completed no later than June 30th of 2nd year.

VACATION POLICY

Any time off **must** be discussed and approved by the PI. This absence is applicable whether you are on a rotation or with your thesis mentor.

News and Events

Make sure to be updated with events at Cornell. There are monthly seminars, workshops, and networking events held at the graduate school. For more information, please visit http://gradschool.weill.cornell.edu/about-us/news-and-events

The BIG D (Dissertation)

After successful completion of coursework and the ACE, the student should form a special committee to oversee their thesis that consists of a designated neuroscience faculty member to serve as chair of the committee, the student's thesis advisor and two other graduate faculty members. This **special committee must meet at least once a year** to provide advice concerning the direction of the thesis. Upon completion of the thesis, the student will prepare the work for publication, present it to the University in an open seminar, and defend the validity of the work before the committee and the members of the Program.

Forms and more information are available from the Graduate School and can be found at this link: https://nexus.med.cornell.edu/display/gradschool.

Program & Graduate school Activities

Graduate students are encouraged and expected to participate in Program and Graduate school activities, including the annual retreat (mandatory), recruitment, Vincent du Vigneaud Research Symposium and other neuroscience activities posted by the Program.

If a student is interested in traveling to a conference, she/he must be presenting a poster and first submit a travel request form to the graduate school. The student pays for costs up front, and is reimbursed up to $1,200 per year.

NEUROSCIENCE STUDENT DIRECTORY

Year	Name	Thesis Lab
2	Ao, Jiarui	
2	Babrowicz, Bergan	
2	Casey, Nicole	
2	Cruz Pineda, Leonardo	
2	Nguyen, Megan	
2	Raad, Tamara	
2	Sunderman, Victoria	
2	Tran, Han Nhat	
2	Wacks, Sam	
2	Wang, Fengyuan	
3	Barr, Olivia	Daniel Heller
3	Bulzomi, Erica	Zhuhao Wu
3	Ciacciarelli, Evan	Eric Lai
3	Donatelle, Alexander	Joshua Levitz/Conor Liston
3	Evans, Brian	Zhuhao Wu/Li Gan
3	Foxe, Nessa	Li Gan
3	Hardin, Evelyn	Anna Orr
3	He, Yi (Francis)	Adrienne Boire
3	Martinez de Kraatz, Marisela	Robert Krencik
3	Mahoney, Matthew	Li Gan
3	McAleer, Jacqueline	Manu Sharma
3	McMahon, Lorna	Robert Rostomily
3	Singh, Ashna	Anna Orr
3	Tomas Baltazaar, Citlalli	Lishomwa Ndhlovu
3	Torres Sicairos, Isis	Philip Horner
3	Tuttman, Anna	Joshua Levitz
3	Zambelas, Joseph	Stephen Wong
4	Booraem, Caroline	Anna Orr/Adam Orr
4	Fall, Alexandra	Francis Lee
4	Gillies, Christie	Amy Kuceyeski
4	Ijaz, Laraib	Anna Orr
4	Mankaliye, Berk	M. Elizabeth Ross
4	Miller, Alekso Milo	Iliyan Iliev
4	Radanovic, Ana	Amy Kuceyeski
4	Rahman, Maliha	Lorenz Studer
4	Rao, Aditya	Manu Sharma
4	Sciortino, Rose	Miklos Toth
4	Silberstein, Dana	Teresa Milner/Michael Glass
4	Swope, Cameron	Jimcy Platholi
4	Villegas, Anthony	Amy Kuceyeski
4	Welday, Jacqueline	Kristen Pleil
5	Bukhari, Syed Hussain	Conor Liston
5	Cross, Abigail	Yueming Li
5	Evangelisti, Alessandro	Lorenz Studer
5	McDonough, Samantha	Manu Sharma
5	Schilling, Louisa	Amy Kuceyski/Conor Liston
5	Wang, Tao	Luis Parada

6	Baako, Ann	Thomas Vierbuchen/Justin Perry
6	Barnett, Daniel	Anna Orr
6	Castagnola, Caitlin	Li Gan
6	Foord, Careen	Hagen Tilgner
6	Hamilton, Pauline	Conor Liston/Jonathan Power
6	Walsh, Alexander	David Simon
7	Al-Naama, Njoud	M. Elizabeth Ross
7	Estrin, David	Conor Liston
7	Mitrano-Towers, Patrick	Geoffrey Pitt
8	Politowska, Nicole	Miklos Toth

