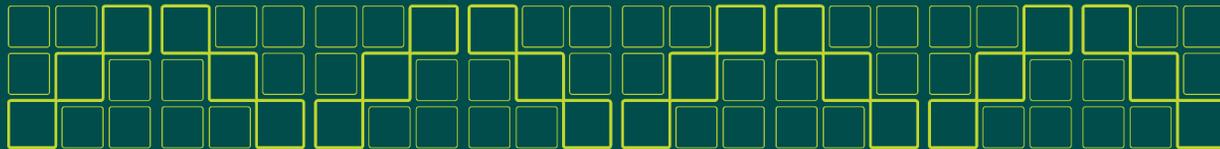

Everything You Need to Know to Get into Grad School

Pat Sokolove, PhD
Deputy Director, OITE
sokolovp@mail.nih.gov

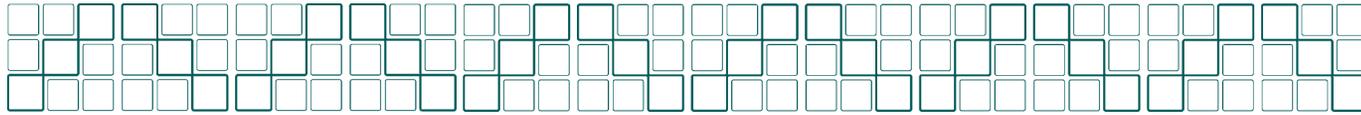


Game Plan

- Choosing and applying to a grad school/grad program
 - What do I want the Admissions Committee to Know?
 - What is the Admissions Committee Looking for?
- Writing a personal statement
- Interviewing

The key to all of these is **KNOWING YOURSELF.**

Choosing and Applying to a Grad School/Grad Program



First Questions

- Why do I want to go to graduate school?
- Where do I see myself in the future?
- What kind of graduate experience will I need to reach these goals?

Reality Check

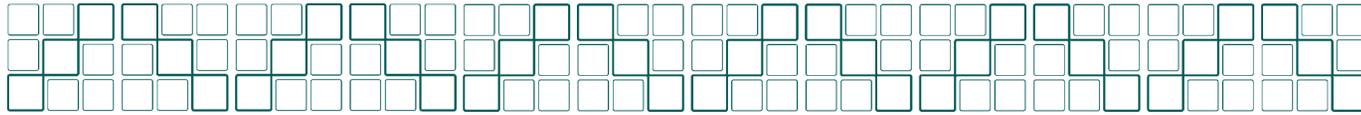
“Improving Graduate Education to Support a Branching Career Pipeline: Recommendations Based on a Survey of Doctoral Students in the Basic Biomedical Sciences” (2011) Fuhrmann, C.N., Halme, D.G., O’Sullivan, P.S., and Lindstaedt, B., *CBE – Life Sciences Education* **10**: 239 – 249.

What Type of Program?

- PhD and other doctoral programs
 - Umbrella
 - Department-based
- MD/PhD
 - MSTP
 - Non-MSTP
- MPH
 - With a variety of sub-disciplines
 - [“What Is Public Health” Web site](#)
- Professional Science Masters
 - For careers at the interface of science and management
 - [“Professional Science Masters” Web site](#)

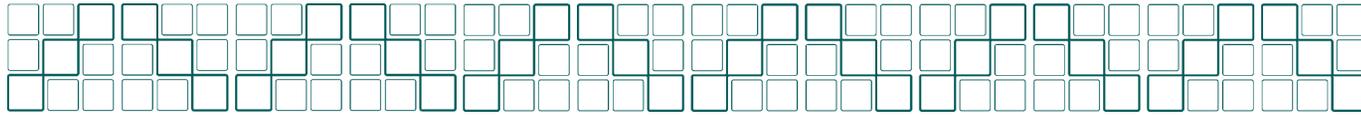
Am I Ready?

