How to select the ideal grad program

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“The ideal grad program” doesn’t exist

too many unknown variables

don’t focus on finding that one perfect grad program, you need to optimize
The big question

Where should I send applications?

General advice

• get organized
  • identify important factors before you start
  • make a spreadsheet to track what's important

• apply to a reasonable cross section of schools
  • some where you have a good chance
  • some where you have a fighting chance
  • a dream school (go for difficult, but not impossible)

• work the problem from the other end
  • where do you want to be after grad school?
  • what training do you need to get there?
A myth about grad programs

**MYTH**
the most important fact about a grad program is its ranking

**FACT**
there are at least two ways to NOT obtain a grad degree
  * don’t go to grad school –or–
  * go to a school that is not a good fit for you

A quick first pass

• Do you meet admission requirements? (GPA, GRE, etc.)
• Could you live in the area for 2-6 years?
• Are you interested in of the courses/specializations offered?
Going deeper

What do you need in a grad school?

Quality of the program

- ranking (take with a grain of salt!)
- where do graduates get jobs?
- what do your mentors say about it?
- what is the student success rate?
Financial support

• TAships, RAships, Fellowships
• amount of pay, benefits
• amount of work required (teaching, research, etc.)
• duration of support
• what about summers?

Faculty

• several faculty in your area(s) of interest
• accessibility and helpfulness
• active research groups
  • faculty/group web pages
  • conferences organized by faculty
  • recent publications
  • current funding
Potential advisors

- track down number and status of past advisees
- talk to current/past students
- meet potential advisors if possible

Location

What is important to you?
- closeness to friends/family
- cultural/outdoor activities
- cost of living
- weather, traffic, housing
- child care
Grad student population

- How many MS and PhD students?
- Are there study groups?
- Are more senior students involved in mentoring?
- What about social activities?
- Meet as many grad students as possible. Ask them questions.

Training Environment

- Good courses offered?
- Type and difficulty of exams?
- Regular seminars, colloquia, distinguished lectures, visitors?
- Conferences held on campus?
- Support for student travel?
Facilities

• Will you get an office? What are the offices like?
• What computer resources are available?
• Do you have access to a good library?
  • check journal subscriptions

Finally...

try not to worry too much