

Graduate Retention and Inclusion Grants Pilot Program

Academic Unit: Integrative Conservation PhD Program (ICON)

Description of Unit

The **ICON PhD** program provides a novel approach to graduate training, encouraging the application of theory and methods from across the social and natural sciences to provide more robust understandings of human-environment problems and solutions. It is designed to provide **interdisciplinary** training to students, such that they learn to collaborate across disciplines and fields of practice to seek integrative solutions to complex conservation challenges. The ICON PhD is offered in three schools/colleges (Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, the Odum School of Ecology, and the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources) with five potential Areas of Emphasis (AoE), including Anthropology, Ecology, Geography, Forestry and Natural Resources, and Marine Science. Through its 3-course core curriculum and research mentorship, the ICON program emphasizes that solutions to complex socio-environmental challenges require us to embrace multiple perspectives, collaborate effectively, and communicate across sectors and boundaries.

The ICON PhD Program is coordinated by the **Center for Integrative Conservation Research (CICR)**, which supports collaborative, interdisciplinary research in the areas of conservation and sustainability. CICR has 71 faculty affiliates from 12 campus units, including the advisors of ICON students.

The ICON program currently has 43 enrolled students and has graduated 33 students to date. As of late 2021, 31 of our alumni were employed in academia, research institutions, NGO's, federal and state governments or the private sector, actively practicing the skills learned in their programs. Our enrolled students are winners of prestigious awards (e.g. Fulbright), and excel academically. Germane to this proposal, the ICON student population is highly diverse, both in the number of international students and ethnic minorities, **a trend that has increased over the years**. For example, 27% of our enrolled students are international, 60% are women (still a minority in the field of conservation) and 45% self-reported as belonging to a race other than white.

Challenges to be Addressed with Activities Proposed

In addition to the requirements and stressors associated with traditional doctoral programs, ICON students face unique logistical, intellectual and socio-cultural challenges. Logistically, the program has course requirements above those of the individual departments, with 4 additional courses and an internship. It also has additional doctoral committee requirements: committees must include two faculty members from outside the student's home department and disciplinary perspective, including an ICON representative that maintains the ethos of the ICON program. This latter requirement is integral to the goals of ICON, providing the student with the opportunity for receiving guidance from multiple perspectives, but it also can impose an additional source of conflict for students, as funding, research opportunities, the priorities of advisors can be at odds with heavy involvement from other committee members. Intellectually, beyond including components of more than one discipline in their work—in and of itself “more effort” than traditional doctoral programs— ICON students are expected to conceive and implement a fully integrative dissertation that truly demonstrates how components of one discipline merge with another to address the research and problems at hand.

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It is not a surprise that students thrive in environments where they feel they are connected, represented and heard. Those connections span various scales—from advisor-mentee relationships, lab groups, both formal and informal departmental graduate groups and finally the ICON cohort. The reality is that ICON students are taught and advised largely by faculty that did not graduate from interdisciplinary programs themselves and thus, to some degree, they are forging new paths. ***Although thoughtful mentoring is paramount, we feel that student success and well-being in ICON is highly dependent on strong cohorts and discipline-spanning peer-to-peer relations.***

Since its inception, ICON has had several strategies to meet the needs of this unique population. For example, the required courses are specifically aimed at bridging gaps between social and natural science students and fostering a culture of positive discourse and trust. To address cohort cohesion, ICON students are encouraged to become active in OINC (The Organized ICON Network and Cooperative, the ICON student organization), ICON Town Halls, an annual student orientation and graduate symposium, professional development seminars and social events, and other team-building activities.

New Demands— First, based both on exit interviews and a self-assessment conducted by students, it is clear that in the last few years, the additive effects of the pandemic, ICON accepting more diverse and international students, and the aforementioned stressors, our students have struggled with cohort cohesion and building the trust needed for effective knowledge production, at times impeding academic progress. Thus, this proposal is meant to address needs already outlined by our students. Second, while UGA has initiatives aimed at helping international students such as the early enrollment programs, we have seen that due to immigration and visa limitations, our students are rarely able to attend. And while International Student Orientation is very helpful for initiating students to US culture, students have noted that it falls short in integrating them into the novel cross-disciplinary milieu of the ICON community.

