

How to Choose a Graduate Program, School, and an Advisor

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Graduate School Presentation: How to Choose a Graduate Program, School, and an Advisor

Choosing Among Graduate Programs

From Tara Kuther, Ph.D.,
Your Guide to Graduate School.

What graduate programs will you apply to? What graduate program will you ultimately attend? Selecting a graduate school entails many considerations, much more than just what field. Although you know what you want to study at the graduate level, you may not be aware that there are differences between graduate programs, both in academic goals and practical philosophies. In deciding on a graduate school, you may want to spend some serious time thinking about your own precise goals and directions, and use that knowledge to weigh differing graduate programs before you decide where to attend.

First, consider the basic facts when selecting a graduate school. The location, the cost, and the types of programs offered are the most commonly cited considerations by most potential graduate students. What many students may not know, is that even though different schools may offer similar programs, many academic departments have very clear and specific goals for their students and graduates that can be very unlike a comparable schools graduate program.

To make the most of your education and of your future beyond, it is worth the time to compare departments, learn about the professors and their teaching goals, their fields of expertise, and what sort of expectations the department holds for their graduates. Ask questions:

- Does the program emphasize theory or practice?
- Where do graduates go?
- Do graduates go into academia or into “the real world”?
- Do they have fields of specialization within the department, or is it a general degree?

Additionally, if you are considering a number of different departments that seem equally attractive, take some time to look over their class offerings, deciding if any one program has classes that hold a particular appeal for you or seem to be particularly important in helping you meet your own personal goals.

Whether you’re working on a professional degree, or an academic degree, take some time to look into a department’s reputation. Are most of its graduates placed afterwards? Are there opportunities to teach? Are there additional educational perks such as proximity to conferences, a professional journal, or opportunities to become published in your field? The Internet is a particularly useful tool for scanning the staff of colleges and universities across the country to see what schools the professors hail from.

You might also take the time to interview the so-called professional movers and shakers of your field and ask them for useful information. Where did they go to school? What kind of experience do they look for in that field and what schools to they feel provide that experience best? While it’s true that one can never have too much information, it’s also a wonderful way of networking with the people that may some day become valuable connections.

There are so many things to consider when selecting your graduate program. While it may seem time intensive and at times overwhelming, putting in that time and effort before going into a graduate program will pay off handsomely. When it comes time to hang that sheepskin on the wall and begin the next step into your future, you will find yourself more focused and prepared for that wide, wide world.

20 Relevant Questions to ask Graduate Schools, Departments, and Programs

Source:

http://www.grad.washington.edu/envision/phd/obtaining_phd/program_questions.html

Time to Degree

1. What is the average departmental time to degree for Ph.D.'s (or whatever degree you are seeking)?
If an incoming student already has a Master's, how long is the time to degree?
2. What is the timeline of completion (including course work, comprehensive exams, and dissertation milestones)?
3. What is the attrition rate?

Mentoring

4. What are the guidelines, if any, for faculty mentoring?
How does a student find a mentor?
How do committee members mentor?
How many times per year do doctoral advisors meet with students to monitor progress?
What has the advisor published?
Is the advisor actively involved in research? What is the advisor's reputation as a teacher?
To what extent is the advisor willing to involve students in his/her research?
To what extent does the advisor show interest in or support the student's own research?
5. Can mentors/advisors/committee members be selected and appointed from outside the university?

Program Options

6. Are joint dissertations possible?
7. What interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary opportunities are available?
8. What types of teacher training are available for both academic and nonacademic careers?
9. What types of internships or externships are available?
10. Are there electronic portfolio tools available to gather information about/products of the degree process?
11. How actively are students involved in departmental governance?
12. What types of teaching, research, or administrative assistantships are available?
13. Are there opportunities and training in grant-writing, and publishing?
Is there exposure to disciplinary associations, publications, and conferences?

Benefits

14. What types of funding are available? For how long?
15. What types of health care benefits are available to graduate students?
What types of childcare options are available?

Career Planning

16. What types of professional development activities (groups, colloquia, seminars, etc.) are organized for/by the students?
17. Are there any opportunities for networking/training with outside professionals (both in various types of institutions and outside the academy)?
18. What types of positions (academic and nonacademic) do students find after graduation?
Can the department/program provide accounts of graduates' job experiences after graduation?

- What are the salary expectations/scales?
Does the department/program keep track of its alumni, and have any of the alumni offered to be contacts for current doctoral students?
19. What proportion of the students get jobs?
 20. What types of career placement services are there?

How to choose a school

Should I stay in town or should I go?

Introduction:

Choosing to attend a University outside the familiarity of home can be a difficult decision. There are several factors to consider such as: finding the right program, finances, and social relationships. It is important to weigh all these considerations with what is really important. For the most part, students will find it is to their advantage to attend a school outside their home state.

