Applying to Graduate School

Worksheet 3: Choosing a graduate school once you have been accepted

Many graduate school programs will organize visit weekends for students accepted into their Ph. D. programs. They will pay or subsidize your travel expenses and accommodations. You are highly encouraged to attend these visit weekends or schedule alternate visit days, as visiting the graduate school and talking to both students and faculty members play an important factor in deciding which graduate program is best suited for you. While the time commitment for the visits may seem large, past students have all emphasized the importance of these visits; many changed their minds after visiting.

Obtaining your Ph. D. may take 5-6 years, so it is important to consider (and be honest with yourself) about what is needed for you to be successful in your graduate studies and what is needed for your personal, physical, and mental health. With respect to graduate studies, most of your time in graduate school will be spent on research. Thus, you should choose a research group that does science that interests you. Be open to new ideas and research topics. It may surprise you how many groups’ research projects interest you. The rule of thumb is that you should go to a graduate school in which there are at least three separate groups that you are interested in. This is to ensure that you have choices when unplanned events occur: the faculty may leave the institute; the research group may not have funding for new students or may only have funding to accept a limited number of students; you may have personality clashes with the advisor or lab members. (For those interested, a separate guideline has been provided on the next page on how to choose a research advisor. They may help you brainstorm questions that you would like to ask during your graduate school visits). Talk to your professors at Bowdoin. They are here to support you. Talk to any alumni who are in the programs. They may know more information about the work environment of the school and research group of interest.

With respect to personal, physical, and mental health, students have to be honest with themselves on what they need to feel supported. One of the greatest difficulties about going to graduate school is having to move and create a new support system. Your decisions may include specific factors about the school: Can you imagine being friends with the graduate students who are currently in the program? Will your advisor be supportive in cases of emergencies or mental health outside the research environment? Other factors may not include the nature of the school itself. Priorities can include being near family or partners. They can include being in a rural versus urban environment, being near geographic landmarks that allow for specific hobbies, or being near other communities of interest. There are no wrong or right answers. They are only choices that support your well-being.

**To help other students in the future, please consider giving a copy of your personal statement and/or contact information to the Chem Office.**
Choosing a Research Advisor

Your relationship with your advisor will develop and change over time as you progress through different stages of life, both personal and professional. What you need from your advisor as a first-year in graduate school may differ greatly from what you need as an older graduate student. It is also important to remember that what you need from your advisor may differ from what a friend or classmate needs, as we all have different social and work personalities.

There is no such thing as the "perfect" advisor. Every advisor has multiple dimensions: leadership/people skills (approachable/supportive); scientific prowess (smart, good to engage / discuss ideas with); business skills (adequate funding). Advisors are people too, and it may just be that you feel more comfortable around certain advisors as compared to others. Your choice should depend on which aspects of an advisor are most critical to your happiness and productivity at your school of interest (and which aspects you may be willing to compromise).

While there are many issues to consider, here are some questions and ideas to think about when choosing an advisor:

- How big is the research group? How often does the group socialize outside of lab?
- How hands-on is this advisor? Is that good or bad for your productivity?
- How defined vs. broad are graduate research projects in this advisor’s lab? Is this advisor open to projects that are proposed/designed by graduate students?
- How available is this advisor to meet with students?
- Does this advisor have required hours, a vacation policy, or other time-related expectations?
- How well does this advisor prepare students for preliminary and qualifying exams?
- What is it like to publish with the advisor?
- Is there support, both financially and in terms of preparation, for students to attend conferences?
- How much job-search support does the advisor offer?
- Do alumni from the lab keep in touch / have positive relationships with the advisor? (Ask senior grad students who know people who have graduated.)
- How supportive is this advisor of different career goals (academia, industry, law, etc.)?
- For students who identify themselves as members of groups underrepresented in science, including members of the LGBTQ community, have there been students of similar identity in the research group? Did they graduate on good terms? Did the advisor treat and communicate with all students in an equal manner? Is the group culture welcoming?

You may want to be mindful of this list when “interviewing” current graduate students or faculty when choosing an advisor. Remember to talk to people from different years/stages in the lab, and not just the junior graduate students. Talk to students from other labs about the group you are interested in joining, since they may provide a broader perspective. Choosing an advisor can be difficult. Become informed of both departmental and campus resources to help you through the process. Also, relationships can change, so if you find that you need help later in your graduate career, you can often turn to those same resources.