M.D./Ph.D.'s

	Campos De Faria, Willian	Amy Kuceyeski
	Chernokal, Brea	Lorenz Studer
	Das, Lala Tanmoy	Geoffrey Pitt
	Davidson, Rina	David Simon
	Iskols, Michael	David Simon
	Karabinas, Isabella	Logan Grosenick
	Mikofsky, Rachel	Conor Liston
	Nilchian, Parsa	Conor Liston
	Shaver, Daniel	Conor Liston
	Pachas, Miguel Chavez	Lorenz Studer
	Tsang, Katherine	Conor Liston
	Whye, Alicia	Anna Orr

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RULES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR NEUROSCIENCE PROGRAM STUDENTS

Details for the rules and regulations for all graduate students are in the Code of Legislation (COL) of the Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences of Cornell University. Below are additional rules and responsibilities for the Neuroscience (NS) Program. These and other important guidelines and forms are available at: https://gradschool.weill.cornell.edu/codeandpolicies https://gradschool.weill.cornell.edu/student-experience/student-forms

The SLATE Academic Progression Portfolio link is here:
Academic Progression Portfolio

LABORATORY ROTATIONS (FIRST YEAR STUDENTS)

(WCGSMS Code of Legislation, pgs. 19, 21)

1) **Lab Rotation form:** G1 students must complete 3 lab rotations. However, they can do a fourth rotation. Students must register for pre-ACE Research (REST 9003) for each semester in LEARN to receive credit for the rotation and to be listed on their transcript. Lab Rotation forms (Rotation Agreement, Student evaluation and Faculty evaluation) are in SLATE. Students and faculty must complete the lab rotation evaluation forms within two weeks of completion of the rotation. Contact the Program Coordinator if problems are encountered. Completed laboratory rotation forms are required for a student to maintain good academic standing.
2) **Lab rotation timing.** We recommend that rotations be taken at the following times: rotation 1 - November to Mid-January; **rotation 2** mid-January to March; **rotation 3** – April to early June. Students wishing to deviate from these time periods should consult Program Directors.
3) **Laboratory rotation expectations:** Students are expected to spend at least 15 hours per week in the lab. Each rotation should be about 8 weeks long but no longer than 10 weeks. Students are expected to provide a 1-2 page write-up or a copy of their final lab presentation slides summarizing their lab experience with the lab rotation form. The content should include specific aims with background, hypothesis, goals as well as results and a discussion of their interpretation. Write-ups and/or slides should be uploaded into SLATE.
4) G1 students will meet individually with the Program Directors in June of their first year.

ADVANCEMENT TO CANDIDACY EXAM (ACE) GUIDELINES (SECOND YEAR STUDENTS)

(WCGSMS Code of Legislation, pgs. 15-17)

1) **ACE deadline:** G2 students must take their ACE exam prior to June 30th of their second year.
2) **ACE procedures:** In October of the 2nd year, the NS Program Directors will review ACE procedures with the students.
3) **Advisor selection**: The student must send their Major Sponsor's name as soon as it is known and no later than December 15th to the NS Program Administrator and Directors. If more time is needed to select a Major Sponsor, the student should contact the Program Directors or Program Chair.
4) **Proposal instruction workshop (required)**: In early January, Anastasia Efthymiou (Office of Fellowships and Scientific Writing) will provide an instructional workshop that includes preparation of the Specific Aims and Research Strategy for an NIH fellowship, useful for the ACE preparation.
5) **ACE committee:** G2 students should assemble their ACE committee and send the names of their committee members and the chair of their committee to the NS Program Administrator by January

31st of their second year. The committee consists of the Major Sponsor and 3 or more faculty members. Three of the Faculty (including the sponsor) must be members of any Program in the Weill Cornell Graduate School (not necessarily NS), as only WCGS faculty may vote to pass the student. Instructions for the ACE protocol will be sent to the Major sponsor and committee members once they have been selected.

