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Grad-School Campus Visits

John K. Borchardt
United States
30 May 2008

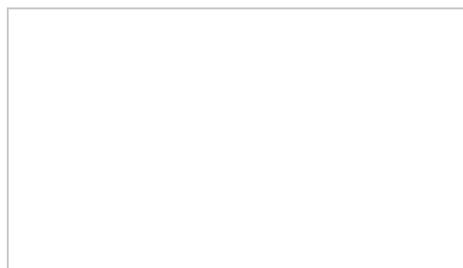
Cary Supalo visited five campuses before deciding to attend Pennsylvania State (Penn State) University in State College to study chemistry. Some of what he learned might have been learned from a Web site or a phone call but not all. "The bottom line was the research opportunities," he says. "I felt confident that I could find a niche in any of three or four research groups" at Penn State. "There were also opportunities for cooperative research with other research groups. Finally, the department was more informal than other departments I visited. I enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere."

On-campus interviews are rarely required for graduate-school admission, but campus visits are common. James Faubion, chair of the department of anthropology at Rice University in Houston, Texas, estimates that about half of his department's current graduate students visited before deciding to attend Rice. At other institutions and in other fields, the numbers seem to be even higher. Campus visits allow students like Supalo to learn things about the

department and institution that might not be obvious from the university's marketing materials, such as just how it feels to be on campus. Campus visits also provide an early opportunity to make a good impression on faculty members and administrators.

CHOREOGRAPHED OR IMPROVISED

Several departments at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, set aside certain days for campus visits and plan those visits out carefully. Northwestern's chemistry department, for example, schedules graduate student visits on three weekends in March. "Each student visiting the chemistry department can schedule five visits with faculty members," says Jonathan Maendel, graduate program assistant for Northwestern's chemistry



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department.

The approach of Rice's earth sciences department runs more toward the ad hoc, helping prospective graduate students schedule visits on an individual basis. "We will help them customize visits to their interests and assist in scheduling visits with particular professors," says Sandra Flechsig, department coordinator for Rice's earth sciences department.



Cary Supalo

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PREPARATION IS KEY TO SUCCESS

One key to a successful visit is choosing which schools to apply to. There's no point in going to the trouble for a department that doesn't have at least a couple of professors you might like to work with. If you haven't even thought about this yet, consider taking a year off to work or travel.

Once those decisions are made, "start preparing early" for your visit "and make contact with faculty members whose research interests you and with graduate school administrators" at least 2 weeks ahead, Flechsig says. More advance notice is even better, Faubion advises. Plan your visit with the chair of the department's graduate admissions committee or call the main department office; someone there will make sure you get hooked up with the right people.



Carl Wainscott

Allow at least a day for your visit. Avoid summer and break-week visits because faculty members are more likely to be away then and because it's hard to assess how well you fit in when so many students are away. Check conference schedules so you don't visit when key faculty members will be conferencing. If there's a conference that week that's likely to be attended by key faculty members, go to the conference and meet them there instead.

Prepare well. A student who arrives with little specific knowledge of the graduate program or its faculty "is bound to make a bad impression," Faubion warns. Even if you've already been admitted, making a good impression is important. "Financial aid is more likely to be offered to students if they have learned about the graduate program,

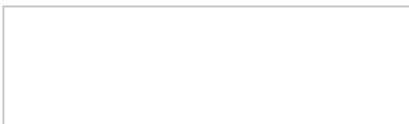
are motivated, and have a prepared list of questions," says Carl Wainscott, assistant director for recruitment to the Graduate School of Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And professors are more likely to want to work with incoming students who seem well prepared.

DURING THE VISIT

Dress neatly. Although some students wear business suits, most dress casually in neat, button-down shirts or blouses and slacks. "Avoid T-shirts and jeans," advises Flechsig. Wear comfortable shoes because you could be doing a lot of walking during department and campus tours.

"When meeting professors, ask questions related to your own research interests," Maendel advises. Here's where you deploy those questions you prepared before your visit--but also listen well and do your best to engage in intelligent, spontaneous conversation.

Don't forget to talk with current graduate students. Such discussions can help you "develop an understanding of the department's culture to decide if it is a place you would be comfortable studying



and working," observes Maendel. Grad-student conversations are also an ideal opportunity to find out what it's really like to work with the professors you've targeted, Maendel says. Some researchers want their students in the lab for long hours; others care only that you get the work done. Finally, a few professors have a reputation for being especially difficult to work with for women, say, or gay men. You want to know these things before you make a commitment, and frank conversations with a few graduate students are your best opportunities to learn them.



Jonathan Maendel

Also tour other important places on campus you expect to use, such as the student union, graduate student housing, student health care facilities, and dining halls. For some people, exercise is a key to maintaining sanity during graduate school. If you're one of those, make sure the institution's facilities measure up.

If you haven't done so already, now's the time to track down information on fellowships and assistantships, teaching expectations and support, employment opportunities for your spouse, and any other details that are likely to have a positive or negative effect on your decision or your graduate school experience.

FINANCING THE TRIP

For many, visiting a graduate school is an expensive, long-distance trip, but some graduate departments will offset at least some of your expenses. Northwestern's chemistry department "will refund up to \$400 in travel expenses," Maendel says. Other Northwestern departments are willing to reimburse different amounts. Rice's earth sciences department will pay all travel expenses for domestic students who already have been admitted to the graduate program. Rice also has "funds available to bring to campus those students residing in the U.S. ... whom we are most interested in admitting" but "before we extend formal admittance offers to them," Faubion notes.

Students admitted to a graduate program at Ohio State University in Columbus can apply for reimbursement of travel expenses up to \$250 but only if they have received a university fellowship or been nominated for a graduate school or graduate enrichment fellowship. The University of Washington, Seattle, will pay for campus visits but only if the university's travel office makes your travel arrangements.

WORTH THE HASSLE

"Visiting a campus once you've been accepted, especially if you visit with a group of similarly graduate-school bound students, can help students figure out what it would be like to be a graduate student at a particular institution," writes a professor who has advised many such students. "The only downside to these visits is that they often require missing some classes during one's senior year, just as thesis deadlines are starting to loom. But they are worth the hassles associated with travel. I would not recommend attending graduate school at a place without visiting first."

<p>John K. Borchardt has a Ph.D. in chemistry. He is the author of the book <i>Career Management for Scientists and Engineers</i>.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor.</p>
<p>Photos. Top: Jackie. Middle, bottom: courtesy of the subjects.</p>	<p>DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800080</p>

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