

What questions should students be sure to ask their potential advisors?

- Ask about funding:
 - Do you have funding for a graduate student? What are the projects you have funding for?
 - Where would my funding come from? (Will your PI support you on a grant or will the institution support you on a fellowship? For how long? What is the plan when they run out?)
 - Where does the lab's funding typically come from?
 - Would I be expected to find my own funding at any point?
 - Will I have opportunities to write grants?
 - What implications does my funding have on my research direction?
- Ask about the projects and research you might be involved in:
 - What projects are available for students to work on in your lab? / What projects do you anticipate me working on? (If you know the PI does research in a specific area you are interested in, ask if there are projects you could be involved in related to that!)
 - How much agency/autonomy do grad students get in projects?
 - How much flexibility will there be to choose specific research questions and paths, given constraints on funding, active project areas, and the advisor's interests?
 - What type of work is involved? (Field work, lab work, computational, etc.)
- Ask about advising and their mentorship style:
 - How would you describe your advising style? Are you more hands on or hands off?
 - How often do you meet with graduate students? How often do you have group meetings vs one-on-one meetings?
 - What do these meetings look like? (how long do they last, what do you expect to talk about in general terms)
 - How do you work through science problems with your graduate students? What type of guidance do you like to give?
- Ask about work/life balance and their expectations for graduate students:
 - What are your expectations for a graduate student?
 - How much time should I dedicate to research and classes?
 - What does a work life balance look like to you?
 - What are the qualities of students who do well in your lab? (Be on the lookout for red flags about unrealistic work expectations and definitely pay attention if they start bashing students who haven't done well in the lab.)
 - How many hours do you expect your students to work each week (including classes)? Do you require/need students that can work during standard hours (e.g. 9-5) / weekends, etc?
 - What's your time off policy?
- Ask about the group / lab:
 - What is the history of your lab/group? Where do you see the future of your group going?
 - How big is the group?
 - Are there group meetings?
 - How would you describe the lab environment/climate?
 - Are post-docs and other scientists in the lab involved in your graduate students' research and mentoring? (be looking for other people in the lab to act as mentors other than just the PI)
- Ask about classes:
 - How do students balance classes in the first couple years with research?
 - What are your thoughts/expectations for taking classes outside of those already required?

- Ask about travel and field work:
 - How often do you travel for work?
 - How frequently throughout the year do you leave for research? How does funding work for research trips?
 - What type of field work do you do?
 - If I wanted to travel for my research, what opportunities are available?
 - Do graduate students present their work at conferences / will I have the opportunity to present my work at conferences?
- Ask about post-graduate school plans:
 - Where do graduate students in your lab end up going after they graduate? (e.g., post-docs, faculty positions, non-profits)
 - How do I become a good scientist/researcher/engineer and how will you help me?
 - How will you help me do XYZ after grad school (or figure out what XYZ is)?
- Get the contact info of your potential advisors current graduate students, and make sure to set up meetings with them! Ask what their past graduate students are doing now.
- Make sure to talk to *former students* from the labs you are interested in joining! These students have already seen everything the school/program/mentor has to offer and will give you a totally unbiased account of their experiences. I found this SUPER important when deciding which labs to join or not.
- Other great questions to ask:
 - Are you open to collaborations? Could I work with you and another faculty member on a joint project?
 - If the interview is going well and you feel comfortable, ask about your unique circumstances (chronic illness, ADHD, have dependents, etc) and try to get a sense of how they might support people who are not cookie-cutter grad students. "
 - What advice would you give incoming / new graduate students?
 - What do you like about being at Scripps?
 - How has the transition to remote-work been? What are the current operations of your lab like, and how do you anticipate the return back to in-person operations?
 - How do you feel about students working remotely once "regular" on-campus instruction/work resumes?

What questions should students be sure to ask graduate students (in their prospective lab or program)?

- Ask about classes:
 - How were the classes and did you think the course load was manageable?
 - What are the available academic advising resources like?
 - What were classes you loved or struggled with?
 - What type of classes did you take, what would you recommend taking?
- If they are graduate students in the lab you are interested in, ask about the PI/advisor/lab (it's often much easier to ask students these questions than the PI themselves!):
 - What are the biggest pros/cons of your advisor?
 - What is your advisor's mentorship style?
 - What is your advisor like to work with?
 - Are they hands on and attentive, or do they give you more freedom?
 - Is advising a group-effort of the lab? Does the lab structure rely on several postdocs to act as mentors?
 - What is your advisor's expectation of graduate students like, especially in regards to work-life balance?

