

Things You Should Know About A Graduate School

(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, now professor at Indiana University.)

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 is expected for a TA or RA?
- Are you guaranteed support for the entire time, 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)?
- What sort of computing facilities do they have?
- 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?
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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."
- Talk to female graduate students in the department!!
- Do they have women's support groups? What do they do? Do they have one specific to your field?
- Is there a women's center?

Helpful Hints:

- Choose a school where there's more than one person you can imagine working with.
- 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 will require three letters of recommendation.
- Make an effort to present your work at departmental and professional meetings.