

Surviving the In-between: Choosing a Graduate School

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Introduction

"The hard part's over," I thought after I submitted my last application. "I have nothing to worry about until after graduation." I couldn't have been more wrong. Applying was the easy part. It was what came after that was difficult.

Applying for graduate school is a funny process: You study for the GRE, meditate over the perfect essay, request letters of recommendation, and check each school off your list as you shakingly hit the submit button on the application. If you're still working on your undergraduate degree, you also have to juggle your current school work and course loads to maintain a solid GPA so you can actually get into a new school.

When you get accepted, you have new things to juggle: interviews and decisions.

Waiting Around

First, I checked and memorized the date when each school's acceptance letters were sent in the previous years. When those days started approaching, I began checking my email twice --maybe three times-- more often than normal just in case I got that acceptance email. "Hmm, no email five minutes ago? Well maybe now..." Each incoming email becomes a burden - another reminder that you haven't heard back from schools yet. When those deadline days pass, I became filled with self-doubt, even though there had been no promise that I would hear back as soon as the previous applicants did. I had to keep reminding myself to breathe, relax, and focus on other tasks.

Getting Acceptances

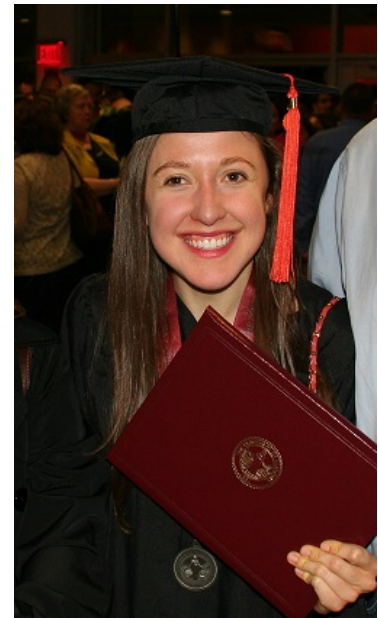
Even though it seemed like ages, in hindsight, that first acceptance letter was very early in the game.

"Finally, someone wants me!" I was ready to pack my bags right then and there and ship off to that first school. It's when I heard back from a second school that the fun (trouble) began. Never before had I imagined that having options could be a negative thing. I began to curse my application-happy self for picking so many schools. "How am I supposed to decide?"

“Do I have to pick just one?” “I can just go to multiple universities, right?” Once again, the best thing to do is breathe. No one is asking you to make a decision right away.

Interviewing Professors

“It’s not so much about them interviewing you as it is you interviewing them.” It’s true! I heard this a million times, but it took actually going through all of the interviews for me to believe it. About a week before my first interview, I met with a professor who, due to my incessant worrying, spent the majority of two hours telling me that the interview is nothing to stress over. You’ve been accepted, so you have obviously already impressed them. The interviews and school visits are your opportunities to see which school will provide you with the most positive and productive atmosphere. It’s your time to pick the brains of professors you’re interested in working with (and see if they pick back!). It’s your chance to talk to the current students. Do they sound exhausted and run-down, or do they sound excited and motivated? These are the things you won’t find on the schools’ websites. I tried to take everything in during each stay: What vibe do I get from the students/professors? What is the cost of living in this area? Could I see myself spending the next 5 years of my life here? What type of extracurricular activities does the school provide? What do students do for fun? What’s parking like on campus (kidding... kind of)? Then there are also the big ticket questions. How many publications does this professor produce in a year? What is the status/reputation of this school in my field? Is this a hands-on professor or does he/she let the graduate students take the wheel? Surprisingly, I found that the tougher questions seemed to be the same for each school. When it came down to it, I had to make my decision on instinct over institution.



Receiving her BS from the University of Alabama

Preparing for Interviews

Though some of the pressure to impress is off since you have already been accepted, you still want to live up to your name. There are four basic things that I found helpful for interviews:

1. **Research.** You are there for --gasp-- research. Be sure to know what the professor has been and/or is currently working on. Be sure to ask questions if there is something about the research you don’t understand. Not only does this show that you are interested and have taken the time to

learn about the professor, but it's also less time that you have to do the talking in the interview. Also, try to contribute to the conversation by telling him or her about ideas that you generated from their work. It shows an initiative and compatibility.

2. **Inquire.** Don't just ask questions regarding their research. Be sure to ask about their teaching philosophy, students, academic career, etc. I learned the hard way that there is nothing worse than having someone ask, "Do you have any questions for me?" and replying, "No." This is a huge opportunity to learn more about them and for them to learn more about you.
3. **Connect.** Try to relate on a personal level. My most enjoyable interviews were the ones where we got a little off topic. Talking about food, entertainment, and/or current events is a great way to relax and stay calm when the tough questions roll back around. It also provides a good sense of whether you could work with this person for the next 5 or-so years of your life.
4. **Thank.** This part comes after the interview when you're back home. Be sure to write a thank you letter or email to each of your interviewers. Include specifics from your conversation to avoid sounding generic. This ensures that he or she will remember your face and that you remember theirs. It makes it obvious that you didn't write one thank you note and simply fill in the appropriate last name after "Dear Dr."

Picking a School

Selecting a school was one of the most difficult decisions I've ever had to make. My family joked with me because I always had a "School of the Week" that I was certain I was going to choose. Like clockwork, a week would pass and I'd be slightly skewed towards a different school. I sought advice from professors, classmates, and graduate students I had met during my campus visits. I had the most balanced pro and con columns in the history of list making. What it came down to was instinct, something that no pro and con list could tell me. I picked the school that I felt would provide me with the most opportunities to flourish as a student and where I thought I would be most comfortable both on and off campus.

With one degree behind me, I could not be more excited to pursue my next one. Hopefully I can remember to take my own advice and breath.

About the Author

Kimberly Oakes will be a Health Informatics PhD student at Indiana University in Fall 2013. She earned her BS in Computer Science from The University of Alabama (2013). She enjoys CrossFitting and cooking vegan food.

