

Guiding the discussion about graduate school

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Searching for a place to do your graduate studies is a challenging process that involves them interviewing you, but also you interviewing them! This will be your home for 4–5 years, and you want to make sure it's a good fit intellectually, socially, and personally for you. Below are some questions to think about asking as you meet with grad students and faculty at prospective institutions.

For Potential Faculty Mentor

- What are the projects that are active in your lab?
- Which projects are you recruiting a student for?
- What kind of work do these projects entail? [how much lab work vs. field vs. computer; day-to-day and year-to-year plan/expectations]
- What is your philosophy on mentoring?
 - How often do you meet with student individually?
 - How often does the group meet?
 - Do you consider yourself a hands-on or hands-off mentor?
- How much independence is expected/encouraged in project design?
- How are students supported (research stipend vs. teaching expectations)?
- How much of the year is the support? (many places are 12 months, but some don't cover summer)
- How collaborative is the department? Your lab?
- Is the culture here more cooperative or competitive?
- How many classes are required?
- What are your expectations for working hours, working in the evenings/on the weekend, working at home?
- What do you do to encourage work-life balance?
- How often do students attend conferences?
 - Are they encouraged/required to present?
 - Which conferences does the group typically attend?

For the Grad students

- What do you think about [professor you're interested in]?
- Is your lab a good one to join?
- Is the culture here more cooperative or competitive?
- Why did you choose this program?
- Is the program supportive of people switching labs?
- Does the program do anything in the beginning to help new students to transition into grad school?
- How much do grad students TA?
- Is there any sort of training for people who want to be better TAs or to go into teaching?
- Is the program supportive of "alternative careers"?
- What do you think of the classes? (Were they valuable, did you learn a lot, did they take a lot of effort, etc?)
- Are there any nightmare professors to avoid and why are they seen that way? (A nightmare for one person could be a great fit for another, depending on personality/needs/expectations)

Grad Life

- What do grad students do in their free time?
- Do most students have a good work/life balance?
- What kind of social events do people in the program tend to do?
- Do grad students in this program hang out with each other?
- Does the program do anything in the beginning to help grad students to bond with each other?
- What kind of resources does the program offer (e.g. for mental health, career development, learning new skills, etc.)?
- Does the program check in with grad students even after the first few years?
- Are most grad students in relationships or single?
- Do any grad students you know have kids?
- Do social events tend to be clique-based or is everyone welcome?
- Are there a lot of international students in the program? If so, are they welcomed by domestic students?
- What do you wish you had done to prepare for grad school?
- What kinds of questions should I be asking professors whose lab I'm interested in?