



I applied to grad school—now what?

Questions & Answers

Note: the following questions and answers were compiled from the chat and Q&A sections of the workshop, “I applied to grad school—now what?” Visit <https://bit.ly/iappliedHO> for the complete recording and handouts.

Acceptances

- 1) I was accepted into a program, I got a phone call from a professor and an email saying I got accepted but have not gotten an offer letter yet (about 2 weeks later). Is this a bad sign or is this a common thing**
 - Circle back and contact the professor. The offer should have been received within a week of it being made.
- 2) When is it reasonable to reach out to a graduate program if you haven't heard anything? The application was sent in at the beginning of December as a note, and I want to make sure I didn't miss any communications**
 - I think it is probably still soon to hear back with a decision. However, if you have not heard from the admissions department (i.e. an admissions counselor), I would first check to make sure your application was received. It could be that they are backed up with applications, so it does not hurt to send the admissions department a quick note about the process. Other considerations - is there an application deadline? The admissions process could be that they review apps post deadline date.
 - If you ask politely, since you sent it in at December, you won't be rude to check in now to make sure that they have everything from you! They certainly may not have a decision now, but you aren't rude to politely check in to make sure your package is complete"
- 3) When is it safe to assume that I didn't get into a grad program?**
 - It is always okay to ask where you are on the list/where the school is in the process. Some schools start sending out letters now-ish, others a bit later, and others are having visits in February/March....and then perhaps another round of visits later than that. Not everyone who is accepted will accept the acceptance! There is a waitlist of sorts. Politely e-mail them, asking them where they are, and where you are in a waitlist (if you are waitlisted).
- 4) When receiving an acceptance letter, should you respond? Like thanking them and letting them know you will consider this offer. Or just contacting them when you have made a decision?**
 - US Graduate Schools have agreed that April 15th is the deadline for accepting your offer. Please reply by April 14th. If you are sure, please accept early and let the other schools know that you will not be attending (perhaps it will open the slot of another deserving student).



Anxiety

- 1) My program requires us to take entrance ACS exams in physical, organic, and inorganic chemistry. I received A's in these courses, but have serious test anxiety, (especially in multiple choice exams), how will this affect my PhD entrance or courses if I don't do as well as I hope?**
 - These are used as diagnostics to evaluate if your undergrad preparation meets their expectations. All students are the same boat. Please study for them over the summer, but don't fret over them.
- 2) Tips for fighting anxiety while I wait for decision? I'm currently 0-3 on acceptances and have been trying to stay confident, but sometimes it's hard.**
 - For anxiety, I would try to practice "acceptance" - accept the things that are now out of your control. Should you not get into a program, stay positive and think of what IS in your control. How can you be a more competitive applicant? Those answers will come with further research and self-reflection - remember sometimes it takes failure to get back up and be stronger, better, etc. Other resources to leverage are mental health professionals, support groups, peers in the same situation; tons of resources provided in this discussion

Applications/Resume

- 1) What are some of the things we should definitely include/focus more in our resume?**
 - Any research that you have done (in person or virtual, that you enjoyed and hated). Admissions Committees are looking for students who can pass their classes, and are research ready. Describe research that you have done in your resume and elaborate on it in your personal statement.
- 2) What do you think is the most important aspect in grad school applications?**
 - Your motivation and stick-to-itiveness - graduate school is a marathon not a sprint. This comes across in a well-written personal statement. Have you done your research into the faculty that you want to work with? Do you explain why that program is the best for you and how it fits into your career plan.

Books

- 1) What were the book recommendations in regards to graduate school?**
 - The books I mentioned in the presentation were about Failure in Science. Both are by Stuart Firestein: *Ignorance and how it drives science* and *Failure: why science is so successful*



Chemistry Education Research

1) I'm interested in doing chemistry research primarily but I can also see myself getting into teaching and doing chemical education research. Is it common for students to do research both in education and in, say, synthetic chemistry?

- Check out programs that may allow you to do both! For example, Iowa State (where I go) makes their ChemEd research students do their technical master's first (I did physical chemistry-- so I did computational chemistry and learned a lot about software development!). That way you can figure out if chemistry is the way to go. If chemistry education research is your passion, then you're right where you need to be! Have conversations with other folks, as this is just one experience.

