

Questions to Ask When Choosing A Graduate School

Compiled by Women in Math and Science, Haverford College

Ask The Graduate Department:

What are the academic regulations/requirements for graduating?

What percentage of the students pass the qualifying exams the first time? How many chances are there?

Are a large percentage of the students graduating with only a terminal masters degree?

What is the average time to obtain a Ph.D.?

When (and how) do you choose your advisor? How difficult is it to switch advisors after, say, a year?

Who selects the dissertation committee?

Is the support offered as a teaching or as a research assistantship? How much is the stipend?

How many working hours per week are expected for a TA or RA?

Are you guaranteed support for the entire time, for a fixed number of years (how many?), or is it on a year by year basis?

If it is year by year, what would disqualify you?

Is there a teaching requirement? How are teaching assignments made (lottery or choice)? Are the teaching assignments for grading duties, holding recitation sections for someone else's lecture, or for teaching one's own class?

What sort of computing facilities do they have? Are any of these reserved for graduate students? Do they have easy-access electronic mail?

What are their provisions for housing, day care, health insurance, etc.?

Ask Current Graduate Students:

Do different research groups interact? Is there collaboration within the department or across departments?

What is the actual time commitment for a TA/RA? Is the TA/RA stipend enough to live on in that area?

Do the students have enough time for a social life? Is the type of social life you desire available?

What are the environs like? Do you like them?

Do graduate students have access to athletic and other university facilities?

Is there a graduate student organization?

Are the provisions for housing, health insurance, etc. adequate?

Talk to current graduate students before you choose an advisor to learn:

do most of the students like working with this research advisor?

what is the average time for a Ph.D. in her/his lab?

how much monetary support is there for research?

is the prospective advisor sensitive to women's issues?

how independent is the research of the students?

do the students work together (with other students and/or the advisor)?

is the advisor personally involved in the research? how frequently is the advisor available?

do the students present their work at national conferences? who pays for attending such conferences?

does the advisor take an active role in placing her/his students? do students go into industry or academia?

how quickly does the advisor publish completed work?

Specific Issues for Women:

It has been said: “do not go to a place where there are no female faculty.” (However, do not assume that every female faculty member will be supportive; some are under a great deal of stress themselves and others are not interested in supporting other women.)

Talk to female graduate students in the department!! (Hint: In some departments you may find out more by speaking to female graduate students in private.)

Do they feel that the atmosphere in the department is either supportive of women or exclusionary of women?

Are there male graduate students or faculty members known to speak or behave inappropriately?

Are women included in the informal mathematical community of the department?

Are there faculty members known to have many female students?

Which (if any) faculty members are felt to mentor female students particularly well?

Do they have women’s support or discussion groups? What do they do? Do they have one specific to your field? Or, is there one for graduate women in science?

Is there a women’s center?

Helpful Hints:

Choose a research area that you are interested in.

However, still choose an advisor with whom you get along!

Choose an advisor with broad research interests.

Your advisor should be willing to help you get through in a timely manner, i.e. assist you with meeting the deadlines for preliminary exams, proposal preparation, and dissertation.

Your advisor should give you some research freedom; do not let yourself be a laboratory technician for five years.

Attend research seminars offered at your university and annual meetings of professional organizations.

If possible, participate in drafting grant proposals so you will know how to write successful ones.

Try to cultivate your “third recommender;” most post-doc positions (and all tenure-track positions) will require three letters of recommendation. It is particularly useful if you can find someone at another institution willing to write for you. If you are interested in tenure-track positions, make sure that a faculty member who is trusted to write good letters observes you teach so s/he can write about this in his/her letter.

Make an effort to present your work at departmental colloquia and professional meetings.

This was written from a draft of *Graduate School in Science and Engineering: Tips for Students and Faculty* by Marsha Lakes Matayas, from statements at the Recruiting and Retaining Women in Physics Conference, held November 2-3, 1990, in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and from a discussion within Women in Math and Science at Haverford College. Prepared by Liese van Zee, HC '91, in 1990; edited/revised/expanded by sarah-marie belcastro, HC '91, inspired by ideas of Abbe Herzig in 2003.