1. Student access and opportunities

During our graduate student recruitment we endeavor to attract applicants who come from a broad range of backgrounds. We utilize two name exchange consortia, The National Name Exchange, also known as the Committee on Cooperative Minority Student Recruitment, which includes 28 major U.S. universities. The Western Name Exchange Consortium is comprised of 26 universities in the western United States. Each year these consortia provide the University with approximately 3,500 names of minority juniors and seniors interested in graduate and professional study. The names are distributed to departments, and each student is also contacted by the Minority Education Division and encouraged to apply for admission to graduate school. We contact each student directly who is interested in Physiology and Biophysics, send them an informational packet and encourage them to apply.

In addition, we purchase names and addresses from the GRE Search service and send out an informational flyer to those who have indicated certain areas of research interest. This service has been tremendously helpful in identifying students from a broad range of backgrounds, cultures and socioeconomic status. Additionally, it has increased our applicant pool by about 10% in each of the last two years.

While reviewing graduate applications, conducting interviews and making offers diversity of background and life experiences is definitely one of the criterion that is considered. Our program does not have formal prerequisites beyond an undergraduate degree so we are able to accept people from a wide variety of academic backgrounds with a broad range of experience. This flexibility greatly increases the pool from which we pull applicants and also increases the diversity within the graduate student population in the department.

We are also committed to supporting all of our students through completion of their PhD dissertation. This support includes both a tuition waiver and a competitive stipend. We do not want financial issues to be a barrier to graduate school for highly qualified candidates.

2. Student development and retention

The department recognizes that all students are unique and have vastly different educational needs. We make a conscious effort to ensure that our students find the best fit when choosing a lab and a thesis advisor. To make certain that a good fit is achieved we encourage everyone to complete at least three separate lab rotations. These rotations allow students to try out a lab, make sure the research is a good fit and that they are comfortable in the lab environment and with their advisor. One of our highest priorities is for our students to find the atmosphere which is most beneficial and conducive to their learning style and where their individual personalities are allowed to thrive.
In addition to the lab rotations Pbio graduate students are permitted to manage the direction in which their education progresses. We do have a few core requirements, but if a student feels like they are deficient in a certain area or they have a certain interest in a subject they are encouraged to take classes in that discipline. This idea is furthered with the implementation of departmental mini-courses. Beginning with this year’s entering graduate student class each student must complete 6 ½ quarter courses of their choosing. Presently, about 15 of these courses exist with additional courses added each quarter based upon suggestions from current students.

3. Engagement with the external community:

A large percentage of our graduate students tutor both undergrads and high school students in the Seattle area. Since a sizable number of Pbio PhD recipients go into teaching, this experience is extremely valuable in terms of the practice it provides and also the exposure to different people and their divergent learning styles. However, this interaction is a two way street. The younger students also benefit from the interaction and the exposure to different teaching styles that the graduate students provide. These sessions are also an opportunity to show future graduate student who graduate students are and just how different from each other they can be.

In addition to tutoring several of our graduate students also do outreach at the local community colleges. As a department we are trying to recruit graduate students from diverse cultures, backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. One of the ways we think we can achieve this goal is to show our target population what a unique and diverse department we are and show them some of our current graduate students who are flourishing in the program. The feedback we have received from these sessions has stated that it has been extremely helpful to be given information from a student point of view and also to have questions answered by people who are currently in the program.

Pbio graduate students are encouraged to attend national conferences to present posters and meet others in their respective fields. These meetings give the outside scientific community exposure to the diverse group of people that the department has to offer while at the same time allowing our graduate students to make connections within the scientific community.

4. Staff and administrative diversity:

The Department of Physiology and Biophysics celebrates the differences in our staff members and believes that the unique points of view, life experiences and distinctive contributions that individuals bring to the department are what make it great. While, HR does all of the recruiting for departmental staff we carry these values into the employee interview/selection process and beyond.
Employee ideas for improvement, effectiveness and efficiency are valued, are most always considered and are frequently implemented. Employee contributions are viewed as extremely important and are appreciated by the department as a whole. We take a value-added approach by recognizing that different life experiences and viewpoints can only enhance both the productivity of the unit and the overall work environment.

5. Faculty diversity:

The Department of Physiology and Biophysics is committed to expanding and maintaining faculty diversity. This commitment has been put into practice in the hiring of new faculty in the last 3 years. Search committees are appointed by the Department chair, who takes great care in selecting a group that is diverse in gender, seniority and (when possible) ethnic background. Since 2000, five new faculty members have been hired, all at the assistant professor level. One of our new recruits is a native of Puerto Rico. He maintains a close, working relationship with the University of Puerto Rico, where he returns twice a year to mentor young academic scientists in grantsmanship and other tasks essential to success as junior faculty. He has also established an invaluable “pipeline” to the best prospective graduate students and postdoctoral (senior) fellow candidates in Puerto Rico. Faculty searches for two new faculty members are underway and are being conducted in the same manner as outlined above. We plan to continue expanding the faculty diversity in the department and embrace the individuality already present in our current faculty members.

6. Curriculum and research:

As mentioned above in the student section we are very much committed to finding a good fit for our graduate students when choosing a thesis advisor. We strongly encourage students to complete three lab rotations and in the past some students have chosen to complete additional rotations, which the department completely supports. Having our students find the right lab environment is much more important to us than the extra cost of supporting them for an additional rotation quarter. We try to shy away from the one size fits all approach.

We are also committed to tailoring the course curriculum to a certain extent to individual student needs. The department has very few core course requirements and we really pride ourselves in being flexible and assessing each student’s educational needs on an individual basis based on their background and prior history. When a student enters the Pbio graduate program they are given an assessment to determine which classes they need to give them a solid science background. They are also given suggestions for additional classes to take beyond the core requirements, based upon their scientific interests and the research direction towards which they are moving. We feel that because the department has such a wide range of research interests and students with such different backgrounds a more individual approach to coursework and curriculum is the correct approach for us to graduate education.
The department has historically been very receptive to suggestions for changes in the course curriculum. One recent example is the replacement of some very broad readings courses with a series of mini-courses to be chosen by the student. Student feedback repeatedly said that the readings courses were too broad and general. Since the research interests in the department are so diverse it made sense that a one size fits all series of courses may not be the best solution. Instead, last year a series of mini-courses (currently at 15) were added to the curriculum where students are able to choose 6 that best fit with their interests. They are also encouraged to submit ideas for new courses, as we would like to keep these courses up to date with current student interests and also “cutting edge” to a certain degree.

7. Climate:

The Department of Physiology & Biophysics is committed to promoting a working and learning environment that encourages respect, inclusiveness and individuality. This ideal holds true for everyone, whether they are a member of the faculty, a graduate student, a staff member or a post-doctoral fellow. We genuinely believe that when people who have different experiences and views colored by those experience are brought together they are forced to consider things from a slightly different perspective than they would have on their own. This interaction fosters creativity and is exactly the ideal that the department is striving to promote.