- How did you decide your research topic? How much flexibility have you been given to choose specific research questions and paths, given constraints on funding, active project areas, and your advisor's interests?
 - How much guidance/freedom does the PI provide for your projects?
 - How often do you meet with your advisor?
- What is your relationship like with your advisor? Do you feel supported by your advisor?
- Do you get along with the other graduate students in the lab?
- What is the lab climate like?
- How much collaboration happens between students in the lab?
- How often do you meet with the lab group, and what is the structure of those meetings?
- How do you feel your advisor has handled the transition to virtual work?
- How has your advisor responded to other non-research-related interests you have? (If you are interested in being involved in student orgs / outreach - how does this advisor react to you spending time doing these other things?)
- If they could do it over again, would you still work with this advisor / go to this school?
- Ask about your unique circumstances (chronic illness, ADHD, have dependents, etc) and see if the grad student thinks the advisor / program would be supportive and understanding.
- Ask about SIO:
 - What do you like most and least about being a graduate student at Scripps?
 - What would you say the campus climate is like?
 - What is the community like at SIO?
 - Do you feel that the environment at SIO is more conducive to competition or collaboration?
 - How common is it for people to switch advisors?
 - How common is it for people to leave the program, and why?
 - If you could change one thing about SIO what would it be?
 - What changes do you foresee happening to SIO in the next 5 years?
 - Are graduate students friends with each other?
 - What do people do for fun?
 - Where do people live while in grad school?
- If you are comfortable with the graduate student, it's okay to ask the tougher questions regarding racism, sexism, etc. You want to be prepared as best as possible. Ask if they feel like the institution is supportive and committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- If you are interested in issues related to environmental racism and justice, are there others interested in and already doing work on those issues in the lab or program? How supportive have advisors and other mentors been for pursuing that?
- Ask about covid and remote-work:
 - How was the first year through a virtual setting?
 - Have you been able to connect with other students?
 - If so, how do you feel this differs from an in-person environment?
- Ask about grad school in general:
 - What has been your biggest challenge during your time as a graduate student?
 - Is your experience with grad school different than you expected?
 - What is your day-to-day like as a graduate student?
 - Have you struggled academically or socially in grad school?
 - How different is grad school from undergrad?
 - What is your work-life balance like? Is it hard to maintain a work-life balance?
 - What is your favorite thing about being a graduate student?

What should students prepare before meetings?

- You'll probably have the same conversation over and over again, so get ready for a long day.
- Having a few sentences prepared/rehearsed about yourself (where you're from, what research you're interested in or are planning to do) is a good way to start any meeting.
- Prepare your heart - stay calm.
- Be able to introduce yourself.
- Think about your answers to general questions like, "why do you want to do a PhD?" "What are you hoping to work on" and "Do you have any questions for me?"
- Look them up ahead of time, find their lab website and read some abstracts of some of their papers. If they have a Google Scholar profile you can find their most cited and most recent publications!
- Read a couple of papers and compile a list of questions for them. Get a good idea of what their current research is.
- It's also okay to ask them to explain or teach you about certain aspects of their research - you don't have to be an expert, but you should be excited to learn!
- It's not a bad idea to write down a list of questions (about their research, mentorship style, SIO, etc.) ahead of time, in case you get nervous!
- Ask open ended questions, like about how they did in school, what do they recommend/advice to students, what their background is, how they got here, etc.! You'll often find they have really interesting backgrounds and life paths, and this is a great chance to hear about them!
- Get a feel of how well you interact with them, if they are personable, if you could see yourself working with them for 5+ years.