Funding

1) What are the funding opportunities for international students in the universities you are representing?

- Many universities will offer international students the same support package that domestic students receive (stipend, health insurance, tuition remission). The City University of New York offers the same to all.

2) How does the NSF GRFP affect the advisor selection process? Will the department remove your financial offer if you do get external fellowships?

- If you have a pre-doctoral fellowship of any kind, it makes the advisor selection process smoother. You will be less 'expensive' as a graduate student, so most advisors will want you in their lab.

3) Should I apply for scholarship separately? Or does university send the offer based on the grad school application?

- It depends! Look into the financial aid /tuition pages on program websites. If it is unclear, reach out to financial aid or admissions counselors for more information. For KGI, we have merit-based scholarships embedded into the application itself, but we also have separate needs-based assistance students can apply for. Outside of that, we offer resources on our website for additional ways to fund the degree – i.e. external scholarships, federal financial aid, etc.
- In terms of scholarship applications, check out what is on the website and follow instructions. Some will have you apply separately while others may not. Also check out some of the resources (such as the ACS bridge program, if you are eligible) to apply for separately from your grad school application.



Imposter Syndrome

1) Can someone explain what that syndrome is? I don't believe I've ever heard that before.

- The question was on impostor syndrome, the feeling that you aren't at the level folks think you are. Some articles:
 - <https://cen.acs.org/careers/graduate-school/How-to-combat-impostor-syndrome/97/i19>
 - <https://inchemistry.acs.org/college-life/imposter-syndrome.html>
- Imposter syndrome is not a mental condition - the symptoms are collectively referred to as "imposter syndrome phenomenon"! It's just a feeling that some researchers experience that they don't belong where they are. Some people may not experience it, feeling like you belong definitely takes practice
- Imposter syndrome phenomenon - I highly recommend daily affirmations!

Interview

1) Should you send a thank you note (either handwritten or email) to an interviewer after a virtual interview?

- It is both polite and professional to do so.
- I personally think it is always good practice to send a thank you note after having a professional meeting.

Location

1) How much should you consider the location of grad school in making the decision? Like where you want to live/where you would be comfortable living for 5+ years? Is there a possibility of moving to a place and hating it?

- Location is an important piece of the overall puzzle. You may get there and hate the city. Try to make the best of it and focus on your science and your studies, but if it gets too bad, then you need to find another program.
- I... have a dispassion for snowy winters, but I did end up picking Iowa for grad school because the positives outweighed me dealing with snow and cold for 3-4 months. You need to figure out how much that matters to you!
- I think it is always important to know your motivations for attending grad school. Do you want to get a job in industry or academia? If industry, is the school located/immersed with companies and opportunities to network in that field? What are the opportunities in that geographical location post-graduation?



Motivation

1) What are the “right motivations” for going to grad school? I think I would like it because I like research, but sometimes I wonder if I can handle the stress and anxiety of doing a terminal degree.

- If you like research, that is great to hear because the PhD is a research degree. But can you answer: Why am I going to graduate school? Do I have a good reason to go? Those answers speak to your motivation.
- I think it is important to know what it is you want to do. What careers paths are considering? What are you passionate about? What sort of working environment do you want to work in? Once you feel confident in your career path, you should look into degrees that will give you the skills, experiences, opportunities, network etc. that will get you there. Some careers may not require an advanced degree; knowing what the industry norm/expectation is will help with your decision.
- I would say that there is no "right motivation" like a right answer for a math course. If you like research, if you want to continue asking questions and finding answers, if the job you might want someday fits with the grad school you are looking at? Those are great places to start. For your mental health, you absolutely want to look at places that are supportive of your growth and mental health. It doesn't have to be super stressful. It shouldn't be super stressful. You deserve to be mentored.

2) When coming in, (to put this broadly to all panelists) what was your motivation of going into graduate school?

- I wanted to be a Professor, which required the PhD. When I got to Michigan for my studies in Fall 1990, I saw pictures of the current grad students, one of which has been in the program for 12 yrs. I went out and bought a calendar for the year 1995, flipped it to a random page and wrote down “Brian, if you are in Ann Arbor on this day, leave”. It motivated me to complete in four years.
- A PhD makes getting into science policy-oriented careers a little easier, which is a part of why I wanted to go to grad school (though I realized there are other ways now!). I also really wanted to do work at the intersection of chemistry and communication because I got involved in science communication later in my undergrad, so curiosity played a big factor.