Widening your options

One of the biggest advantages with opening yourself up to distant programs is the widening of options. This is especially true for those with specialized interests. Having a large set of options will boost your chances of finding the program that most suits you. Confiding yourself to just in-state schools can severely limit your options and increase competition. One limitation of attending an in-state school is the limited applicants accepted. Since competitive programs seek a variety of backgrounds in their students, they may be more lenient to accept outside students opposed to local students (despite having relatively the same qualifications). A strong applicant applying from across the country will stand out more so than the local applicant crowd, giving them the edge they may need.

Finances

While there is no doubt that the cost of attending graduate school out-of-state is expensive, it should not be a reason to decide against attending that school. Financial assistance is provided by the federal government and individual states. Support packages offered by state-supported programs often waive nonresident students' tuition. Considerable money can even be saved by moving away if the cost of living is cheaper than it was back home. Additional costs can be avoided by limiting yourself to traveling back home so much. In general, it is to your advantage to examine your priorities before letting finances sway such important decisions.

Social Relations

It can be a scary thought imagining yourself so far away from family and friends. Thus, it is important to consider such things when deciding to apply to a school far from home. However, most students find that it can be a great experience meeting new people in new places. Considering your classmates will be a good ready-made circle of friends and most time will be spent within the confines of the University building, it may not be as much of a change as anticipated. Faculty will also ease your transition with new contacts and

information. Once again, it is important to examine your priorities before automatically saying, “I can’t go very far.”

How to find out about other schools.

Introduction:

Deciding which school you want to attend can be a big decision and very often a hard one. Considering you’ll be spending most of your time there for more than a few years, it is important to do your research. Fortunately, finding out about other schools can be done using several accessible methods and can positively influence your decision anxiety. A few of the most common research methods include: firsthand exploration, the web, and contacting the local community.

Firsthand Exploration

If possible, firsthand exploration should be your first choice. Walking around the campus, talking to other students, and experiencing the local community are one of the most informative methods possible. Not only are you interacting directly with the University setting, but you are also able to assess your own comfort level. Unfortunately, not all students can afford to travel from school-to-school. If such is the case, there are still other effective methods available without leaving home.

The Web

Just about every school has a website providing useful statistics, places of interest, and local photos. Most university websites will also provide links that direct you to community websites. These sites may be sufficient enough to truly grasp the surrounding environment. If this isn’t adequate, try using search engines to find other information that is not provided by the university or community website. This includes local and university forums where you can interact with citizens. However, if you find that the web’s resources are limited, there are other ways to obtain even more information.

Contacting the Local Community

Most schools and communities have a local newspaper where you can learn about activities and entertainment, available services, cost of living, and even community problems. Getting a hold of a single one of these issues can give you all this information at once. They can easily be obtained by directly contacting the publisher. Just as good as newspapers are local brochures, which often provide several photos, information about housing, and other community attractions not listed in the newspaper. Obtaining a brochure can be as simple as contacting the Chamber of Commerce or Travel Information in the communities surrounding the school.

Choose a school that will fit your needs.

When choosing a school it is important to consider what your individual needs are. Thus, don’t decide on a school for reasons such as the ease of application or superficial reasons associated with the school. This can lead to a serious insufficiency when it comes to your study interests and needs. Therefore, it is important to ask

yourself, “Does this program train students to do what I want to do?” This will not only satisfy your interests, but will also enhance your chances of acceptance. Furthermore, answering this question can aid you in the selection process. Some students find that their interests are better suited with smaller unknown programs as opposed to notable glamorous schools. It is important to consider this when looking for the right school.

Choosing an Advisor

Source: <http://www.psywww.com/tipsheet/insider.htm>

Introduction:

Choosing an advisor is one of the most important decisions you will make as you begin to prepare for graduate school. Your advisor is someone who will guide you in your research, help you know and be known in the scientific community, and ultimately sets up your future after graduate school.

Some schools allow you to start graduate school without an advisor and let you pick one along the way, while others let you switch advisors if you are not satisfied with your current advisor. Whichever the case, you should have a good idea of whom you would like to work with prior to applying to graduate school.

Researching Potential Advisors:

Since picking out an advisor is so crucial, it is important to know where to start to look for information. Marshall Lev Dermer, Ph. D. has prepared a list of tips on how to start the researching process.

“Getting Started”

It is best to decide on potential research areas and three or four potential advisers by your last semester in college (13). You can best make these decisions by working as an assistant in a research laboratory where you can consult with the faculty and post-doctoral staff. Alternatively, discuss selecting potential research advisers with your undergraduate adviser and the faculty who teach courses in the areas that most interest you.

