SRE Frequently Asked Questions

Eligibility

Q. I am graduating before the SRE program occurs. Am I still eligible?

A. Congratulations! But sorry, no, you won’t be eligible for our program. For the NIMBioS SRE you must be enrolled as an undergraduate at a U.S. institution the entire time you are in our program. For those of you not graduating until Fall or Winter after the program occurs, you are in fact still eligible!

Q. I am an international student, am I eligible for your program?

A. You might be! Check below:

Are you enrolled as an undergraduate at a U.S. institution? Does your visa status allow you to work in the United States? (Example, F1 Visa) Then the answer is yes. (Example: Iranian student studying at the University of Illinois on an F1 Visa.)

If you are a U.S. citizen or U.S. permanent resident enrolled in an undergraduate program outside the U.S. or just studying abroad, the answer is still yes! (Example, someone born in the United States who is now studying in Canada).

If you are an international student enrolled at an institution outside the U.S. (including institutions such as American universities based in other countries), I’m afraid the answer is no, you are not eligible. (Example: An Iranian student studying in Canada.)

If you’re not sure, check with the international student office of your university. Ask them if your current visa status allows you to work in the U.S. We are unable to support visa applications.

Q. I am a rising freshman or sophomore. What are my chances of getting accepted into the NIMBioS SRE? Is it worth it to apply or should I wait?

A. I always say to apply. It is true that, as you anticipate, because mentors look for students that are more advanced, with more coursework and experience under their belts, your chances will be less this year. The NIMBioS SRE is competitive to get into and most selected participants are indeed rising juniors and seniors. But there’s no penalty to apply anyway, and it may still be worth your while. We have had exceptional rising freshmen and sophomores in our program before. Sometimes our mentors get impressed by less advanced students with unique preparation or interests, lots of AP credit, or excellent letters of recommendation and personal statements. Plus, the experience of applying is good practice. If you don’t make it in next year, you can use the experience to think about how to improve your application. Also, the applicant pool is different every year and hard to predict, so
apply multiple years and increase your chances. And, you can always save that application, revise/update it and try again next year!

Q. Do you have a minimum GPA to apply?
A. Generally the minimum GPA you would need for us to consider your application is a 3.0 (B Average) on a 4.0 scale. This program is very competitive. We do take into consideration what your institution is like or other special circumstances like a very unusual semester – be sure to explain such circumstances in your personal statement.

Program Logistical Questions

Q. Does your program have a meal plan?
A. No. Your stipend is expected to cover your meals. You will be put up in free university apartment-style housing, with kitchens, and we have a Publix and Walmart on campus in easy walking distance! Plus, we have local restaurants galore. Also, every year it seems that the students in our SRE program enjoy organizing potlucks. No SRE student has ever starved!

Q. The beginning of the SRE program conflicts with my school's final exam schedule or academic school year end, so I would need to arrive late. Could I still participate?
A. Maybe. Contact us with your specific circumstance so we can advise. It is really in your best interest to not miss any of the program, since the research is in groups and a lot of orientation and training happens in the first week to get everyone up to speed quickly. We are willing to work with your professors to proctor your finals here if they are amenable. Otherwise, we can see if a compromise of some kind can be reached. Generally if it’s just a couple days you might miss, we recommend to just apply and not worry too much about this until you’ve been accepted – then we can work out details.

Q. Can I take courses or study for the GRE or MCAT at the same time as your program?
A. Maybe. It may be possible to take one course or study for a big exam while doing the NIMBioS SRE, but we expect that you fully commit yourself to 40 hours per week to our full-time internship at NIMBioS if you accept this opportunity. So, think carefully and be realistic about how much time you can commit to different things – and keep in mind you might also want a little time in there to enjoy your summer! Classes and studying are not suitable excuses for not getting your work done with
us. Because these are group projects and your group mates are giving the SRE their full attention, we can’t allow you to let down your group by letting other priorities get in the way of the SRE. You must be fully committed to us first, and other summer commitments must be secondary. This is a highly competitive internship program to get into, and so giving this opportunity to someone who can’t give 100% is not fair to your group or to others we must turn away.

**Q. Can I have a part-time job at the same time as your program?**

A. No. We expect that, by committing to a full 40 hours per week to our SRE program, you would not have time to carry on another part time job simultaneously. This is why we pay a good stipend that goes beyond your cost of living – we expect to get you full time!