MS/PhD

1) What are some of the advantages of doing you PhD after bachelor’s degree over doing a masters degree?

- My favorite thing is that you can stop at a Masters whenever you want. I think of the entirety of the PhD as an opportunity to reflect on how much you want to be in lab. When you get your PhD, you should expect more responsibilities and there's a sizable pay jump for that reason. If you want to spend more time in lab and just specialize in a technique, you may want to jump off



ship at the Master's. THAT BEING SAID: accepting the PhD offer and allowing yourself time to take internships and decide how many responsibilities you'd be excited to take on (project management, etc.) before deciding to stop at the Master's.

2) How to determine whether I should do a masters or PhD policy program?

- We have some good webinars dealing with that exact topic! www.acs.org/undergrad

Offers

1) If all the panelists could go back to -applying and selecting a grad school (like same position as us right now), what is the one thing you would tell yourself or do differently/keep the same?

- I would say to be honest with yourself and what your motivations for going to grad school are. What do you value in your day-to-day in a future career? In what sort of environments and capacity to you envision yourself working. Once you hone in on some specific career goals, you can then focus your grad school search and which program will be aligned with those goals. Also, in what sort of learning environment do you thrive? Things like school/program size, networking opportunities, hands-on experiences, etc. can be very important in your decision.

2) Is it possible to negotiate offer letters if you get a fellowship from one university?

- It never hurts to ask. Some Universities have funds to deal with this situation, while others do not.

3) I've heard of leveraging offers against each other for a better stipend, is this a common practice or does it risk "offending" the program?

- I haven't heard of anyone leveraging a better offer - I think that in general that will be accomplished through grant applications, which you can strategize prior to joining! Think about the NSF grant if you're uncomfortable with the current stipend. The program coordinators might be able to give advice on additional funding!

4) When responding to offer letters should these be formal letters?

- The offer letters will usually have the letter for you to sign so you're not making something from scratch

5) When responding to offers you're not interested in; just fill out the forms?

- You may reach out to the contact they list in the offer

6) I know I'll probably have a tough decision between my top two schools

- Think about actually living in the area you intend to go to school at...grad school is different than undergrad, you will definitely need a life outside the life of the school! Is it a part of the world that suits you (or would be fun to try on for a few years?) Are there things at the school/in the area that will feed you emotionally? Something else to consider....



PI/Advisor

- 1) Do you recommend reaching out to the PI directly or to their graduate students? Does it matter?**
 - I would recommend talking to the PI first. They will likely tell you a better idea of what the current projects look like. After that, definitely reach out to grad students - the grad students will give you more information, than anyone else, on what the group dynamic is like!
- 2) When following up with potential faculty advisors, what kind of questions should you ask to show interest in their group?**
 - I think doing your research on their accomplishments and understanding what topics they have dedicated their careers to. You can look at their LinkedIn profile for example, to see what other things they have been involved in outside of the institution. Knowing those things and framing questions in such a way that show you took the time investigate them further, could make a difference.
- 3) What little things would I be looking for in a good PI and/or lab that would support my career interests?**
 - A great PI will support your intellectual development while challenging you to be your best. You want to talk with their students and look into where their graduates are at now. Do those career paths align with yours? Do most students actually graduate, or do only the select few.
- 4) What are the most important characteristics of a PI to look at when deciding on a lab?**
 - I really enjoy that my PI sees me as a person. She knows I spend a lot of time in advocacy and she supports it. Research is important but in building a science career, it's never going to be research alone.
- 5) For an institution to be a good choice, how many of the faculty members should you be interested in working with?**
 - That depends on how much you invest in the kind of research you want to do. If you're interested in only X research, and there's only one professor that does that that might be a flag that another program may be a better fit. If you're more flexible and/or are willing to try research, you may not know about very well and may have a few faculty (perhaps 3?) then that might be better.
- 6) How do I figure out which professor is the best research fit for me, if none of them align exactly with what I want to do?**
 - I had this problem exactly. I can only say, talk to the PI about YOUR aspirations, not just the parts that align with them. They will be able to give you good advice to making it there. PhD is training; specialization can come later (in a post doc if you want).
- 7) How does co-advising work? Should I consider this as a possibility or just join the lab of one PI, even if it's not as good of a research fit?**
 - When you're thinking about a co-advising situation, it means that one or both of the PI's will fund you. The rest of it depends - you'll need to talk to both PI's involved and figure out who will be your primary contact. Try to look for opportunities that excite you.