Correspond with Potential Advisers

Corresponding with a few potential advisers can be very helpful, after you are familiar with their work. In your initial letter be sure to describe your background, training, grade point average, research experience, and your interest in the researcher's work. Write carefully; writing is public thinking. Ask for recent reprints and copies of manuscripts in press. You might also casually mention your interest in where this potential adviser studied and a list of his or her publications. Potential advisers may send you their vitas, saving you much detective work!

Talk with Graduate Students

If you have exchanged letters with a potential adviser, ask for the names and telephone numbers of senior graduate students, so that you might learn more about the laboratory and the graduate program. Call the students at their homes where they are most likely to have a private telephone. Items not covered above include determining: what proportion of this professor's advisees earn a Ph.D., how much time is typically required to earn a Ph.D. in this laboratory, and do graduates continue working in the area upon graduation? For researchers who are assistant professors ask about their chances of being granted tenure. It is unwise to study with a person who will not be re-hired in a few years and may leave you stranded!

Discovering Publications and Grants Sans Vita

The *Science Citation Index* and the *Social Science Citation Index* can help you locate a researcher's publications and the extent they have stimulated other scientists. Grant support and whether an article was "invited" are usually indicated in an article's first footnote.

Face-to-Face Interaction with Your Prospective Adviser

Meeting potential advisers may be scary; but you *must* develop strong, positive, self-presentation skills if you are to succeed. You can meet potential advisers and their students at professional conferences. A too-little exercised but most useful option is working on a summer project in a laboratory. If you arrive at graduate school without an adviser, then do interview all potential advisers. You will learn quite a bit about the work in your new department and, consequently, have a good idea about whom to select for your research committee.”

What you should look for in an advisor:

Just like looking for a mate, there are certain good qualities that an advisor should possess. Marshall Lev Dermer, Ph. D. has also prepared a list of tips on things you should look for in an advisor.

“Whom to Look For”

Someone with Similar Interests. Seek someone with whom you share research interests; otherwise, you may undertake a project that you do not value and never complete it. But you may not know your interests. A senior doctoral student in chemistry wisely noted:

It is not possible for even the most motivated and successful undergraduates to have a clear understanding of their research interests. The projects are way too complex for college seniors to comprehend. The technology will almost always involve equipment and approaches never seen or imagined before. Students at best understand their

inclinations: "I like computers," or "I've always enjoyed mathematics." More than that is probably rare. The search for common ground is usually a case of a research director convincing a willing subject of the compatibility of their interests. It is not the same thing as genuine mutual interests. There is simply too great a disparity between their respective scientific sophistication and their degree of understanding of the entire graduate study process. (11)

Someone with Compatible Interests. All organizations offer people common means to diverse ends. Even if you cannot work in a laboratory in which the research goals are similar to your own, the laboratory procedures may be relevant to your goals. It is quite possible, of course, that as you work in this "second best" laboratory you may become interested in the research problems there. Consider the experiences that determined your current research interests.

Scholars: Renowned Researchers. Seek people who love science and are obsessive about research. They will document their work in articles, published in respected journals, that often describe a series of inter-locking experiments concerned with a single problem. When researchers value their work and others agree, others will extend the work. *Invited* articles and presentations to professional societies suggest that a researcher's work is well-received.

Grant support from major research foundations, for example, the National Science Foundation, indicates that other scientists judge this person to have made significant contributions. Such grant support is allocated competitively; more competitively than is space in major journals. A history of grant support from major foundations is, therefore, very impressive. Most impressive is a researcher who holds a special position where a university or a foundation has granted the person a lifetime of research support.

There are potential problems working with renowned researchers. In areas where research costs require grant support, such advisers may be unable to offer help because they are busy writing grant proposals, justifying grants, administering grants, and supervising post-doctoral students.[1] Another problem is that others will wonder whether you or your adviser conceived jointly authored work and even your dissertation! Complicating all this is the possibility that post-doctoral students may be your actual mentors.

Scholars: Less-Renowned Researchers. These researchers' records will have many of the attributes discussed above; often a record of grant support will be absent. Where research costs are small, such faculty can also be excellent advisers. Seek an adviser who knows quite a bit about your area, is enthusiastic about research, and, of course, readily offers help.

It is possible to have the best of both research types! If there are renowned researchers in your department include them on your research committee (with your adviser's consent), seek their advice and eventually, if all goes well, seek their letters of recommendation and "connections" without the potential liabilities of having one serve as your adviser (12). This option, of course, is only available to students in large graduate programs.

Someone You Can Respect. If your adviser is honest, ethical, loves doing science and is reasonably successful, it would also be nice if you liked your adviser (and vice versa)! But choosing or keeping an adviser primarily because he or she is nice is a mistake. A nice person may withhold frank evaluations of your knowledge, skills, and progress. If you have an excellent adviser, your feelings toward your adviser might best be labeled as respect.”