**Q. I have a family vacation, wedding, family reunion, or other event during the timeframe of the SRE, can I take time off during the program?**

A. Maybe. When you accept the opportunity to come to the NIMBioS SRE, we expect you to be here for the full 8 weeks. July 4th is a holiday, so you’ll definitely get that day off. Any conflicts must be approved before you accept. Sometimes we are able to make exceptions for 1-2 days off, if they are not very near the start of the program. Note that we can’t pay you if you’re not here, so this will result in a decreased stipend.

**Q. Can I get course credit for the NIMBioS SRE?**

A. This may be possible - send us your specific request.

**Q. I don’t like working in groups. Got any projects where I can work solo with mentors?**

A. No - best look for a different program. This SRE is all about building your collaboration skills across disciplinary boundaries. Only people with the social skills and the interest in becoming boundary-spanners should apply. But take note – few scientists or mathematicians work alone these days, so maybe it’s time to think about working on those skills if that’s your dream. You’d definitely get a prime opportunity to do that here, as long as you have the positive attitude for it.

**Q. Will I get to spend a lot of time in the lab?**

A. No. Unless you mean the computer lab! All of our NIMBioS projects are “synthesis” projects – it is part of our mission from NSF to train scientists and
mathematicians to fill this enormous need in modern biology – to use existing large datasets, peer-reviewed literature, or data that comes from theoretical (computer-based) mathematical models to make exciting new discoveries. Data gathering in the lab or field is not something NIMBioS supports – plenty of other places do, but we are unique in this way. Sometimes students will spend a little time in the field or lab to gain intuition on how biological systems work or data is collected, but expect that the bulk of your summer work will be computer-based. You’ll be learning great skills in computer programming, mathematical and computational modeling, literature searching, data analysis, hypothesis development and testing, collaboration, and more!

Application Questions

Q. What should I write in my personal statement?

A. This is your chance to define yourself to the selection committee, so don’t blow this part of the application off. Tell us about yourself – why you are interested in the program, the projects you selected as your preferences, and why the whole idea of a research program in math and biology together sounds like it’s something you’d like to try. If you have had other research experiences, tell us about that. If not, tell us why you are interested in trying research. Also let us know how you feel about doing a group research project (you should be enthused – all of our projects are group projects). If this is a good stepping stone to future plans and dreams, let us know. Make it into a nice (non-fiction) story about you!

Q. When are transcripts and letters of recommendation due?

A. All materials are due to NIMBioS by midnight on the application deadline date. That’s not a postmark date – that’s the deadline to receive. That’s because our committee meets and starts reviewing applications the very next week. So while we try to add late materials to applications where we can, it decreases the chances your complete file will get reviewed by everyone. Make sure you give your recommenders and the transcript office plenty of notice, because your poor planning shouldn’t become their emergency. Also, it can be useful to send a “thank you” note to your recommender about a week before the deadline, because it’s a nice gentle reminder for them to get on it if they haven’t already!

Q. Whom should I ask to write my letters of recommendation?

A. Choose professors that you have had classes with or worked with, the best being the ones who know you well enough to write something a little more personally about you and who have had a positive experience with you. In particular, choose professors related to this program – math, biology, or computer science. Don’t have
any connections like that? Just do the best you can for now, but consider fostering some relationships for the future – start going to office hours, start asking good questions in class, start being “present” for your education and get yourself noticed in a good way. And don’t start it all this week and then ask for a letter next week – these relationships take time and professors can spot insincerity. If you’re not sure whether a professor would write you a good letter, a good way to ask is “Do you feel like you know me well enough to write a good letter of recommendation for me for this program?” This gives the professor a way to get off the hook if they think they wouldn’t have something good to say. Professors are really best. Letters from TA’s, graduate students, supervisors from non-research jobs, high school teachers, family, coaches or pastors -- though they may know you best of all -- are not as useful to the selection committee.

Q. I have transferred schools. Do I need to send transcripts from each school I have attended?

A. Send us transcripts from every college or university that has coursework you are reporting to us in math, biology, computer science, or any related coursework. Remember these don’t need to be original transcripts, but photocopies are ok – save yourself some money there! You might want to make sure you have your fall grades on there -- as long as the transcript can make it here by the application deadline.

Q. My transcripts are in another language because I attended some of my schooling abroad. Is that ok?

A. Yes – still send us the photocopies. But also, please send us a translation – you can translate it yourself, no need to pay someone.

Q. Are unofficial transcripts ok?

A. Yes. Photocopies of official transcripts, or the unofficial ones you can print from your university’s web portal, are fine to send to us in hard copy or as email attachments (please do PDF). Make sure they are readable and understandable. If your university uses unusual abbreviations for things, you might send some helpful notes of translation.