

Forward Fellows Program Provides Extended Onboarding for New Graduate Students



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The Wisconsin MRSEC launched the Forward Fellows program in 2025 with 10 incoming graduate students from 9 departments. The program promotes students' sense of self-efficacy in research and belonging at the university, and provides the opportunity for students to join the campus community and immerse themselves in research one month before their program's official start date. Admitted students who would especially benefit from the experience were nominated by faculty in departments affiliated with the MRSEC.

The students participated in professional development and community building activities organized by the MRSEC. Topics included mentoring, research skills, and social belonging. Social events enabled the fellows to informally meet current graduate students and faculty outside their home departments.

The long-term goal of the program is to address challenges in transitioning to graduate school and enhance students' commitment to completing their graduate degree. Evaluation data collected from the first cohort highlighted how useful students found the extra time to start research, the professional development sessions, the extra time to adjust to campus life, and the opportunity to connect with other Forward Fellows students. For example, one student said, *"Starting research early was completely invaluable to my transition. I think the hardest part of starting grad school is developing a support network and a routine."*



(top) The Forward Fellows inaugural cohort and program coordinators; (bottom) Forward Fellows students practice communicating their science.