

Advice for potential graduate students

Before you apply to this lab or any other, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, be realistic about graduate school. Graduate school is not a sure path to success. Many students assume that they will eventually get a job just like their advisor. However, the average professor at a research university has three students at a time for about five years each. So, over a career of 30 years, this professor has about 18 students. Since the total number of positions has been pretty constant, these 18 people are competing for one spot. So go to grad school assuming that you might not end up at a research university, but instead a teaching college, or a government or industry job. All of these are great jobs, but it's important to think of all this before you go to school.

Second, choose your advisor wisely. Not only does this person potentially have total control over your graduate career for five or more years, but he/she will also be writing recommendation letters for you for another 5-10 years after that. Also, your advisor will shadow you for the rest of your life. People will always think of you as so-and-so's student and assume that you two are somewhat alike. Finally, in many ways you will turn into your advisor. Advisors teach very little, but instead provide a role model. Consciously and unconsciously, you will imitate your advisor. You may find this hard to believe now, but fifteen years from now, when you find yourself lining up the tools in your lab cabinets just like your advisor did, you'll see. My student Alison once said that choosing an advisor is like choosing a spouse after one date. Find out all you can on this date.

Finally, have your fun now. Five years is a long time when you are 23 years old. By the end of graduate school, you will be older, slower, and possibly married and/or a parent. So if you always wanted to walk across Nepal, do it now. Also, do not go to a high-powered lab that you hate assuming that this will promise you long-term happiness. Deferred gratification has its limits. Do something that you have passion for, work in a lab you like, in a place you like, before life starts throwing its many curve balls. Your career will mostly take care of itself, but you can't get your youth back.

If, after reading this, you want to apply to this lab, we would love to hear from you.

Source:

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<http://biology.duke.edu/johnsenlab/advice.html>