- 8) If my research goals don't completely align with the PI, will that affect whether or not they choose to take me into their lab? Like if, they don't have the funding or something.**
- If they don't have funding, it's a sticky situation. Your goals should have some kind of overlap ideally, but if you have enthusiasm for some part of their work it will take you a long way
- 9) So with that said, would you say that your PI matters more than your research in grad school?**
- In some ways! Still go after research that you see yourself being excited about for 5 years. I might not be in my dream research, but I see the things I love in this research and opportunities in it.
- 10) Is it better to choose a rotation-less department that is a better research fit or a department with a specific PI that's a great fit?**
- I am a fan of rotations. It provides students with an opportunity to work with several PIs (and then ask them to be on their committee / write letters of rec in the future) and explore the breadth of their intellectual interests. Even if you know exactly who you want to work for, the rotations can be configured to support your development - perhaps one in electrochemistry if you going into redox organic synthesis, for example. Also, should things go wrong with the PI you selected, these other PIs might be a backup, or at least someone you can talk to about the issues.
- 11) How do we figure out if a school has rotations or not? Because I've found it hard to find this info on some school sites.**
- Feel free to ask the graduate coordinator (if they have one) or perhaps even the Chemistry department chair if you don't see a graduate coordinator.
- 12) How can I increase the chances of getting into my favorite research group?**
- Talk to the grad students! The PI's don't make a decision without consulting the students. Just be yourself and be prepared for your favorite to change during group-joining; it's part of the process.
- 13) After I get into a program, how do I figure out which PIs were the ones interested in taking me?**
- Read their papers, and email them expressing an interest in their research and ask them if they are taking students, can afford you and have space in the lab for you if you come.
- 14) Are older advisors usually more hands-off?**
- Not always! It depends on their personality/perspective in my experience.
- 15) Could you talk about the advantages/disadvantages of working for a new faculty member?**
- There are many of both. One advantage—you will get more one-on-one attention and you will learn how to set up a laboratory (in case you plan to do it someday). One disadvantage—a more senior faculty member is well known within the community.



Science Policy

1) Any advice for a policy program?

- Balance is HARD! I think talking to program coordinators about resources available for people with families might be helpful. Emergency funds are offered at our university which I think takes off a little bit of the pressure.

2) What opportunities should I be looking for science policy related work as I transition into grad school?

- Check if your graduate school has a science policy chapter! If not, you can check out the early-career organizations centered around science policy, advocacy, communication & diplomacy like the National Science Policy Network (<https://scipolnetwork.org>). ACS also has some online advocacy resources and tools to get you involved!

3) To follow up, how did you start in policy work? What type of challenges do you see in the line of your career?

- Some ways to get started are to figure out what issues you want to get involved with (environmental justice, health policy, etc.) and see who else is interested. One easy way that's currently on the top of the list is the Journal of Science Policy & Governance's different calls for policy memos. You can check out webinars that NSPN, ESEP, and other orgs have online to get some background info, etc. A definite challenge is making sure to stay strong in the face of questioning because it is definitely a different path than most in grad school!

Transition to grad school

1) I wanted to ask, if you had to go back in time and change something in your academic career, what would it be?

- I think it's important to remember that there is no "right path". Believing that and practicing that mentality would have saved me a lot of stress! Especially in Undergrad

2) How does summer before starting grad school typically look like?

- It depends on your resources and situation! If you can move early (or even ask to do a summer rotation with a research group), it would be great to move early and acclimate to the area! Get used to your new situation and find places and routines that work for you!

3) Some schools offer a summer program/fellowships before entering in the fall. Should I try to do that for the graduate school I choose?

- KGI offers summer programs reflective of each masters degree and I always highly recommend that!

4) What are some summer programs available to students who have graduated undergrad, but haven't entered grad yet?