- Academic preparation
- Research skills
- Problem solving skills
- Ability to read and comprehend research papers*
- Communication skills - verbal and written*
- Time & stress management skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Maturity & willingness to sacrifice
- Finances



Things To Consider

- Structure of the program
 - Rotations and required coursework
 - Mentor selection process
 - Teaching requirements
 - Qualifying exams
 - Stipends and other compensation
- Teaching opportunities and pedagogy training
- Career and professional development resources
- **Diversity** of the students, faculty, and broader communities
- Career goals and **outcomes** of past and current students



Things To Consider II

- Program climate, morale, and student satisfaction
- Program focus on teaching, mentoring, and career development of graduate students
 - Coordinated programs to help you develop professional skills
 - Innovative internship and training opportunities
 - Strong leadership and oversight of your graduate experience
 - Attention to controlling time to degree
- Geography and cost of living
 - Distance from family
 - Needs of partner and kids
 - Access to things you enjoy

Evaluating the Quality of the Department and Institution

- Funding record
 - RO1: [Read about these grants.](#)
 - Training grants to the institution & individual students
- Publication record
 - Quality, not just numbers
 - Students doing the writing and publishing as first author
- Awards
 - Students
 - Faculty

Drilling Down To Your Scientific Interests

- Scientific resources
 - Quality of the research space
 - Core facilities
 - Access to important patient populations
 - Possibility of doing fieldwork
 - Access to experts in technologies important to you
- The number of potential mentors doing what YOU want to do?
 - You will want to know about their funding, publication record, tenure status, **and** mentoring history
 - Remember institutions and departments have strengths in some research areas and not in others

To Learn about Schools and Programs

- Talk with your mentors.
- Use the NIH Alumni Database.
- Surf the Web.
- Go to undergraduate meetings.
- Contact program directors, administrators, and students at schools that catch your interest.
- Arrange a visit if possible (but only go if you are prepared)
- Do NOT use *US News & World Reports* rankings!

Getting Ready to Apply/Write/Interview

- What sets me apart from other applicants?
- How did I learn about this field?
- Why am I interested in this field?
- What experiences have stimulated and enhanced my interest?
- What skills or personal characteristics do I possess that would enhance my chances for success?
- What are my biggest accomplishments?
- What are my career aspirations?
- Why THIS school and program? Do I have any connections?
- What will I be doing between now and next fall?
- Have I overcome relevant obstacles in my life?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in my academic record?

Desirable Characteristics*

- Creativity
- Problem solving ability
- Tenacity
- Ability to work in a team
- Independence
- Self-motivation
- Good communication skills
- Project management skills
- Relevant background knowledge
- Flexibility
- A positive attitude
- Resilience
- Organizational skills
- Attention to detail
- Ability to see the big picture
- Ability to prioritize
- Time management skills
- **Appreciation for diversity**
- Good interpersonal skills
- Maturity

What do I want the Admissions
Committee to Know?

What Is an Admissions Committee
Looking For?

The Admissions Committee

- 5 to 15 members depending on the size of the program
- Chaired by the Program Director or the Director of Admissions
- Applications are read in advance and discussed at a meeting.
- Some, but not all, use rolling admissions.
- Program Directors often have some discretion.

What They Evaluate

- Academic record
- Standardized test scores
- Research experience
- Personal statement*
- Recommendation letters

What Is An Admissions Committee Looking For?

- Someone who will succeed in graduate school*
 - What do you know about doing research?
 - How effectively can you talk about science?
 - What do you know about the program?
 - How sophisticated are you about graduate school?
 - Do you have **characteristics that favor success**?
- Someone who will be a good fit for the school

Letters of Recommendation

- Three or four are required
- Typically submitted online
- From mentors and teachers who **KNOW YOU WELL**
 - Not from personal/family friends
 - Not from non-educational employers unless the work is relevant
- Asking:
 - Request a letter far in advance.
 - Provide a list of schools who will be contacting them and the program you are applying to.
 - Provide an updated CV.

Consider

- The goal of your written application is to get an interview - even if you have good grades, take this step seriously.
- Missing deadlines and asking for an extension is a poor way to make a good impression.
- You can apply to too many OR too few schools.
- Get advice along the way.
- You should have a mix of reach schools and safe schools.
- Waiting until the last minutes adds tremendous stress to an already stressful process.

