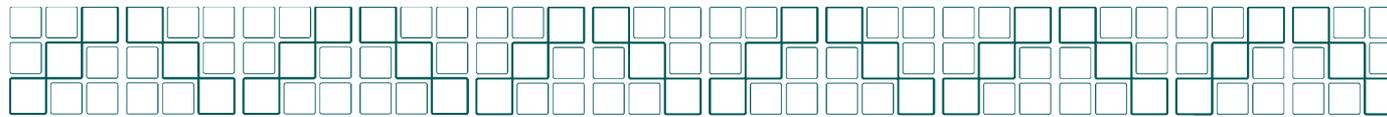


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# Interviewing for Graduate School

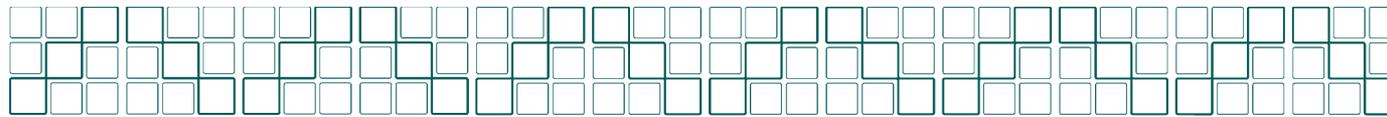
Pat Sokolove, PhD  
Deputy Director, OITE  
[sokolovp@mail.nih.gov](mailto:sokolovp@mail.nih.gov)





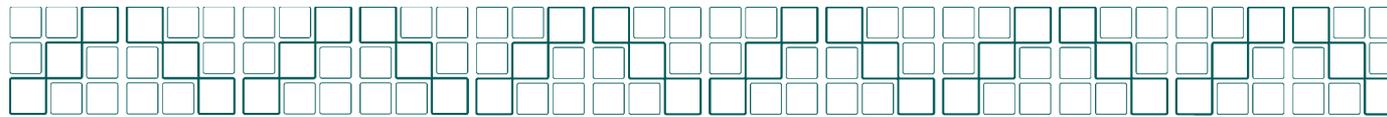
# What Will the Interview Process Be Like?

- Overall structure: recruitment weekend vs. individual visit
- Components
  - Campus tour(s)
  - Opportunities to interact with current students
  - Interviews with faculty and administrators
  - Social events
- The actual interviews
  - A series of short one-on-one meetings
  - A group interview: you with multiple interviewers OR you and multiple applicants with multiple interviewers



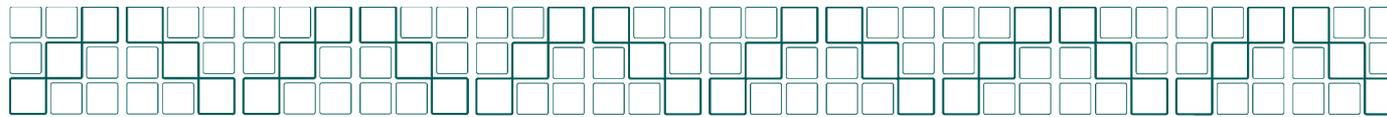
# Setting Up Your Interview

- Respond to e-mail promptly and professionally
  - Do not say “yes” if you are not ready to commit
  - Be clear if you need more time
- Read instructions *carefully before* calling with logistic questions
- Be as accommodating as possible regarding visit details
- Follow directions for your planned visit
- Be sure you understand
  - The structure of the visit; expected arrival/departure times
  - Transportation and lodging arrangements
  - Financial commitments from the program



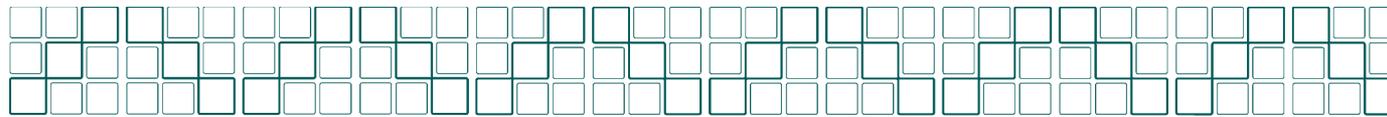
## REMEMBER

The Program is interviewing you  
**AND**  
You are interviewing the program.



