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To ace your Ph.D. program interviews, prepare to answer—and ask—these key questions

By [June Gruber](#), [Jay J. Van Bavel](#) | Feb. 4, 2019 , 12:55 PM

You've made it to the last step of the Ph.D. application process: the interview. Congratulations! But amid the excitement and butterflies, don't neglect the crucial next step: preparation.

Grad school interviews—in which aspiring graduate students meet with prospective advisers, colleagues, and other students—are opportunities to connect, engage in scientific conversations, and get a hands-on feel for the graduate programs and broader communities. To make the most of them, you need to prepare in advance so that you can confidently and thoughtfully answer questions

from     department members who are deciding whether they want to invite you to join them. You should also ask your own questions to figure out whether the program is right for you.

To get you started, here are 10 common questions to prepare for.

Questions you may be asked

1. Why are you applying now? A Ph.D. program is not a simple continuation of your previous studies. It is a serious commitment—often 5 to 7 years—to a specific training path. Demonstrate to faculty members that you have carefully considered all possible options and concluded that now is the ideal time to begin a serious commitment to graduate studies, and that you are intellectually and emotionally mature enough to take on the responsibilities and stressors of graduate school.

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2. What are your career goals? You do not necessarily need to have one specific career path laid out, and there aren't right or wrong answers to this question, but you should be prepared to describe the potential career paths you are considering and explain why you think the program is the right one to support your future career path. Some graduate program websites state what kind of careers they can—and cannot—train students for. In other cases, you may need to do deeper detective work to find out what types of careers graduate students have gone on to (and this is one of the questions you can ask during your visits; see **No. 6**). Regardless, you should spend some time thinking carefully about what type of post-Ph.D. careers you may be looking for and what you need from a graduate program to achieve those goals.

3. Can you describe a research project you'd like to pursue in graduate school? Prospective mentors want to know that you can have in-depth discussions about research and think on your own. They may ask you to describe study hypotheses and research designs for projects that you would like to pursue. They may also ask you to discuss a recent research article you enjoyed and explain how you might follow it up. These types of questions allow them both to get a better sense of your research interests and to observe your ability to engage in thoughtful and coherent discussions about research. You should also be prepared to think on the fly because research conversations are often wide ranging and can easily head in new and creative directions.



4. Are you a good fit for you? Every applicant selected for an interview has already demonstrated their potential for graduate work. So, it is largely about showing the interviewers why you are a good fit. Do your homework and be authentic in explaining why you are enthusiastic about the program. Carefully read the department and graduate program website, potential mentors' websites, and recent publications, and reflect on why your background and interests are a good fit for the program. For example, what unique skills do you bring that complement and extend your prospective program or mentor's research? What resources does the program provide that will help you pursue the directions you're interested in? How will the program's training environment help you flourish? Be prepared to answer these questions in both brief 1- to 2-minute blurbs and more extended organic conversation.

5. Can you tell me something else about yourself? Informal conversations about your hobbies or interests outside of the academy are meant to be a low-stress part of the interview to let people get to know a little about you that may not be apparent in the application materials. (This does not include overly personal questions, which are not appropriate and should not be asked.) You can approach it like a friendly conversation with an acquaintance you meet at a bus stop, sharing—for example—that you like to hike or play hockey, have a dog, or enjoy the outdoors. You may want to avoid disclosing information that you would share with a close friend, such as relationship or family issues. This portion of the interview can also be a good opportunity to get an interpersonal feel for prospective mentors, whom you would be working with closely for many years. Your fit in a program is as much about personality match as it is about an intellectual match, and you should pay close attention to any potential red flags that might signal a bad fit.

Questions you should ask

6. Is the training provided appropriate for my goals after grad school? The goal of graduate school is to provide you with the right kind, quantity, and quality of training. Ask faculty members and students about common trajectories and job placements in the past 5 years. What percentage of students typically land in tenure-track careers, and at what types of institutions? Industry? Other careers? Like any good scientist, you should ask for base rates rather than a few cherry-picked success stories. This will let you know whether the faculty members are attentive to the outcomes of their students and give you the best estimate of your own prospects after graduate school.

7. What opportunities does the program offer for graduate students? It can be tempting to think that the more prestigious program is always the better choice—and it's true that graduating from an "elite" Ph.D. program is a **strong predictor of academic job prospects**. But some graduate programs have high rankings based more on the fame of the senior professors than the graduate training itself. Don't base your decision purely on a program's status; how it will look on your CV is not the only ingredient for success or happiness. Instead, use the interview to examine the opportunities for graduate students, from the training and facilities to the financial resources and success of other students in the program, and keep your eyes open for any potential signs of **a toxic environment**. The current students will be your best source of information: Are they flourishing or floundering?

 **8. Do you have access to great mentors?** One of the biggest keys to success and happiness in graduate school is securing the right adviser (as well as other mentors who can support you along your path). Indeed, a supportive adviser is one of the **best predictors of graduate student engagement** (and reduced burnout!). Unfortunately, many faculty members receive very little formal training in mentoring, and the quality can vary immensely even within a strong program. Programs with multiple excellent faculty members can give you the flexibility to change labs if anything goes awry. You may want to talk to students who do not work with your prospective advisers; they may feel more comfortable giving you honest advice and another perspective of the program.

9. Is the funding sufficient? One of the perks of graduate school is that you go from paying for school to getting paid to go to school. But you need to ensure your support will be sufficient to complete your Ph.D. Find out the size of the stipend you will receive, along with opportunities for additional funding—such as teaching and summer research; benefits, including housing and tuition support; and the local cost of living. Try to get a firm commitment about how long your funding will last and what proportion is guaranteed. Another critical question is whether this money will require you to carry a heavy teaching or service load that may slow down your progress.

10. Is the social and intellectual culture supportive? Finding a great fit includes not only the academic environment, but also the broader social and emotional context. Remember that this will be your life for the next half decade or so. It's important to determine whether the environment will be supportive as you take on one of the most challenging projects of your life. Do the graduate program and your potential advisers organize activities to build camaraderie and bring people together? Do the other students seem friendly or fiercely competitive? Are there activities off campus that will nourish the other elements of your identity? It's easy to ignore these concerns during the interview process. Don't. Social connection is **very important to your health**.

This is not an exhaustive list of interview questions (we include a more detailed list [here](#), developed by Jay). But no matter what specific questions you ask, remember that the graduate interview process is a two-way street: It is as much about you interviewing them as them interviewing you. Good luck, and have fun!

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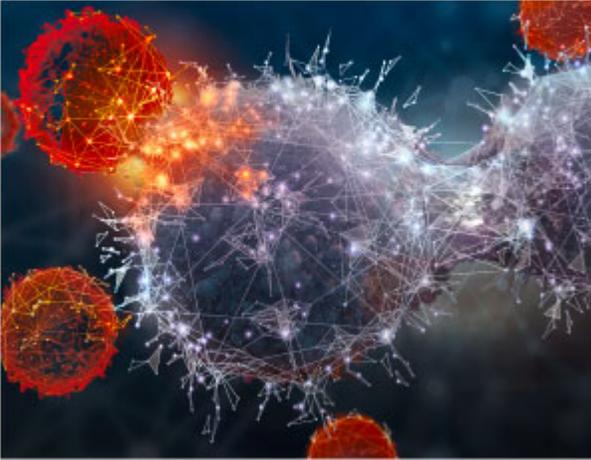
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