Science Societies

Interviewing for graduate degree programs

Helpful questions to ask potential advisers, graduate students, and staff

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February 14, 2022



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Deciding to continue with your education is a big step, and the interview and admissions process can be daunting and mildly confusing. Before starting a program, it is hard to envision who will be most influential in your daily life as a graduate student or who to talk to during an interview or campus tour. Below are a few suggestions to help you gather information and evaluate whether a particular program is a good fit for your career goals and personal needs.

Rotations through multiple labs are uncommon in agronomy and crop and soil science graduate programs. Instead of interviewing with a program coordinator, it is more common that you'll interview directly with potential faculty advisers before applying to the graduate program at their university.

How to Identify and Contact a Potential Academic Adviser

Once you have identified the type of research you would like to focus on during graduate school, you can begin looking for potential advisers. One way would be to dig into the literature and look who the faculty members are on some of your favorite papers. Another common way to identify potential advisers is by asking other graduate students at your university if they know of any faculty that would be a good fit for you and your interests. With potential advisers identified, you can then reach out via email to inquire whether they are taking on new graduate students. Generally, you will briefly introduce yourself, mention what you like about their research, and then ask to talk more via Zoom, a phone call, or an in-person meeting if they are at your current institution. Attaching a current resume or curriculum vitae is also a good way to

introduce yourself and give them a quick way to look at your credentials.

Questions to Ask during Campus Tours

There are four main groups of people to talk to when you're looking at graduate school: the faculty member(s) you would consider to be potential advisers, students advised by those faculty members, students in the same department or program but advised by *other* faculty members, and program coordinators or other staff members.

Talking to potential adviser(s) gives you the opportunity to learn about the research project(s) you'd be working on and how student funding works in the lab. Do they have current in-progress projects you'd participate in, or would you be starting new experiments at the beginning of your graduate program? Does this potential adviser pay tuition and stipends for all students? Are you expected to find fellowships or paid teaching assistant positions during graduate school? Will you be writing a lot of research grant proposals to pay for your research, or are there currently grants that would pay for experimental needs? What types of working instruments will you have access to in their lab or other collaborating labs on campus? Labs are not static and are likely to change significantly during your time in graduate school. Take the time to ask your potential adviser about what types of positions they'll be hiring for over the next few years, what skills are currently missing from their lab, and what type of projects or collaborations they're looking to develop in the next few years.

Meeting students that work in the lab you're interviewing can help you understand the working environment and lab culture. Asking students when and where they work can help you understand workload and remote work flexibility. Another way to assess workload is to ask students about their hobbies—their responses can give you important insight into whether the lab values work–life balance. Better yet, ask students what their adviser's hobbies are; if they know, then it's likely their adviser also

values a good work–life balance as well. We also suggest asking students how frequently they meet with their adviser and whether they've been able to develop other mentoring relationships through their work. It's also important to get a sense of how your potential adviser treats current students, especially on bad days. Two questions that can be helpful are (1) "Could you describe your adviser's worst day and how they responded?" and (2) "What is your adviser is like when they're upset?" Knowing how your adviser handles conflict and stress can help you decide whether you may work well together.

It can be equally helpful to talk to students from other labs within the same program. Ask students from across the program about department events to learn more about the culture. They may also have insight into leadership activities outside of research, which you can learn more about by asking about committee activities or student organizations. Students from other labs may also be able to offer insight more freely into faculty members as colleagues—try asking about whether they have ever seen your potential adviser angry or how they participate in department events.

Program coordinators are a great source of information about what to expect during the admissions process and student expectations on campus. If you're concerned about classroom accessibility or disability accommodations, they would be a great person to ask. Program coordinators can also help you assess student fees, health insurance, and the potential for transfer credits from other universities, which is particularly important if you're looking to enter a Ph.D. program after obtaining an M.S. elsewhere.

Places to See During Campus Tours

Campus tours might be the only time you'll be able to see a particular university or city before you have to decide if it's somewhere you can see yourself living for two to

seven years. At minimum, we recommend seeing graduate student offices in the program you're applying for and the lab facilities or field stations your potential adviser expects you to use for your research. You may also want to see classroom buildings, greenhouses, libraries, or gyms—try to make time to see the spaces you'll be spending significant time in during graduate school.

If possible, get a sense of the broader city or town where the campus is located. Again, you'll be living here for a good chunk of time, and you want to make sure you can see yourself becoming a part of the bigger community off campus. It's also wise to ask students what part of town they live in—it might even be possible to go on a driving tour of the area while you're in town. If you do decide to attend graduate school there, you'll be better prepared to sign a lease remotely if it's too far to arrange in-person visits to find housing.

Final Thoughts

When you're interviewing with faculty, graduate students, and staff at universities you're interested in attending for graduate school, remember that you're asking them questions so that YOU can decide where you want to go. Yes, you want your potential adviser to want to work with you, but your main concern is making sure the program is right for you. Presenting yourself authentically can help encourage the people you meet to be honest with you about their experiences, and it helps them feel more comfortable sharing their perceived strengths and limitations of the program.

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