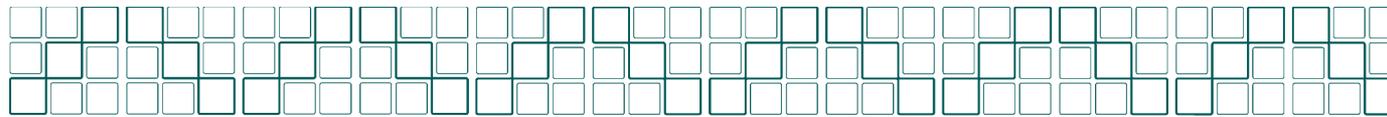
# Your Goals

- Present yourself honestly and enthusiastically
- Show that you understand your research and the field you are entering
- Clearly describe your research interests, knowing they will evolve
- Show that you understand what a career in this field would entail
- Explain any “bumps” in your past
- Demonstrate that you will fit well in this community
- Find out if the research being done interests you
- Learn details of the program, students, faculty, and community
- Figure out if this is the “right” school and life for you



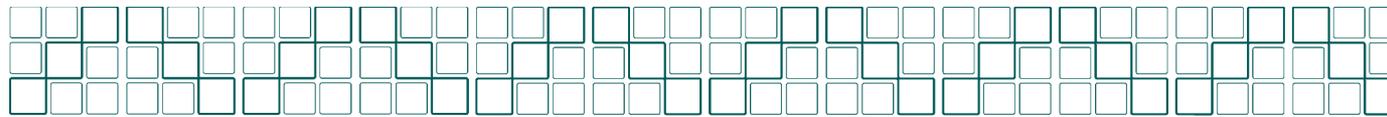
# Remember

- Preparation pays off.
- First impressions form quickly *and last*.
- If you attend an interview WEEKEND, the weekend is not about you.
- You are trying to connect professionally AND personally.
- Social activities are part of the interview.
- You **must** have questions when asked.
  - In individual meetings with faculty and/or students
  - During talks and posters
- Don't focus solely on social life and non-school activities.



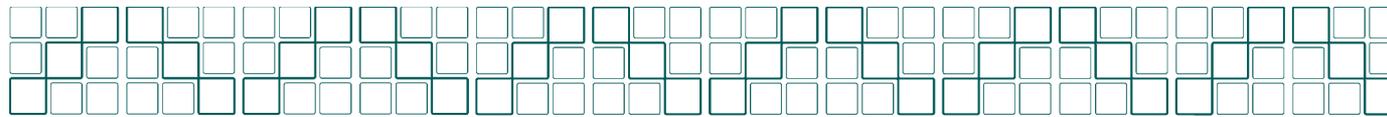
# Preparing

- Re-read your application and material about the school and program.
- Learn about the work of faculty you will meet.
- Practice your handshake and “elevator speech”.
- Practice answering common interview questions.
- Prepare questions in advance.
- Practice with mentors and then do a mock interview with someone you don’t know as well.