Writing Your Personal Statement

Why Does a Graduate School Ask for a Personal Statement?

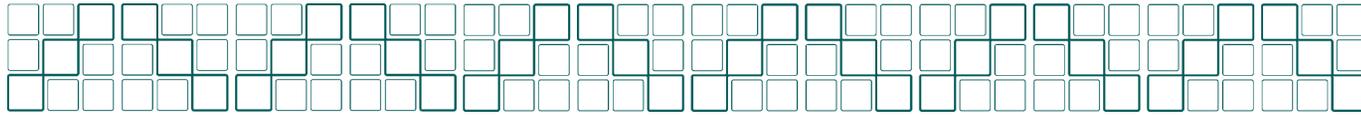
- To try to determine if you are likely to succeed
- To see if you will be a good fit for the school
- To get to know you, not your record
- To look for insights into the sophistication of your thinking
- To determine whether you can organize information
- To see if you can think logically
- To see if you can write well

The General Structure

- The “hook”*
 - Introduce yourself.
 - Explain why you want to go to graduate school.
- The substance
 - Explain your science.
 - Highlight other relevant experiences.
- The future
 - Explain “why this program”
 - Briefly describe your career goals.

Explaining Your Science

- Include your IC and the name of your PI or mentor
- Present the big picture – the overall goal of your group or lab
- Describe your project
 - What specific question are you trying to answer?
 - What techniques are you using?
- Present your results, briefly
- Indicate what your results mean and/or possible future research directions



General Thoughts

- Answer the questions that are asked
- Tell a story – but content over style
- Analyze – don't just list
- Give concrete examples
- Share credit when appropriate
- Personalize each statement to the school and/or program
- Be concise rather than long-winded
- Make your statement easy for committee members to read

Statement of Purpose

Describe in your statement of purpose:

- Your reasons for applying to the proposed program at Stanford and your preparation for this field of study
- Your research and study interests
- Future career plans and other aspects of your background and interests which may aid the admissions committee in evaluating your aptitude and motivation for graduate study

Your statement should not exceed two pages in length (single spaced).

Statement of Purpose

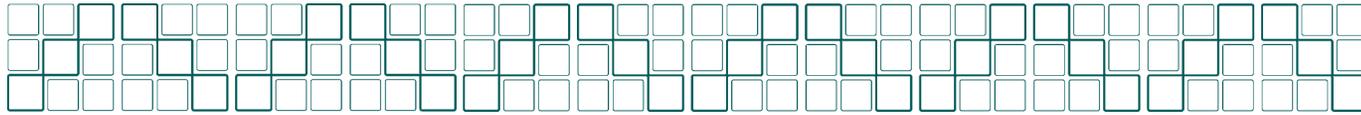
Describe in your statement of purpose:

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Personal History Statement

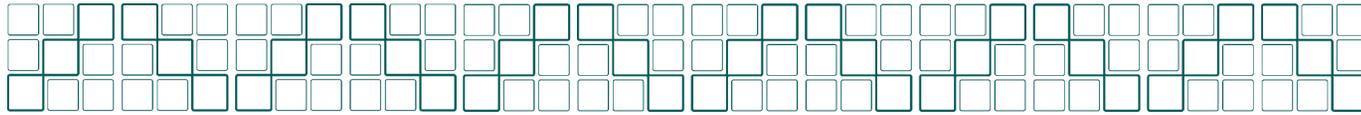
Please describe how your personal background informs your decision to pursue a graduate degree. Please include information on how you have overcome barriers to access opportunities in higher education, evidence of how you came to understand the barriers faced by others, evidence of your academic service to advance equitable access to higher education for women, racial minorities and individuals from other groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education, evidence of your research focusing on underserved populations or related issues of inequality, OR evidence of your leadership among such groups.