Initiatives

1. We will host a student retreat to Jekyll Island, GA for the students that began ICON in the 2020 and 2021 academic years, their advisors, and a select number of current students from earlier cohorts. We will select current students who are active in OINC and have demonstrated leadership within ICON, but also allow space for those who are identified in need of stronger cohort cohesion. Advisors are specifically invited because they should be introduced to the disparity in students' socio-cultural backgrounds and experiences, and this will be one of the few opportunities where advisors can interact with ICON students from other departments and encourage cohort cohesion. Current student leaders can act as mentors and provide guidance on both logistical and cultural aspects to academic life, particularly for international and first-generation students. We chose Jekyll Island because its unique conservation challenges offer ready opportunities for important informal discussions, inviting students to contribute various perspectives. Jekyll Island (JI) is a state park that is both highly dependent on

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tourism, rich in native biodiversity, and experiencing globally prevalent challenges with climate change and development pressure. During our time on JI, we will conduct nature hikes, visit sites to discuss specific conservation challenges and solutions and participate in at least one formal activity (weather dependent, either kayaking or a group activity with the GA Sea Turtle Center) to introduce new students to GA biodiversity. **Expected benefits.** Students will immerse in an aesthetically and intellectually engaging new context dedicated to explore the intersections and synergies of students' various perspectives. Based on students' aspirations for cohort-building, this structured but flexible excursion will offer the sustained, dedicated time for meaningful, enduring relationship-building.

2. Conduct a day-long facilitated workshop for all ICON students to foster understanding across differences of discipline and perspective, led by Raye Rawls J.D., a Public Service Associate at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development. This workshop will be held at UGA. The workshop's methodology is *reflective structured dialogue*, and is effective for simultaneously building both self-awareness and other-awareness in groups. Topics would cover substantive issues surrounding conservation research and practice, as well as building soft skills relevant to experiences in graduate school or future professions. **Expected benefits.** Students have identified their desire for training that facilitate their confidence and capacity to engage fairly, inclusively, and equitably with partners as they carry out their sustainability research. Currently, students' skill development in this arena is opportunistic and to some extent, dependent on their advisor and own resourcefulness. This training would build inclusivity on two levels: 1) it provides all ICON students access to this sought-after training, and 2) it will build their capacity to engage inclusively in their collaborative research.

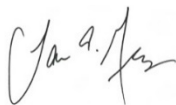
Estimated Costs and Justification

- 1) Total cost: \$2,966 (lodging: \$1,320; transport: \$656; formal activity \$990): –We will utilize the 4H facility for lodging on Jekyll Island at an estimated cost of \$40/person for 2 nights. We estimate the participation of 10 students and 10 advisors from the 2020 and 2021 cohorts, but will also invite 10 students from previous cohorts and 3 CICR faculty facilitators. Thus, lodging for 30 people is estimated to cost \$2,850. We will rent three Warnell vans for \$36/day for 3 days (\$324) and need .56c/mile for fuel (@592 miles roundtrip; \$332). We estimate a formal activity to cost \$30/person (thus \$990).
- 2) Total cost: \$1800 for salary support for Ms. Rawls to develop a custom-made curriculum and facilitate the workshop.

Total Requested: \$4,766

Assessment Measures

Prior to implementing the aforementioned activities, and recognizing that students are often unable to be fully candid during exit interviews, we will conduct an anonymous survey of our students to determine how they feel about 1) their representation within ICON and UGA at large, 2) whether their perspectives are respectfully considered, 3) their confidence to engage with one another inclusively, and 4) cohort cohesion. At the completion of both activities, we will repeat this questionnaire to assess if the activities had a measurable impact.



Laura German—Director of CICR



Sonia M. Hernandez—ICON Graduate Coordinator