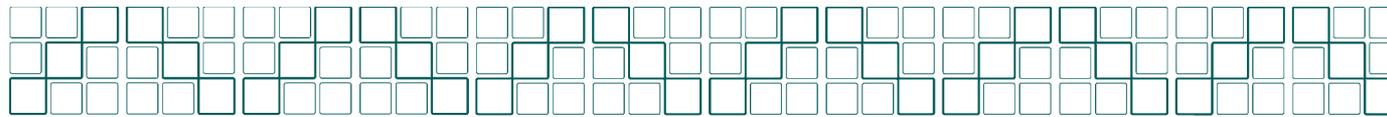
# How We Form Impressions

- From your dress
  - Neat and clean
  - Appropriate for the institution and event
- From your non-verbal communication
  - Posture and handshake
  - Eye contact and facial expressions
  - Gestures and nervous mannerisms
- From your verbal communications
  - Voice and tone
  - Grammar and sentence structure
  - Ability to organize and express ideas
  - Ability to listen and respond appropriately



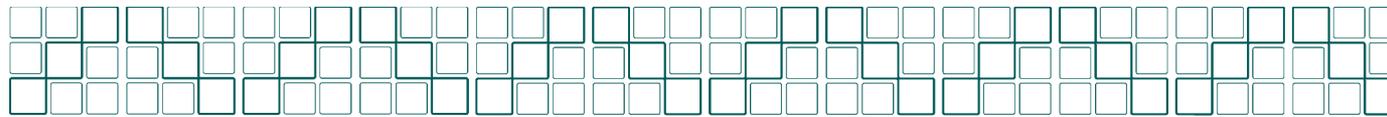
# The Strategy Behind the Interview

Have in mind 4 to 6 things you want to communicate to the interviewer, things that make you unique and would be of value to the program.



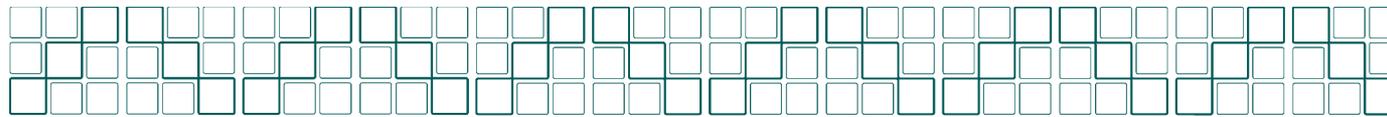
# Interviewing Successfully<sub>1</sub>

- Show that you understand the “big picture” and the details of your research project.
- Target your responses to the listener.
- Limit the length of your responses.
- Where possible use examples or stories to “show” rather than just “stating”.



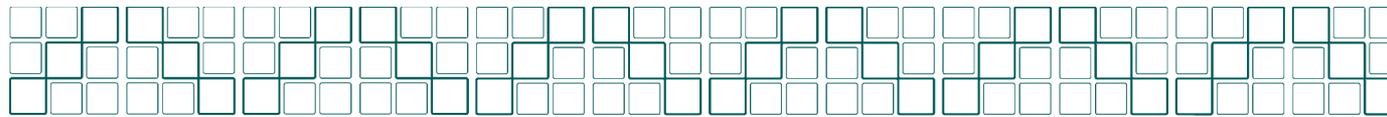
# Interviewing Successfully II

- Ask questions about student/faculty research.
- Ask good questions about science AND about the program.
- Use your questions, answers, and interactions to show you are enthusiastic, realistic, and hard-working.
- Accept responsibility for poor grades or blemishes on your record.



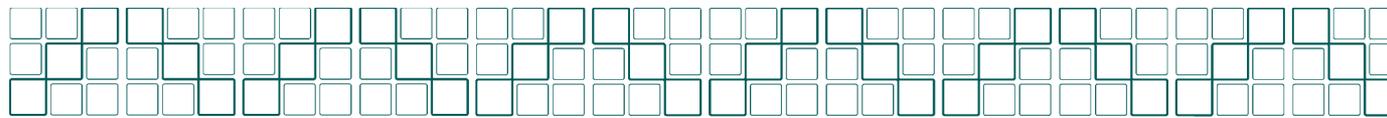
# What We Might Ask<sub>1</sub>

- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me about your previous research experience.
- What do you enjoy most about doing research?
- What don't you enjoy about doing research?
- What types of scientific problems do you hope to work on? What approaches would you like to apply?
- Why do you think you are ready for graduate school?
- What interested you in our program?
- Why did you do so poorly in \_\_\_\_\_?



