With the fall semester in full swing, application deadlines for graduate school and postdoctoral positions are in the not-so-distant future. Sorting through information about different research programs, funding, and coursework, for example, can be a daunting task. Here are some ideas for prospective graduate students and postdoctoral candidates to keep in mind when reviewing their options.

For graduate students

Master's or PhD?

Narrowing down graduate programs by degree is a good place to start. Some graduate schools only offer a doctoral program. Although you essentially earn a Master's degree along the way, in these programs you are expected to complete your PhD. Other graduate schools only offer a Master's degree program and some offer both Master's and PhD programs.

Look for potential mentors with similar research interests.

This may be the most important step in choosing a graduate program. If you decide to pursue a PhD, you will be working with your faculty advisor for five (or more!) years; therefore, it is very important that your research interests mesh. Speak with your student advisor or another faculty member familiar with your interest to help narrow your search. The internet is a great source of information. Explore different researchers' lab websites. You could even search for and read some of their publications to get a better idea of their interests. Last, contact the researcher and inquire if they are accepting new graduate students.

Compare research programs.

How do different research programs measure up? Ask a potential faculty mentor what their graduated students are doing now. If you are hoping to pursue a scientific research career, you may want to focus on programs or faculty mentors that have a good track record of sending students into the field. Recent graduates pursuing postdoctoral or faculty positions at research universities or holding positions at
research institutes are good indicators of a competitive research-oriented program. Unlike undergraduate programs, the strength of a PhD program is not solely based on the prestige or ranking of the university as a whole. It is important to focus on the strength of the individual department.

Explore funding opportunities.

Funding availability differs across universities and even across faculty mentors. Although funding may not be a deciding factor, it is important to know what opportunities are available to you at different schools. Some faculty mentors may be able to offer you a research assistantship through their grant, in which you receive a stipend for working on their research project. Other mentors may offer you a teaching assistantship. You should also note that there are alternate funding opportunities, such as fellowships, that you may apply for during your graduate career.

For postdocs

Seeking out new opportunities.

Finding a mentor with a congruent research agenda is also important for those looking for postdoctoral positions; however, this is an optimal time to work with someone who can provide you with unique training opportunities that you were unable to get when you were a graduate student. Think about your long term goals and focus on positions that will help you meet these goals. Speaking with your faculty advisor about potential postdoc mentors is a good place to start. You may also want to join your APA division listserv, as they often circulate information about open postdoctoral positions.

Searching for alternate funding opportunities.

In some cases, universities or research mentors are able to support a postdoc through their own funding. In other cases, however, students may have to bring their own funding into the position. This may require writing a training grant or applying for a fellowship. There are several resources on the web regarding postdoctoral funding. A compilation of these resources may be found here. Also, keep an eye out for the Science Student Council’s November column in PSA on funding opportunities.
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