- KGI offers programs for both undergrads and recent grads for summer experiential learning - feel free to check out at kgi.edu/summer. If you have access to undergrad platforms, such as



Handshake, you may find other similar opportunities posted for those who have recently graduated

5) How did you adjust to meeting people in the times of the pandemic? How were you proactive with being involved with events, finding socially distanced activities, reaching out to the PI (especially in a large lab, especially when sometimes people feel more distant)? What are some strategies you would advise for us?

- Someone has to take the reins in building community, and it can be frustrating when it falls on you. Our cohort has a Discord channel! We have a channel for every class and we chat when we're bored, stressed, or working. My friends and I have set up some trivia nights even for the full cohort!

6) What are some things that new graduate students struggle with in their first semester

- I think it's different for many people, but I think figuring out a work-life balance is very difficult. Teaching, rotating, and classes can be overwhelming but you can't sacrifice your mental health

7) Can anyone give more info on how your move and transition was? To a new community, new chapter of life, new location, etc.? Gaining independence? Maybe finding housing, roommates, what the best traditions are there, billing, etc.

- Yes absolutely! Definitely think about building credit. My sister was there to give me advice on savings and such, don't be afraid to defer loans. Do look for therapy when you move, look for communities over the summer - I joined dance, I practice yoga, it's all things that are flexible in how much you monetarily invest.
- I was lucky to have an external fellowship to a) move early and b) be able to fund a summer research project with a faculty member I was interested in. As someone who's had to pay for college through scholarships and my own funds, moving costs and living alone for the first time were definite concerns! I tried to have a written plan in place and general structure for travel (I drove because I wanted to have a vehicle in grad school and luckily had one). I definitely did a lot of research prior to actually leaving! A lot of the independence was making sure I tried routines/habits to see what worked for me. I also relied on a lot of resources online in terms of just learning about living alone/with people. I made sure to keep my close friends/family informed! You may feel lost especially with your support system so far away, but calls and reassuring texts are helpful!

8) I've never lived alone for more than a week; how does one plan for changing living conditions? Are there any good websites or resources for help on how to live alone?

- YourNewApartment's tumblr has some great resources:
<https://yournewapartment.tumblr.com/post/158400897004/masterposts>

Visit

1) Would a program cover the costs for a student to do a personal visit?

- Most used to, but with COVID you will have to check with the individual programs.



- I think it depends on the institution and doesn't hurt to ask. I know we have done mileage reimbursements, but covering flight/hotel costs may be tough especially during these times
- 2) What advice would you give to get a good feel of the community of the graduate program when you can't visit in person?**
- I would ask for the contact info for current graduate students so that you can email/text/chat/Zoom with them and get a good feel for the campus culture.
- 3) Do you have advice on how to make these connections with others on Zoom because I won't be able to visit the campus or actually talk to people that I choose to talk to (i.e. other grad students, other accepted applicants, etc.)**
- Whoever is administering the program should be able to provide you with zoom links to current students.
- 4) Would you recommend starting to email current grad students in the labs I am interested in? Or waiting until grad school visits to figure out how the community is like and all that?**
- No time is too soon to figure out the lab dynamic! I know some people who found opportunities to virtual lab-tour before visitation and established friendships before anything happened. I think any PI or grad student would be happy to talk, but it is not an expectation.
- 5) What types of questions are best to save for "visitation" weekend vs over email before?**
- I would suggest that you 'talk' as much as you can with current graduate students about their day-to-day lives, how much they are expected to work, what they like/dislike about the program or their PI. This is better done in person than via email.
- 6) I have grad school visits coming up but I'm a first-gen student so I'd like more info on how to decide between multiple schools that accepted me**
- As you visit each of the programs that have accepted you, look for the best fit for you. I would suggest that you might want to have multiple potential mentors at any campus, and you should find a way to interact with current graduate students to get a feel for the campus community so that you find a program where you will be comfortable and challenged intellectually.
 - I am so sorry for the anxiety. Don't go down an online rabbit hole! Hopefully some part of online visit time can be some time with grad students to talk about lifestyle, cost of living, etc.
 - I also am a first gen student! When I was thinking about graduate schools and one of those factors was, "did I feel comfortable?" Look at organizations that supported you in your undergrad; I was a McNair Scholar and I ended up also looking into a group that is for Womxn of Color. Find communities that make you feel more comfortable; for example, moving from CA to IA was a definite change in terms of population and those I would interact with.