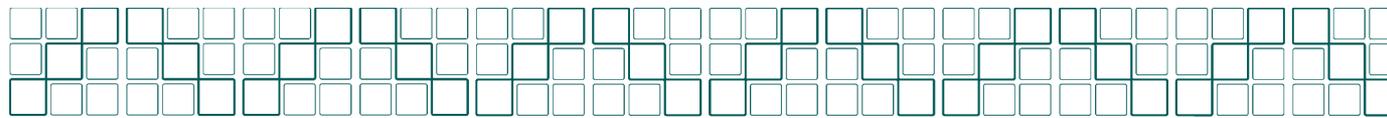
# What We Might Ask<sub>||</sub>

- Why do you want to be a scientist?
- What are your career goals?
- What are your strengths? What about weaknesses?
- What do you think will be hard about graduate school?
- You say you want an academic career. Is that realistic?
- How do you relax?
- What have you read recently?
- Is there anything you wish I had asked you?
- Do you have questions for me?



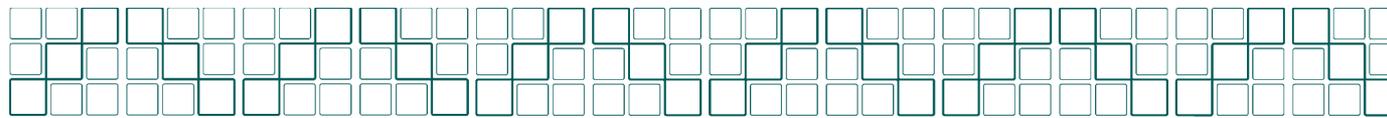
# We Might Ask Behavioral Questions

- Describe a time when you had difficulty working with a supervisor or co-worker. How did you handle it?
- Describe the system you use to keep track of multiple projects.
- Tell me about a time when you came up with an innovative solution to a challenge your group was facing.
- Tell me about a time you failed to meet a deadline. What did you learn?
- Give me an example of a conflict in your group and how you handled it.



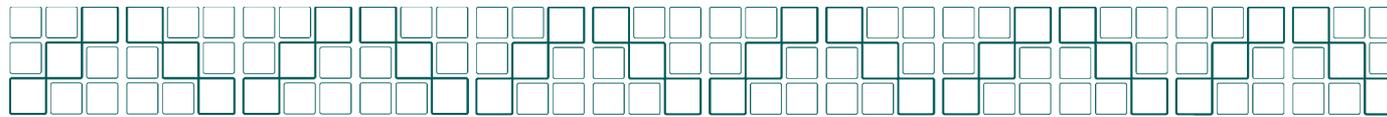
# Why Would We Do This?

- Lots of applicants will be technically competent; we want to know if you will “fit in”.
- The data say that past performance is an indicator of future behavior.



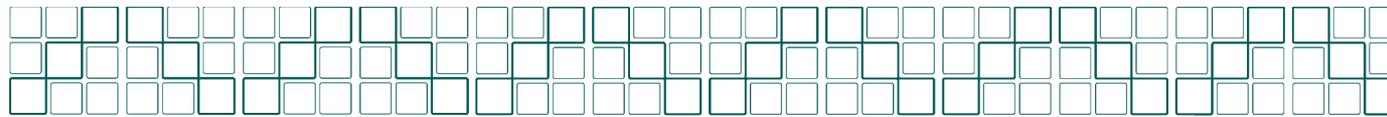
# How Might You Prepare?

