Commonly-Asked Questions

(B) Admission Procedures

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Answers

Criteria for graduate admission decisions?

The EES program evaluates graduate applications based on 4 general criteria.

First, we evaluate your academic preparation by looking at where you went to school, what you studied, and what kinds of grades you got (not just your GPA, but which classes you did well/poorly in, and whether your grades tended to get stronger or weaker as you progressed).

Next, we look at your standardized test scores. We do not view these as a perfect measure of your abilities, but they do provide us with a way of comparing the different applicants. We look most closely at the Quantitative score, as a rough measure of your technical abilities. [For verbal skills, we rely much more on the English skills you show in your statement of purpose, and on TOEFL scores for nonnative speakers.]

We look closely at your statement of purpose, to evaluate how well your interests and abilities match with our EES program's focus areas. We also look for the answers to 3 questions: (1) Why are you interested in environmental engineering and science; and (2) Why do you want to continue on for graduate studies? and (3) Why do you feel that Stanford's EES program will help you fulfill your educational objectives?

Finally, we look closely at your recommendation letters, to find out
what others say about your strengths and weaknesses. So we hope that your letter writers know you fairly well, and have a technical or scientific background, and can provide insights into your suitability for our academic program.

*Procedure for admissions at the MS Level?*

At the MS level, each program in the Civil & Environmental Engineering Dept. chooses a faculty committee to review the MS-level applicants. This committee evaluates how well-qualified you are for admission, and whether your interests are a good fit with the program. In the EES program, we have a target class size of ~25-30 MS students; by looking at what fraction of the admittees in recent years have chosen to attend Stanford, we can estimate how many students we should offer admission to. We do not use waiting lists; instead each applicant is either offered or not offered admission. Many years, we must turn down well-qualified applicants in order to stay within our target class size.

If you are offered admission, we will indicate in the letter whether we will be seriously considering you for merit-based funding. Our funding resources for MS students are quite limited --- the entire EES faculty reviews the applications of those students being seriously considered for financial aid, and decides as a group which individuals should receive funding offers.

*Procedure for admissions at the Ph.D. Level?*

Our department's policy is to only admit Ph.D. students who have full funding (stipend plus tuition), either from an outside fellowship or from funds being provided by their faculty research sponsor. So to be admitted, a faculty member needs to (i) judge you to be a promising candidate for their research program, and (ii) have funds available (usually a research assistantship from a funded project) to fully support you.

At the Ph.D. level, applications to the EES program are circulated among our faculty, so that each one can assess whether their research areas overlap with your background and interests. The decision to admit is made by the individual faculty member whose research group you would be joining. Typically, Ph.D. applicants do not receive decision letters until mid- to late March, due to the time it takes to complete this review process.
Because the Ph.D. admissions criteria include funding, and because funding depends on getting research projects funded, the number of students admitted as Ph.D's varies greatly from year to year, and from faculty member to faculty member. Only rarely do we consider applications outside of our usual January-March schedule, because usually the number of applications we receive in January already exceeds the amount of funding available.

Do we accept non-engineering majors?

The EES program gladly accepts students with non-engineering academic backgrounds. Almost every year, our MS class includes students with undergraduate degrees in areas like Biology, Chemistry, and Geology, and we also occasionally get students with more unusual backgrounds, like Ecology, Physics, Economics, and Mathematics. We find that students having a strong chemistry background tend to do especially well in our EES program.

For prerequisites, the EES program would most like to see a year of college calculus, an introductory class in fluid mechanics, an introductory class in organic chemistry, and a class in molecular or cellular biology. While we will admit students who lack some of these prerequisites, we will encourage them to pick up the course background they lack BEFORE arriving at Stanford (because we assume in our fall quarter classes that they already have this background).

Financial aid for MS students?

Financial aid decisions are made once the admissions process is completed. We are able to offer a small number of financial aid packages to MS students using funds made available to our Environmental Engineering & Science group. These 9-month fellowships are awarded based entirely on merit (without any consideration of financial need or citizenship). In a typical year, 4-6 financial aid packages are offered at the MS level in the EES program.
Should I send an updated transcript with my fall quarter/semester grades?

Yes, do go ahead and send updated versions of your transcript. While this is not required, it is helpful to see what classes you are taking in your senior year, and how you are doing.

How about research opportunities at the MS level?

The 9-month MS program in EES only requires 45 units of coursework. Research Assistantships tend to be given to Ph.D. students, so this is not a reliable source of financial aid for our MS students. However, all of the MS students in the EES program, whether funded or not, are offered the opportunity to participate in research projects as part of their first year of study --- it is up to them to decide how they want to divide their time between classes and research. [A total of up to 9 units of research coursework (which is equivalent in research involvement to a 25% Research Assistantship over three quarters) can be credited towards the 45 units of coursework required to earn an MS degree in the EES program here at Stanford.]

Students wanting more extensive involvement in research typically stay on to pursue an Engineer's or Ph.D. degree after completing the MS. For post-MS studies, students are only admitted if full financial aid is available to them (either from their research supervisor, or from outside funding sources).

How am I assigned a faculty member as my MS advisor?

Since the 9-month (3 quarter) MS program in EES focuses on coursework, students do not need to affiliate themselves with a research group. Instead, each MS student admitted to the EES program is assigned a coursework advisor by the admissions coordinator. At the MS level, the primary responsibility of the advisor is to assist the students in selecting classes.

Students wishing to continue on for PhD-level work typically spend the first few months of their MS year becoming better acquainted with the various faculty and their research areas before deciding with whom they would like to work.