Things You Should Know About A Graduate School

(This was written from a draft of Graduate School in Science and Engineering: Tips for Students and Faculty by Marsha Lakes Matayas, from statements at the Recruiting and Retaining Women in Physics Conference, held November 2-3, 1990, in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and from a discussion within Women in Math and Science at Haverford College. Prepared by Liese van Zee, HC ’91, now professor at Indiana University.)

Ask the Graduate Department:

• What are the academic regulations/requirements for graduating?
• What percentage of the students pass the qualifying exams the first time? How many chances are there?
• Are a large percentage of the students graduating with only a terminal masters degree?
• What is the average time to obtain a Ph.D.?
• When (and how) do you choose your advisor? How difficult is it to switch advisors after, say, a year?
• Who selects the dissertation committee?
• Is the support offered as a teaching or as a research assistantship? How much is the stipend?
• How many working hours per week is expected for a TA or RA?
• Are you guaranteed support for the entire time, or is it on a year by year basis?
  ○ If it is year by year, what would disqualify you?
• Is there a teaching requirement? How are teaching assignments made (lottery or choice)?
• What sort of computing facilities do they have?
• What are their provisions for housing, day care, health insurance, etc.?

Ask Current Graduate Students:

• Do different research groups interact? Is there collaboration within the department or across departments?
• What is the actual time commitment for a TA/RA? Is the TA/RA stipend enough to live on in that area?
• Do the students have enough time for a social life? Is the type of social life you desire available?
• What are the environs like? Do you like them?
• Do graduate students have access to athletic and other university facilities?
• Is there a graduate student organization?
• Are the provisions for housing, health insurance, etc. adequate?

Talk to current graduate students before you choose an advisor to learn:

• do most of the students like working with this research advisor?
• what is the average time for a Ph.D. in her/his lab?
• how much monetary support is there for research?
• is the prospective advisor sensitive to women's issues?
• how independent is the research of the students?
• do the students work together (with other students and/or the advisor)?
• is the advisor personally involved in the research? how frequently is the advisor available?
• do the students present their work at national conferences? who pays for attending such conferences?
• does the advisor take an active role in placing her/his students? do students go into industry or academia?
• how quickly does the advisor publish completed work?

Specific Issues for Women:

• It has been said: ``do not go to a place where there are no female faculty.''
• Talk to female graduate students in the department!!
• Do they have women's support groups? What do they do? Do they have one specific to your field?
• Is there a women's center?

Helpful Hints:

• Choose a school where there’s more than one person you can imagine working with.
• Choose a research area that you are interested in. However, still choose an advisor with whom you get along!
• Choose an advisor with broad research interests.
• Your advisor should be willing to help you get through in a timely manner, i.e. assist you with meeting the deadlines for preliminary exams, proposal preparation, and dissertation.
• Your advisor should give you some research freedom; do not let yourself be a laboratory technician for five years.
• Attend research seminars offered at your university and annual meetings of professional organizations.
• If possible, participate in drafting grant proposals so you will know how to write successful ones.
• Try to cultivate your ``third recommender;'' most post-doc positions will require three letters of recommendation.
• Make an effort to present your work at departmental and professional meetings.