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Five graduate level courses are required for the PhD. Formal course work is generally finished in the first twelve to eighteen months, permitting students to begin full-time research early in their career. Courses are selected according to the special interests and needs of each student. Penn State's chemistry department is noteworthy in its effort to break down unnecessary barriers; hence there are no formal divisions between chemistry areas. Lists of suggested courses are provided for concentration in specific areas of chemistry (analytical, biological, chemical physics, inorganic materials, organometallic, organic, physical, polymer, surface, theoretical). Students are encouraged to begin research as soon as they are ready and to choose courses that strengthen their research capabilities.



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Dealing with the Elephant in the Room - I

Attempt this only if the problem is

- Sympathetic
- In the past
- Resolved
- Unlikely to come back

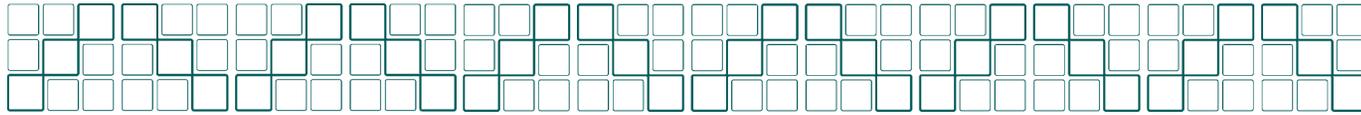
Dealing with the Elephant in the Room - II

- Use either your personal statement or an attached letter to the Graduate Program Director
- Avoid making excuses or assigning blame
- Point out more recent evidence showing that you are a good candidate
 - Success in graduate level courses
 - Steady improvement in your GPA
 - Success in the lab
- Offer to discuss this further with the Program Director

Polish Your Draft

After you have edited, have your statement read by

- Friends and non-scientists for general writing and flow
- Your PI, your IC Training Director, OITE staff, undergraduate teachers for content and style
- Someone with experience on an admissions committee



Common Mistakes

- Not enough intellectual depth
- Too much humor (or drama)
- Too long – too short
- Failure to answer the question(s) asked
- Failure to explain a weakness in your application
- Trying to impress the committee with big words
- Poorly written, written in the passive voice, or wordy
- Too many (or too few) transition words
- Re-stating the obvious

The Penn State Dance Marathon was great fun and a huge success; in the aftermath we were able to contribute \$25,000 to the fight against cancer.

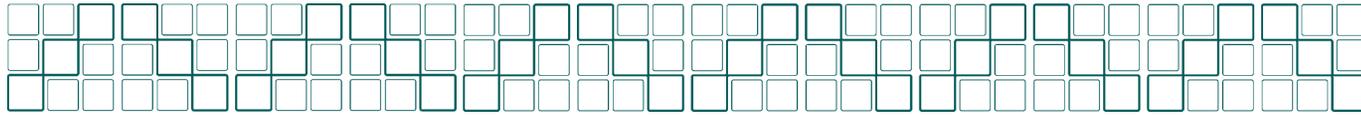
I'm in a number of clubs that focus on servitude and improving the community around us.

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aftermath: the period following a (usually) ruinous event

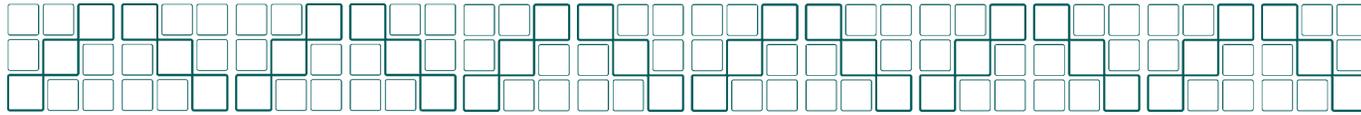
I'm in a number of clubs that focus on servitude and improving the community around us.

servitude: a condition in which one lacks liberty esp. to determine one's course of action or way of life; a synonym for "slavery"