6) **Meeting with the Chair:** G2 students will be individually meeting with the Program Chair to discuss their ACE progress in February.
7) **ACE date:** ACE meetings are scheduled for 2 hours. This time period allows for the ACE pre-meeting of the committee, a 45-60 minute presentation by the student, and a post-ACE discussion by the committee. Students should submit their ACE date (determined with the ACE committee approval) to the NS Program Directors, Chair and Coordinator by March 1st. Students must register for the "Admission to Candidacy Exam (ACEX 9003) in LEARN (spring session if exam date is prior to May 5; summer session if their exam date is May 5 or later). Students also must complete the ACE application form in SLATE at least two weeks prior to their scheduled exam date.
8) **ACE proposal first draft:** Students should submit an approximately 1-page summary of their research proposal to their committee members by end of February. Committee members have 2 weeks to provide feedback on the proposal. However, faculty are asked not to provide detailed edits to the proposal. Students have 2 weeks to revise if needed. If extensive revisions are needed, the ACE should be postponed (no later than June 30th). Approval from the committee chair should be sent via email to the NS Program Coordinator. Students should meet frequently with their committee members to get feedback on aspects of their proposal!
9) **ACE proposal format:** Students are highly encouraged to submit their ACE proposal in the format of a fellowship application (e.g., F31). The proposal should be 7 pages total, including one specific aims page and a 6-page research plan including summary figures and preliminary data if existing (but not required) and excluding references.
10) **Full ACE proposal:** The full proposal is due to be distributed to the committee 4 weeks before the scheduled ACE. The committee will provide feedback within 1 week after submission. A final version after incorporating edits from the committee is due no later than 2 weeks prior the scheduled ACE to the graduate school. A final copy of the ACE proposal must be given to the Graduate School (Denise Jenkins djenkins@med.cornell.edu) as well as to the ACE committee faculty.
11) **ACE:** On the day of the ACE, the committee members will excuse the student and vote as to whether or not the written document is acceptable. The committee will not proceed with the oral exam if the written ACE does not receive a PASS. If the written document is tabled, the student will revise the document with assistance from the committee, and re-schedule the ACE. If a student passes the ACE, they are admitted to PhD candidacy. Students can pass the ACE for a Master's degree only (for details see the WCGS policy guidelines). All finalized and signed ACE paperwork and the ACE proposal will reside in SLATE.
12) **Post-ACE**. Post-ACE students must register for "Dissertation Research: NEURO" (REST 9105) in LEARN to receive credit for the research portion of their degree.

Brief timeline

- Advisor Selection: by **December 15**
- ACE proposal workshop: in **January**
- Assemble ACE committee: by **January 31**
- Meeting with Chair (Betsy Ross): in **February**
- ACE date: Submit by **March 1**
- ACE proposal 1 page summary: to committee by **end of February**; committee gives feedback within 2 weeks; then 2 weeks to revise if needed. Chair will send approval to program administrator.
- Full ACE proposal: **Meet with committee members as frequently as needed**. Format is that of F31 proposal and includes 7 pages (1 specific aims page, 6 pages of research plan). Due to committee **4 weeks before scheduled ACE date**. Committee will provide feedback within 1 week. **Final version is due 2 weeks before scheduled ACE**.
- ACE date: Must be completed **no later than June 30th** of Year 2.

THESIS COMMITTEE MEETINGS (POST ACE STUDENTS)

(WCGSMS Code of Legislation, pgs. 15, 18, 19)

