

A Guide to Choosing the *Right* Grad Program

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Choosing the right graduate school and program can be daunting, but it is also a wonderful opportunity for taking a step along your career pathway. While there are many strategies, the key to determining the right graduate program for *you* is to understand where you are likely to succeed, your personal preferences for community, and where each program can take you. I stressed the word *you* because your preferences really matter. The overall goal is not to get a degree from a specific institution or even to get a job in a specific field, but to achieve your career and life goals. There are many pathways to your specific goal, and often many programs—sometimes wildly different programs—can help you achieve your goals.

So, before you begin, realize that you are choosing between great opportunities, not good or bad options. The more honest you are with yourself, the easier it'll be to choose the program that's right for you.

When developing your list of schools, consider:

1

THE PHYSICAL LOCATION

- City vs. Suburban vs. Rural
- Large vs. Small School
- Warmer vs. Colder Climate
- Coastal vs. Midwestern vs. Mountain
- Are there other centers of science nearby?

2

FINANCIALS ARE IMPORTANT: WHAT IS YOUR MOST LIKELY LIVING SITUATION?

- Stipend amount vs. cost of living in that city
 - > Is there a stipend?
 - > Is it a research, teaching, or fellowship position?
 - > Do you need to pay tuition or semester fees?
- Does the program provide health care?
- Does the stipend allow you to live comfortably?

3

LIFE OUTSIDE THE LAB

- House vs. shared apartment vs. campus housing
- Driving vs. biking vs. walking to work
- What is there to do in the area besides school work?
- What do current students do for fun?
- Do students live together? Do they have a social life?
- How many first-year graduate students will be there?
- Are there graduate student organizations you can be a part of?

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CONSIDER DEPARTMENT CULTURE

- Large, diverse incoming class vs. small, personal
- Collaborative or competitive student culture
- Are interdepartmental projects normal?
- Can you work outside the university with national labs and researchers?
- Who teaches the courses?
- Who teaches the labs?
- Do you need to take any labs as a graduate student?
- Is there a foreign language requirement?
- Are there closely related departments: e.g., astrophysics, applied physics, chemical physics, etc.?
- Is there a graduate student group?
- Are graduate students unionized?
- How inclusive and diverse is the department?

5

CONSIDER POTENTIAL ADVISERS

- How many people are there with whom you could be excited to work?
- Do potential advisers have compatible work styles?
- Are there multiple potential advisers you'd be excited to work with?
- Does your potential adviser have research funding?
- Would you need to be a teaching assistant in your later years?
- How is funding within each department?
- What percentage of students who start finish the program?

6

QUESTIONS TO ASK CURRENT STUDENTS

- Are you happy?
- What's it like being a student here?
- Would you come here again if you could do it over?
- What's the worst part of being a student here?
- What's the best part of being a student here?
- What did they not tell you about in orientation?
- Is the stipend enough?
- Are students involved in community events?
- Do you like the department? Is it cohesive and supportive?

This list of questions is far from exhaustive. It's meant to get you thinking about the things that are important to you in graduate school.

While courses and the broader department matter most for your first two years, your adviser and research group matter most for the remaining years in graduate school. So, don't skip out on researching both aspects: classes and department culture versus individual advisers and research groups. Use this book and the online companion, GradSchoolShopper.com, to help you develop a list of 8-12 places to apply.

One item which is often overlooked is that your social and emotional well-being is just as important as your academic life. If you choose the perfect school for your career but you aren't happy there, it can be very difficult to succeed. Correspondingly, if you are at a school that matches your style but you aren't happy with your academic options, this can be an issue as well. Many students do not consider life issues and personal preferences when choosing their graduate programs, and this can alter their chances of success.

Above all else, realize that there is most likely not just one school that is the perfect school but many schools that can work for you. So do your grad school research well and ask the hard questions. If you do, you'll likely end up in the place best for you. Good luck!