

# Thinking About Graduate School

## A how-to guide to choosing good options

As you begin the process of selecting a graduate school, it is important to keep one piece of information in mind: there are most likely many schools you will succeed in. The experience you could have depends on the discipline, environment, classes, preparation, and your graduate advisor. The absolute best thing you can do for yourself is to research your options. GradSchoolShopper can help you get many of the facts you need to make a well-informed decision.

## Things to keep in mind during the grad school selection process

- **Do your homework:** Critically consider what you are looking for in a graduate program. Keep track of what schools offer and how well these offerings match your needs.
- **Masters versus PhD:** There is a huge difference between the two in terms of applications and disciplines. Many programs only admit a limited number of master's students. Some programs only offer master's programs. Investigate options on a program by program basis.
- **Make sure it's a good fit:** Don't just apply to a program because it is rated well. Seek out and apply to the programs that are the best fit for you. Programs want students who will succeed. Don't blindly apply to programs or send generic applications.
- **Physics and Astronomy stipend/salary:** Often, PhD programs offer stipends or salaries to students who are enrolled full time. Amounts do vary so evaluate on a location by location basis.
- **PhD advisors are extremely important:** Choosing the right graduate advisor, or set of possible advisors, is one of the most important decisions you can make. A PhD advisor sets the tone, goals, and style of your graduate education. Be sure to talk to a potential advisor's current students individually about their experiences.
- **Research areas:** A program's research areas change over the years and so does availability in professor's labs. It is important to select a school where there are several people you'd want to work with.
- **Don't just apply to one school:** It's common to apply to several programs if you are serious about attending.
- **Consider a variety of research areas:** Consider other fields, research areas, and advisors. Many students end up in labs that are vastly different than the one they were initially aiming for. Sometimes your dream advisor is full that year, or they retire or move. Having several options is key to setting yourself up for success.
- **Don't plan on part-time jobs or side hustles:** Graduate school will be your full-time job and you often have to formally agree that you won't get another or part time job. Plan your time and finances accordingly.
- **Ask about tuition:** For many programs, you don't have to pay for tuition in addition to being paid for your work.
- **Ask grad students about their experiences:** The best advice comes from people who are at your potential school or have recently searched.
- **Visit your top choices:** Schedule a visit with your top graduate program choices. Meet the graduate program advisor (or appropriate person) and potential research advisors.

- **University environment:** Diversity and inclusion initiatives can vary between schools and programs. Investigate differences on a program-by-program basis.

## How the GSS book and website can also help you:

- **Unbiased:** GradSchoolShopper provides unbiased, factual information so you can directly compare programs side-by-side. You won't find rankings, but you will find all the information necessary for you to find schools that match your goals.
- **FREE for students!** Create a free user account on the website [GradSchoolShopper.com](http://GradSchoolShopper.com) or request a free copy of this book.
- **Browse by geographic location:** Use the table of contents or the appendix in the back of the book to find schools by geographic region.
- **Comprehensive department information:** Each program lists research areas, program funding, equipment, number of graduate students, first year student numbers, faculty members, stipend and tuition information, location, contact information, and general university info.
- **Direct comparison data:** On [GradSchoolShopper.com](http://GradSchoolShopper.com), you can create an account, select and save your school list, and then compare your options.
- **Download your data:** After you have saved & you're ready to compare your schools, you can download a subset of information in an Excel sheet to give you an organized look at what each school offers. Admission deadlines, GRE requirements, # of full-time faculty, # of full-time grad students, acceptance rates, and average stipend per academic year are all available.
- **In-depth faculty data:** Each department provides a full list of the full-time department faculty. You can look at their research fields, where and when they graduated, and their areas of expertise. When coupled with equipment, you can get a sense of a department's strengths.
- **Understand incoming degree requirements:** Review this section to see what coursework is recommended before arriving.
- **Special equipment, facilities, or programs:** In this section, students can learn about special programs and equipment that make a department stand out.
- **Advanced search option:** On the [GradSchoolShopper.com](http://GradSchoolShopper.com) website you can do an advanced search to filter for degree specialty, degree type, and/or location.
- **Department size and acceptance rate:** On the website you can also sort by acceptance rates. Additionally, you can examine the number of students who have applied, been admitted, and are enrolled.
- **Culture & Diversity:** Also on the web prospective students can learn about the department culture & diversity. What is the environment like for students? Is there a weekly social time? What kind of graduate student groups are there? You can also quickly look up information on student and faculty demographics.
- **"Why choose us?":** This is where departments can highlight what they feel sets them apart from other institutions. Many programs focus on their department culture and some include social media networks.

## Additional resource

AIP Statistical Research Center: The AIP Statistical Research Center (SRC) collects information about graduate students, their careers, and departments. Data can be used to understand national trends and averages. Details can be found at [www.aip.org/statistics](http://www.aip.org/statistics).