1) **Special committee:** The Special thesis committee members do not have to be the same faculty who were on the ACE committee. The committee consists of the sponsor and 3 or more faculty members. Three of the faculty (including the thesis advisor) on the committee must be members of the Weill Cornell Graduate School. The selection of the Special Committee (Thesis Committee) including the Committee Chair must be selected, approved by either Program Director or Program Chair and submitted in SLATE within 3 months after completion of the ACE (WCGSMS Code of Legislation, pgs. 15-16). Instructions for the Thesis Committee protocol will be sent to the Major sponsor, Committee Chair, and committee members once they have been selected. G3 students must submit their "Nomination for Special Committee" forms in SLATE at least two weeks prior to their first committee meeting. G4 students and beyond must make changes to the members of the committee on the "Nomination for Special Committee" form prior to initiating Thesis committee meetings.
2) **Frequency:** Thesis committee meetings must be scheduled at least every 12 months (G3 and G4) or every 6 months (G5 and beyond). More frequent meetings are encouraged for all years. Students can meet as frequently as needed. **Meetings are in-person**. Exceptions for committee members who can only attend remotely must be pre-approved by the Associate Dean.
3) **Scheduling:** Students are encouraged to schedule meetings at least 3 months in advance. Thesis committee meetings should be scheduled for 1.5 hours, unless the committee requests additional time. Contact the Program Directors or Chair if you are having difficulties scheduling the meetings.
4) **Communication:** The student should maintain communication with the committee members throughout the conduction of the thesis work.
5) **Preparation:** The student must send a 1-2 page summary of their work ≥ 1 week ahead of the thesis committee meeting. The summary should include accomplishments so far, plans for future experiments and how their work will be organized into potential manuscripts. These reports are to be uploaded in SLATE.
6) **Thesis Committee Form:** Students must initiate the thesis committee form in SLATE at least one-week prior to the scheduled date of the meeting. The student should alert the Major Sponsor that the form has been initiated in SLATE so that the "Major Sponsor comments on student progress" can be completed prior to meeting. The student should also alert the committee chair that the form has been initiated in SLATE.

OTHER POST-ACE REQUIREMENTS

1) **Individual Development Plans (IDPs):** Students should update IDPs annually by July 1st (https://gradschool.weill.cornell.edu/student-experience/student-forms). Note that this requires a discussion with the mentor. The IDP form will be part of the student's file.
2) **Presentations:** Students are required to give at least one poster or oral presentation annually. Presentations could be local (e.g., BMRI Work-in-Progress, Appel Work-in- Progress, Du Vigneaud Symposium, Program Retreat) or external (e.g., scientific meetings).
3) **Post-ACE evaluations**. Students will be evaluated 3 times/year (Fall, Spring and Summer) by the Program Directors. The post-ACE evaluation will be based on lab research performance. However, this evaluation will take into account completion of thesis committee forms, annual IDP and attendance at the annual retreat.

THESIS DEFENSE

(WCGSMS Code of Legislation, pgs. 17, 18)

1) **Guidelines for dissertation preparation and final submission:** See the WCGSMS Code of Legislation (pgs.17-18) for a description of the thesis defense. Details for the format of the thesis can be obtained from: https://gradschool.weill.cornell.edu/student-experience/student-forms
2) **Dissertation deadlines:** Students must submit their dissertation at least 30 days before their Final Examination (thesis defense) to committee members. The "Application for Final Examination for the PhD Degree" also must be submitted in SLATE at least 30 days in prior to the thesis defense date. Students must send a copy of the dissertation to the NS Program directors at the time they submit the final examination form.
3) **Thesis defense committee:** The thesis defense committee and chair are typically the same faculty as the thesis committee members. However, the thesis defense chair must be different from the thesis committee chair(s). The committee must consist of at least 4 members. Three of the faculty on the committee must be members of the Weill Cornell Graduate School. If needed, additional faculty can be added. (WCGSMS Code of Legislation, pgs. 15-16). Changes to the members of the committee must be made on the "Application for Final Examination for the PhD Degree" form (above).
4) **Dissertation defense:** Students should schedule 1 hour for the thesis defense presentation and 1.5 hours for the thesis defense meeting with the committee. The oral presentation and closed session examination may take place in different rooms.
5) **Publications:** Students should have a body of work that is either accepted, submitted or soon to be submitted for publication.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS (ALL STUDENTS)

1) **Laboratory work week:** In-person work in the laboratory is not limited to Monday- Friday 9am-5pm. However, if students will be working in the laboratory alone, they must obtain a NY Fire Department C-14 Certificate of Fitness (COF). Details for obtaining the COF are available at: https://ehs.weill.cornell.edu/safety/chemical-safety/certificate- fitness-c-14.

2) **Vacations/extended absences:** Students are expected to do lab work during times outside of the academic year. Planned vacations should be approved by either the Program Directors or Chair (G1 and G2 students) or the thesis advisor (G3 students and beyond) at least 1 month prior to the departure date and should be no longer than two weeks. Exceptions require petition to the Directors. The Program Directors or Chair should be notified of extended leaves or emergency

leaves as soon as possible (WGSMS Code of Legislation pgs. 14-15).

Contacts

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