- Do some self-analysis in advance.
- Focus on your interactions with and responses to people around you.
- Consider using the STAR approach to formulate your answers.
  - Situation
  - Task (or challenge)
  - Action
  - Result



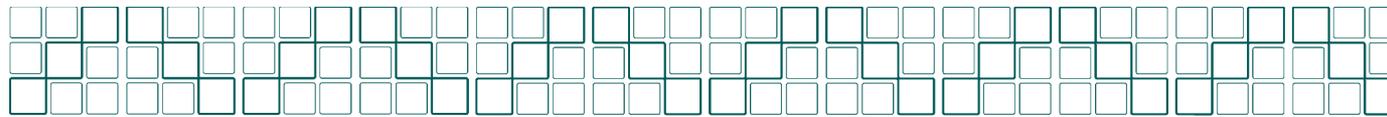
# Questions You Might Ask

- What kinds of students succeed in your program?
- What kinds of jobs do your graduates take?
- How many mentors can I choose from?
- Where do students publish?
- Do students attend meetings; who pays?
- What is the average time to degree?
- Do many students drop out? Why?
- Are there teaching requirements? Teaching courses?
- Do many students have their own grants? Do they get help writing/submitting them



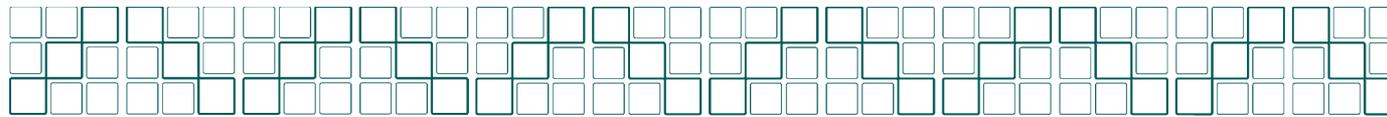
# Behaviors to Avoid

- Bad mouthing other schools or programs
- Talking too much about other schools
- Forgetting to thank each interviewer
- Drinking too much
- Ordering the most expensive thing on the menu
- Charging movies and other items to your room
- Skipping social events to study, visit friends or family, etc.
- Checking e-mail/answering your phone during poster sessions and social activities
- Showing up late



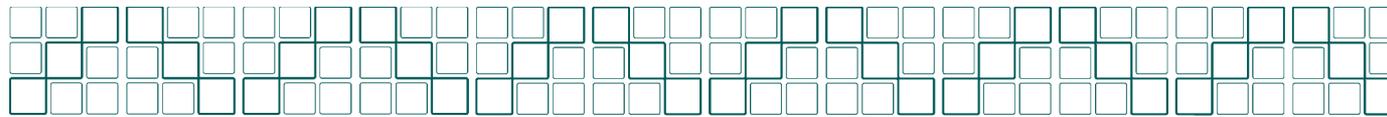
# After the Interview

- Send e-mails or cards to thank the Program Director(s), the program administrator, and your student host.
- Acknowledge offers with a prompt “thank you”; find out when the program needs a firm commitment.
- Do not hesitate to e-mail or call with questions.
- Do NOT commit before you are ready.



# Final Thoughts

- Plan your travel wisely to minimize stress and distraction.
- Prepare a standard set of questions in advance.
- Be self-confident but not egotistical.
- Remember: you are being “interviewed” even when you are not in formal interviews.
- Don’t be overly swayed by the opinion of any one person you meet.
- Ask yourself if you would fit in well with current grad students and other interviewees.
- Take notes on the way home; your memory will fade.
- Have fun; this is the start of a wonderful journey.



# Resources

- Attend the NIH Graduate & Professional School Fair.
- Watch NIH Career videos at [www.training.nih.gov](http://www.training.nih.gov).
- GREAT group Web site: [www.aamc.org/phd](http://www.aamc.org/phd).
- **Important** articles on PhD training in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:
  - [http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_magazine/previous\\_issues/articles/2012\\_09\\_07/caredit.a1200100](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2012_09_07/caredit.a1200100)
  - <http://www.lifescied.org/content/10/3/239.full>
- Connect with us on LinkedIn (no Facebook requests please).
- Use the Alumni Database to find former postbacs at schools you are considering.