An Insider’s View on Applying For and Succeeding In Graduate School! - Advice from a Professor

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Overview

Should you get a graduate degree?

How should you apply?

What types of applicants are professors looking for?

How to get the most out of graduate school

Positioning yourself to find a good job
Methods:

- 33 years of time series data (Bonar) being a graduate student, sponsoring graduate students, mentoring graduate students
- Survey of 42 fish and wildlife professors asking them what they look for in a student, and what traits students have who succeed.
- Informal interviews with other professors
“A must-read for the conservation professional” – *Ecology*

“A guidepost...should be a part of college curricula in every natural resources program” – *Mamie Parker, Assistant Director, USFWS*

“Reassuring, wise and entertaining guidance” – *Paul R. Ehrlich, Stanford University Author of “The Population Bomb”*

“Required reading for all my graduate and undergraduate students...I am just sorry (this book) was not available earlier” – *Quarterly Review of Biology*

……..*etc.*
Why (or why not) graduate school?

**Pro’s**
- Either MS or PhD needed for many professional positions – increases your options.
- Learn project management, advanced technical writing and analysis skills
- Work with talented scientists in a research setting to learn latest advanced techniques
- Develop valuable future contacts

**Con’s**
- Time investment
- $$$ investment
How to Pick Your Program
Research scientific literature/ask undergraduate professors to find out which professor is doing good work in your preferred subjects.

Look for openings in AFS job boards, Texas A&M Site
Apply for positions with full funding.
Apply for projects you can be passionate about.
Visit/speak with professor – to determine if they have an opening, learn about their program.
Do students get a chance to publish? To speak at conferences? How are they employed?
Talk to their former graduate students.
How do you increase your chances for being selected?
A student who is unmotivated and will not complete things
A student who cannot get along with people (including professor)
A student who will embarrass them with their project sponsors and supervisors
A student who will finishes their degree, but will not publish their work in a scientific journal

Minimize these for highest success!
Inside Info! – Your professor wants you to succeed. **Badly!!!!**
“List the three most important things you look for when selecting a graduate student”

(The larger the word, the more times it was mentioned)

$n = 42$ Faculty (U.S.G.S. Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit Leaders and Assistant Leaders)
Volunteer, Volunteer, Volunteer!!!
Make sure your references will give you a good recommendation!

…And make sure your references are good ones!
How do you succeed once you are in?
“List the three most important factors a graduate student needs to succeed in graduate school”

(The larger the word, the more times it was mentioned)

$n = 42$ Faculty (U.S.G.S. Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit Leaders and Assistant Leaders)
Learn People and Communication Skills
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.......*etc.*
Show Initiative and Strong Work Ethic!
Grad school great! But sometimes daunting...
Inside Info! Perseverance is Key!

Typical Graduate Student Mood Over Time

Mood

Entry to Program  Difficulties (logistics, analysis, writing)  Graduation

Time →

Students:
- Student 1
- Student 2
- Student 3
How do you persevere?

- Realize that things \textit{will} work out over time with persistence – keep at it!
- Say to yourself “when I finish” \textbf{never} “If I finish”
- Maintain Work/Life Balance!
  - Get involved with other students
  - Get some exercise
  - Leave some time for fun stuff
  - Keep ties with old friends/family
- Keep perspective
Nothing is worth your health or safety
How does graduate school translate into a good job?
You are “interviewing” all through graduate school

- Get to know your project sponsors
- Do good work on your project and tell your sponsors about it
- Underpromise, overdeliver
- Present your work at conferences
- Meet deadlines
...and all along the way you are making contacts for jobs
Graduate School is fascinating, memorable, fun, extremely hard work - one of the most difficult things you will do...

But it is usually well worth it!

Best of luck in your endeavors!

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