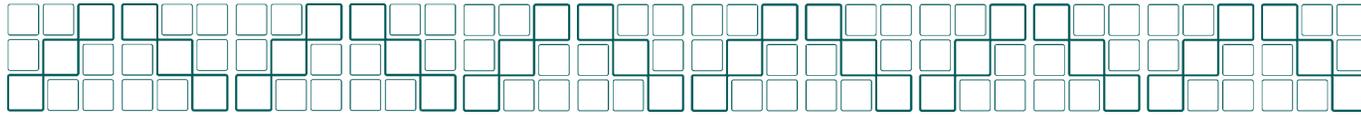
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Things to Avoid

- Criticizing past professors (or anyone else)
- Bad-mouthing other graduate programs
- Expressing intolerant religious beliefs
- Sharing political beliefs
- Extended descriptions of mental anguish
- Arrogance
- Sexist language
- Too many adjectives: “wonderful”, “meaningful”
or adverbs: “terrifically”, “extraordinarily”
- Flowery language



My purpose in undertaking graduate study in the PsyD program at George Washington University is to develop my skills and knowledge of therapy in preparation for a career as a psychotherapist. I have a long-held interest in mental illness that began during high school and deepened during my undergraduate clinical psychology courses. I became fascinated by the impact of mental illness on the brain and behavior and by the myriad of treatments available. My commitment towards pursuing a career as a practitioner was established during my summer internship at Northgate Clinic, an inpatient psychiatric unit for adolescents in London. Observing therapy groups and reporting on patient progress I was engrossed in the changes that I saw in the patients during the two months I was there. I grew to care deeply about the teens I worked with every day and was saddened to leave the clinic at the end of the summer. It was then that I determined that a career spent working with children and adolescents struggling with mental illness would be both worthwhile and personally rewarding.

Sample 1: “Hook”

My purpose in undertaking graduate study in the PsyD program at George Washington University is to develop my skills and knowledge of therapy in preparation for a career as a psychotherapist. I have a long-held interest in mental illness that began during high school and deepened during my undergraduate clinical psychology courses. [I became fascinated by the impact of mental illness on the brain and behavior and by the myriad of treatments available.] My commitment towards pursuing a career as a practitioner was established during my summer internship at Northgate Clinic, an inpatient psychiatric unit for adolescents in London. Observing therapy groups and reporting on patient progress I was engrossed in the changes that I saw in the patients during the two months I was there. [I grew to care deeply about the teens I worked with every day and was saddened to leave the clinic at the end of the summer.] It was then that I determined that a career spent working with children and adolescents struggling with mental illness would be both worthwhile and personally rewarding.

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It was at Y University where, through close interactions with my peers and mentors, my enthusiasm for science and research first took root and flourished. Although I began my undergraduate education majoring solely in biology, it didn't take long after my first encounter with synthetic organic chemistry for me to realize that I wanted to focus on the area where chemistry and biology overlap. I added chemistry as a second major and sought to integrate both fields through advanced coursework in molecular/cellular biology and organic synthesis. Furthermore, I took advantage of research opportunities in both fields. The underlying passion that fueled my academic and research career to date is the same that leads me now to pursue a graduate degree in the field of chemical biology. I am drawn to this area due to its emphasis on integrating the principles and techniques employed in both biology and chemistry to address specific questions.

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After completing my bachelor's degree, I accepted a fellowship with the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD. I am currently associated with the Lab of Cellular and Developmental Biology headed by Dr. Kenneth Yamada, and working under the direct supervision of Dr. Kurt Musselman. As part of my research, I employ laser capture microdissection and microarray analysis to study gene expression in the developing submandibular gland. Our objectives are to characterize the expression profile of the developing gland and identify novel genes involved in the process of branching morphogenesis. It has been amazing for me to work alongside many top-notch scientists at one of the world's leading research centers. One of the most notable things I have observed while at the NIH is the interdisciplinary nature of modern scientific research and the need for communication between different fields.