Remember:

According to “The Complete guide to Graduate School Admission” by Patricia Keith-Spiegel you should avoid limiting yourself to one adviser. This will limit your options for potential schools and programs you can go to. Also, the faculty will perceive themselves as being unable to fulfill your needs. So limiting yourself to one adviser is risky!

Questions to Ask

Source: Golde, C.M. & Dore, T.M. (2001) *At Cross Purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education* (www.phd-survey.org). Philadelphia, PA: A report prepared for The Pew Charitable Trusts.

While looking for an adviser here are some questions that you should be answering to help narrow down the search.

28. Is the advisor’s personality appealing and compatible with your own?

What kind of person do you expect your adviser to be (remember, perfection is very rare!)? What kind of relationship do you image that you will have?

29. How many advisees does the person have? How many students finish? How quickly?

Is the time to degree for students of that adviser shorter or longer than the norms of the department? (One lab from which students never seemed to graduate was called “The Roach Motel,” because “students checked in and they didn’t check out.”) How many students does the adviser have? What stage of the process are they all in? How does this compare with other faculty members student load? How many students of that adviser do not complete their degree, or transfer? Why?

30. What are their former advisees doing? Is the adviser proud? Does s/he still serve as a mentor to some?

31. What is the person’s reputation as an adviser?

32. What is the person’s line of research and their reputation as a scholar? At what stage of their career are they?

33. How does and will the advisor's research relate to the student's research? How does a student pick dissertation project(s)?

In some disciplines a student's research is very directly connected to the advisor's research, in others the connection is less direct. Understand the norms of the discipline before you begin talking to faculty. Within the normal range in the field, you still need to understand how much autonomy of project definition and direction is expected of you and available to you.

Some things to learn: How do students select a research project? How much input does the advisor have and want? Is there a research group? What is the range of dissertation topics typically pursued? How quickly do students select a dissertation research project? To what extent does the final dissertation really resemble that in the proposal? Who determines when the student has done sufficient work to complete the dissertation?

34. What is the advisor's work style? What does s/he expect the work style of students to be? Is it compatible with your own?

An advising style can be a difficult thing to ascertain and define. Think about the kinds of behaviors you expect from your advisor, these can be a useful way to define an advising style. You need to know, when you ask an advisor or faculty member for help, what kind of response is helpful to you? Different students expect, want and need different amounts and kinds of feedback. Likewise, different faculty members approach advising doctoral students on research related problems with different degrees of hands-on/hands-off feedback. Here are two examples: (1) If you asked a faculty member for help on a particular research puzzle, would you want them to: Send you to books/articles that can help, offer to give direct feedback on the text or data, tell you what the next step is, offer general strategies and encouragement?(2) When writing articles, research papers or dissertation proposals and text, faculty members might give feedback. How many drafts of each kind of work does an advisor read? What kind and level of detail of feedback to you receive? How quickly can you expect the text to be returned to you?

When talking to other students, you can ask what kinds of students thrive best with this person?

35. What is the advisor's communication style? What is the frequency and quality of interactions?

Recognizing that there are norms by discipline, you can determine how often the advisor meets with students about their work. Is it daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly? Are meetings set upon the student's request, when the advisor requests, or are they regularly scheduled?

36. How much time does the advisor spend with students on their work?

What are the competing demands on the advisor's time? How frequently is the advisor out of town?

37. What is her/his philosophy of advising?

Many advisors are able to articulate such a philosophy, although many have not yet done so. For example, how does the advisor foster increasing independence in students? How does the advisor resolve conflicts?

38. Does the work environment and culture of the lab or research group suit you?

How closely do students of that advisor work together? How does the advisor facilitate collaboration?

39. What are the work expectations? Are students able to strike a balance between work/school and personal life?

What are typical student work patterns in the department? Do students typically work most nights and weekends?

40. What opportunities for professional development exist? How supportive is the advisor of students' efforts to gain professional breadth?

What other kinds of sponsorship does the advisor provide? Do students co-author papers with the advisor? Does such co-authorship imply joint intellectual work or is the advisor added by courtesy? Do students attend professional conferences? Who pays for these trips? What kinds of help does the advisor provide in finding jobs or post-doc positions?

41. How are students funded for research and travel?

How much funding and financial support can you expect from your advisor? For what does the advisor financially support students: conferences, supplies, books, research expenses, tuition, summers?"

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Choosing a Specialization

Alongside choosing a graduate program it is important to consider your specialization. A specialization is a refined topic underneath your graduate program. Thus, specializations offer a good opportunity to explore more into your specific interests. Examples of specializations under Psychology include: Clinical, Counseling, Developmental, Health, Physiological, and Educational Psychology. Considering your specialization abides by the same guidelines you would follow when choosing a graduate program.

Additional Links and References:

- <http://graduate-school.phds.org/> Here you can rank graduate schools by YOUR priorities
- “The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission” by Patricia Keith-Spiegel and Michael W. Wiederman