Finally, here's some general advice, tips, and words of encouragement submitted by current students:

- As much as you are being interviewed, also remember that you are interviewing them/Scripps and that we want to convince you to come here. Don't be afraid to ask questions of things you want to know, especially of the graduate students. Have a quick spiel prepared for the inevitable, 'so tell me about yourself' question.
- You should have an idea of the topics that interest you and how that fits in with your prospective lab, but no one expects you to have every chapter of your dissertation outlined already.
- As a prospective grad student, know that you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. You don't want to end up working in a lab environment or with a faculty member you are unhappy with for the next 5-7 years.
- Be yourself, be confident! You deserve to be here!
- The application process can be really scary and confusing and it takes a long time. Especially when speaking with potential advisors, they can take a LONG time to get back to you because they are extremely busy, so stay confident and don't think you're doing anything wrong. Everyone is in the same boat as you! Advisors like to see that you have passion and that you can take control on your own projects. Anyone can spit facts from papers they've read, but showing you will do the work and put your time into it will really prove you belong there.
- The road never ends, it just veers off! If you feel like after this that it's the end of the road, look for where it veers. You are worth more and deserve more!
- You have been invited to Open House, that means you are already impressive! So have fun, relax, enjoy the day or two - being in the process, and nerding out with other nerds (students and faculty)!! It's very stressful but it can also be very fun. It's a momentous time in your life.
- You were selected for this weekend because SIO is interested in YOU, not necessarily your resume items or your research experience. You've shown the ability to ask complex questions

and the intellectual curiosity to explore them. You have nothing to prove – just find the right fit for your interests and personality.

- Prioritize your own happiness and mental health when picking a PhD program/advisor. Grad school will be difficult no matter what, but your lab/advisor can really make a difference in how tolerable that difficulty will be. Pay attention to your gut feeling when you're talking to potential advisors/lab mates.
- I would look at schools comparatively. Is SIO the best fit, or are you doing it for name recognition? I would also say that during the application process they will do everything they can to get you here, but they won't do everything to keep you here. Make sure it is the best fit for you. Also if you are having reservations about an advisor you should really consider your options. 5 years working for this person might not sound like a lot but they control many aspects of your life, make sure they take care of their students. One common misconception I've heard spread is that it is easy to switch advisors once you are in. That can really vary depending what department you are in, always ask the graduate students because the advisors might not be up to date. Ask graduate students any questions or concerns you might have! We want to help you as much as possible.
- Try not to compare yourself to others and just gather as much honest information about the environment as you can to help you make your decision.
- Make sure to think about both what you bring to the table to add to the lab group, but also what you want to take away from the experience in the lab. It's a two way street so it's important to have that perspective.
- Don't stress too hard, take breaks if you need a mental refresh, don't be scared to ask questions-even if you think of them on the spot
- Be sure to maintain a work-life balance in grad school. There will always be work to do and it is important to not burn out. So, set your work hours and enjoy evenings with friends/family so that you stay fresh for the marathon that is grad school.
- It's easy to feel powerless in grad school, especially in your first year or two when everything is new and you're constantly becoming more aware of how little you know. Look for peers and mentors that encourage discovery and curiosity (rather than shaming for lack of knowledge) and that help you feel a sense of personal agency over your studies/degree/projects. As a graduate student you don't have a lot of power, but you are not powerless--you can decide what you want from this experience and go for it.
- It's also very useful to learn what work-life-balance means for you and what your needs are. That balance is different for everyone and may take some trial and error to figure out, but ultimately it's very useful to find out what you need to prevent burnout.
- Ask anyone (especially current graduate students and postdocs, if you want more detailed honest opinions and advice) you want to have more conversation with outside of the formal meeting times for their contact information and if they can schedule another time to talk - the windows of time allotted may be too short, and everyone will be happy to talk for longer at another time.
- To the greatest extent possible over zoom, try to connect with other prospective students as well as current students - often they will be familiar faces in classes you can quickly reconnect with when you both start a program next year.
- Ask lots of questions! Do not be afraid to ask about details regarding how much they expect from you. It is better to find out now before committing to a lab.
- Just relax! Everyone is nervous, but the majority of the professors at SIO are actually super chill people. I know they call them "interviews" but they're not here to grill you. They just want to get to know you.
- Pay attention to how people make you feel. Remember to pay attention to what you think of them; don't only worry about what they think of you.

- Students are paid for work the *prior* month, so budget well during your first month. It's better to find a good advisor and lab (try not to be the only one!) than it is to be drawn by the prospect of great science; do not waver on this. Be aware that SIO is a public school and comes with all the bureaucracy built in.