

Selecting a Graduate Program That Is Right for You

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Graduate school is a large commitment, so choosing the best program for you is a crucial decision. There are many different types of graduate programs, tailored for students with interests such as wellness, teaching, research or clinical application. To aide in this decision, I have compiled some tips that can make the experience a fruitful one.

Begin with what interests you. Find a discipline or line of research that you find compelling. If your focus is on a research-driven program, be aware that conducting research is often a long and arduous endeavor, so you don't want to choose a line of research unless it excites you. If your interest lies in an applied field, such as athletic training, you want to investigate programs that give you the opportunity to gain valuable hands-on experience in this field.

Find an advisor with whom you would like to work. Finding a discipline or line of research that peaks your interest will invariably lead you to a potential faculty advisor(s). Finding an advisor with whom you are compatible is as important, if not more so, than the university or the department that you choose. Contact potential advisors early in the process and get to know their personality, goals, and expectations. If feasible, schedule personal visits.

Visit the programs that interest you the most. Once you have narrowed down your options, you will want to consider campus visits, not only to meet with your potential advisors, but to see the programs' facilities, such as labs, themselves. It is also a good idea to meet with students who are currently in the graduate programs which you are considering, to hear about the programs from their perspectives. Finally, personal visits will give you an opportunity to see the cities in which you may end up living.

Get all of your paperwork in order. Most programs require that you take the GRE, so you'll want to schedule that early, in case you want (or need) to take it a second time. Be aware of any minimum score requirements or areas of emphasis at the programs that you are considering. Make sure that you request required letters of recommendation well in advance, furnish your recommenders with statements of purpose or areas that you would like them to emphasize, and thank them for their time. Finally, be aware of application deadlines, so you will have ample time to submit all of your materials to the programs that interest you the most.

Find out about funding. The degree of funding, as well as what is required to obtain this funding, varies from program to program. Many programs offer a tuition waiver and some level of stipend for the duties, such as fitness testing or research, which you perform as a graduate student. You may also be expected to teach to help fund your studies. If your long-term career goals involve teaching at a university (or other venue), then this will give you valuable experience. In addition to funding amounts and requirements, find out if fellowships or assistantships include other benefits, such as health care provisions.

Graduate school can be a challenging and rewarding experience. Taking the time to make a good decision about the program that is best for you will likely pay dividends for a lifetime.