Sample 3: Science Explanation

After completing my bachelor's degree, I accepted a fellowship with the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD. I am currently associated with the **Laboratory** of Cellular and Developmental Biology headed by Dr. Kenneth Yamada, and working under the direct supervision of Dr. Kurt Musselman. As part of my research, I employ laser capture microdissection and microarray analysis to study gene expression in the developing submandibular gland. Our objectives are to characterize the expression profile of the developing gland and identify novel genes involved in the process of branching morphogenesis. [It has been amazing for me to work alongside many top-notch scientists at one of the world's leading research centers. One of the most notable things I have observed while at the NIH is the interdisciplinary nature of modern scientific research and the need for communication between different fields.]

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Sample 4: Science Explanation

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While I have specific interests in toxicology, I find many areas of molecular biology fascinating. The flexibility of the BBSP program at the University of North Carolina is appealing to me because it will allow me to explore the field of toxicology while still having the option to rotate in other molecular biology labs. In addition I like the fact that the Curriculum in Toxicology is composed of faculty from several different institutions including the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In particular, I find the work of Dr. Suzanne Fenton on mammary gland development and of Dr. Elizabeth Wilson on steroid hormone receptors intriguing due to their focus on toxic chemicals found in our environment. I also find the work of Dr. Linda Birnbaum on polychlorinated biphenyls equally fascinating. I feel that graduate studies at the University of North Carolina can provide me with the education and training that I need to have a successful career in the field of toxicology, and I look forward to visiting the campus and meeting faculty.

Sample 5: “Why this program”

While I have specific interests in toxicology, I find many areas of molecular biology fascinating. The flexibility of the BBSP program at the University of North Carolina is appealing to me because it will allow me to explore the field of toxicology while still having the option to rotate in other molecular biology labs. In addition I like the fact that faculty from several different institutions, including the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, **participate in the Curriculum in Toxicology** . In particular, I find the **focus on toxic chemicals in the environment** of both Dr. Suzanne Fenton's work on mammary gland development and Dr. Elizabeth Wilson's **research** on steroid hormone receptors intriguing. I also find the work of Dr. Linda Birnbaum on polychlorinated biphenyls equally fascinating. I feel that graduate studies at the University of North Carolina can provide me with the education and training that I need to have a successful career in the field of toxicology, and I look forward to visiting the campus and meeting faculty.

General Writing Principles

- Be specific and accurate.
- Make certain grammar and spelling are perfect.
- Avoid lofty sounding statements that communicate little.
- Be ruthless about eliminating extra words.
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence and make certain all sentences in the paragraph address the topic.
- Use white space to make the document look easy to read.

Graduate School Interviews

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

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

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

- 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.
- Even social activities are part of the interview.
- You must have questions when asked
 - In individual meetings with faculty
 - 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 Successfully₁

- 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 Successfully₁₁

- 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 Ask₁

- 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 Ask₁₁

- 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?

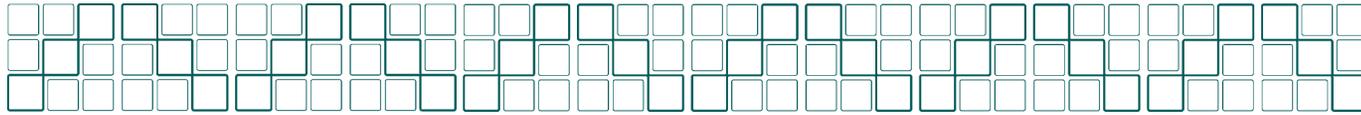
- Lots of applicants will be technically competent; we want to know if you will “fit in”.
- Some believe that past performance is an indicator of future behavior.

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

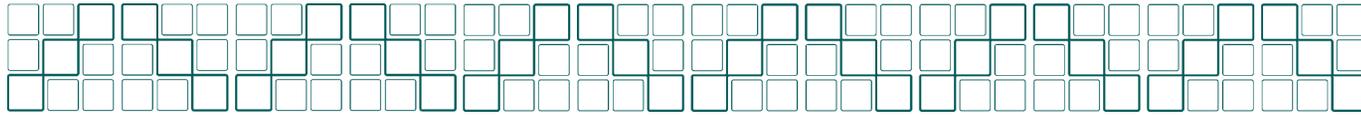


Behaviors to Avoid

- 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.