

## TIPS ON APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

**Become familiar with the department you're applying to.** Graduate school is a big commitment and it is important that you enroll in a program that has faculty members you like and who are doing research relevant to your interests. Establish conversation through email or online forums with potential faculty or grad students currently in the department. See if it's possible to visit the department to meet with faculty and fellow graduate students before applying. **Departments may have**

**funds to cover your travel expenses**, or there may be a general university-wide hosting program. You can often stay overnight with current graduate students. Tap trusted undergraduate advisors for insights into a particular grad program, or for networking info with colleagues who could offer insight, especially for narrowing or expanding a search.

**“Never choose a school without first visiting. Tour the campus. Walk around the town or city. Get as good of a feeling for the place and atmosphere as you can. Ask other grad students to lunch, during which time you can ask questions. Don't forget to visit the library, too, because you will undoubtedly spend a great deal of time there . . . When it's time to make a choice, go with your gut.”**

*Jason R. Karp, author of  
“How to Survive Your PhD”*

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/47659468/How-to-Survive-PhD>


### **Know your funding options.**

Ask about departmental fellowships and teaching or research assistantships, and what you need to do to be considered for them. If you have applied or are planning to apply for fellowships from federal agencies, industry, or private foundations, let the faculty you are interviewing with know that. Deadlines can be a full year before you enroll in graduate school! Apply to several different portable fellowships – the worst that can happen is that you have to turn someone down! You may be able to "stack" multiple fellowships. Keep an eye out for fellowships that can be deferred. If you want to teach, you may want to make sure that some of your funding comes from a teaching position. While portable funding is great, you also want to make sure your advisor is invested in you. He/she may be most invested in those students funded by his/her own grant. Balance different funding sources into a portfolio that meets YOUR career goals. Search for funding on [www.pathwaystoscience.org](http://www.pathwaystoscience.org), a site listing over 25 fellowships and over 250 graduate programs searchable by field of interest, keyword and institution.

**Ask about support resources on campus for graduate students.** Are there orientation activities? Does the department offer any preparatory workshops for its TAs? Is there a formal mentoring program? Are there resources at the department or university for underrepresented minority students, women, or students with disabilities? Are there funds to support students to travel to conferences to present their research or network? These are all good questions to ask when you visit a department. Visit <http://www.pathwaystoscience.org/Undergrads.aspx> for the handout *“Finding the Right Graduate Program: a Checklist of Relevant Questions to Ask Graduate Schools, Departments, and Programs.”*

**Ask about the coursework.** What graduate level courses were offered in your area of interest this year and what will be offered next year? While the primary thrust of your graduate experience will be your research, coursework still provides an important foundation. Shy away

from departments that aren't offering any graduate level coursework that aligns with your research interests.

**Recognize the importance of selecting a graduate advisor.** 

**It's more than just the GRE.**

While GRE scores are still important, even more important is your personal statement, your letters of recommendation, your past research experience, and your ability to identify faculty member(s) with whom you would like to work. If you have low test scores, don't despair! Focus on the strengths in the other areas of your application.

**Complete a summer research experience as an undergraduate.** One of the best things you can do to strengthen your application is to complete a summer research experience as an undergraduate. Visit the Resource Toolbox at

<https://www.pathwaystoscience.org> for "Summer Research Experiences for Undergraduates: What are they good for? How does it all work? Finding and applying to programs" and other handouts.

**Get organized.** Create a timeline to keep yourself on track. Create a calendar of application deadlines for graduate programs, GRE test dates and fellowship application deadlines. Collect faculty contact information and file in a way that you can find it again. Give yourself enough time to craft strong essays and personal statements. Ask for your letters of recommendation with plenty of advanced notice – let your recommenders know several months ahead of time. They have other responsibilities and deadlines, so give them enough time to do a good job for you. Visit the Resource Toolbox at <https://www.pathwaystoscience.org/Undergrads.aspx> for the handouts "Tips on Applying to Grad School" and "Getting Strong Letters of Recommendation."

"The relationship you have with your PhD advisor will be one of the single most important relationships you will have in your life, both professional and personal . . . don't commit to a PhD advising relationship without putting some time and thought into it!

A recent paper surveyed graduate students to find out what they thought was an ideal graduate advisor. Here's the (condensed) list:

- Creates structure for labs, meetings, and communication
- Offers support regardless of student's career choices
- Makes time for students
- Sets high standards
- Increases challenges as students develop
- Doesn't let students flounder
- Encourages independent thinking and work
- Encourages attending conferences, writing papers and grants
- Reflective of one's own advising style.

. . . you need to know something about *yourself* and how you like to work to be able to make a good choice of an advisor. How do you like to be managed? Hands-off or hands-on? Do you need to have deadlines set for you, or can you work without them? What environments have been successful for you in the past?"

*Blogger Bug Girl, on "Bug Girl's Blog"*  
<http://membracid.wordpress.com/2011/06/26/choosing-a-graduate-program-and-advisor/>