

CHOOSING GRADUATE STUDIES

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First of all, what do you want to do! What really interests you? What subject in your undergraduate courses made you sit on the edge of your seat? That is the easy part; the more difficult part is choosing the right graduate school and the right professor.

Now define your area. If you want to stay in Canada, you have many choices of institutions that are doing some really groundbreaking work. Keep in mind though, that you are in a great place already, as both of the Universities of Alberta and Calgary boast tremendous graduate programs. If you have your heart set on going overseas for graduate studies, start looking early, as there are fewer studentships available for overseas studies. These studentships are underutilized though, and many of the tri-council agencies (NSERC, CIHR and SSHRC) encourage these applications. Keep in mind that it may be easier to perform research abroad later in your career, after attending scientific meetings and speaking with potential supervisors in a more cost-effective manner. If you are thinking that you want to stay in Canada, you can slim your search down to the respective fields of study quite easily. Every major university has a list of faculty members and their departments, and it is relatively simple to navigate the websites to see biographies on the faculty members, their publications, and contact information.

But before you rush into anything take a step back and analyze your potential supervisor for a number of criteria that lead to a successful graduate program. First of all, does he or she have funding? Do they have grants right now that will let you perform the experiments you want to perform? The major granting agencies usually have published lists of the grant money they gave out. Also, most professors will tell you what funding they have - just ask. Now that you have finances sorted out, think about the lab environment that you want to be in. Many of the most successful, high-profile researchers have done amazing things in their careers, but in a sea of 25 other trainees and students, would you have the chance to learn from this person? Finally, what about the graduate program you would enter into. Many faculty members are part of a single department or research group, so take a close look at the program, the required courses, and the level of funding that it promises its students.

Now that you have your list of prospective supervisors down to a handful, it is now time to contact them. A wise professor once told me that when students contact him, the first thing he looks for is have they done their homework. Many students "broadcast their curriculum vitae (CV)" to a list of 50 supervisors with a generic message such as "I am interested in being your graduate student. I have amazing grades. Take me". It doesn't work quite like that. What many professors look for, is 'does he or she know what my lab currently studies' and 'has this student read my publications'. This should be a high priority for you, and relatively easy since you're looking at labs doing research of interest to you.

If you really cannot decide on a research path, one of the most useful things you can do is ask a professor of yours. Professors know who does good research, and they know who is good at training students. Often, they might be the critical link that you need to get into his or her lab, and hey, it never hurts to ask. Even if you give them a broad area, such as "[Dr. Prof], I am interested in [broad research category], and would like to pursue graduate studies on this topic in the fall. Could you recommend somebody that does good research on the subject?"

When you finally get to the big moment of asking a prospective professor if they would meet with you to discuss graduate school, let them know that you are qualified! Many professors get dozens of requests a month, so it is important to let them know that you are an excellent student in your first email. Here is an example of what this email might look like:

*Dear Dr. Supervisor,
I am [your name]. I will be graduating in May with a BSc in [your subject] from the University of Alberta and I am looking for graduate studies in the fall. I have taken numerous courses in [relevant area], which explains my interest in your work on [their research]. I have read your publications on [their research] and [description of it]. I would very much like to meet with you to discuss your current research interests and how I can be part of it. I have a great deal of pertinent experience, as I have worked in [previous researcher's] lab. I feel I would be competitive for several scholarships such as Alberta Innovates and NSERC, so there is a good chance I would come to your lab with my own funding. I have attached my CV so you can evaluate my qualifications in more detail. Dr. [previous supervisor] has also agreed to serve as a reference, please feel free to call him/her.*

I look forward to your reply.

When interviewing, come prepared to show that you know what you are talking about. Make sure you have done your homework on their research, and do not be afraid to ask questions. Graduate studies is about asking the right questions, so you might as well start now. If you are undecided about a particular lab, or trying to decide between more than one, the best way to get to know the place is to talk to the current graduate students. Straightforward questions such as 'do you get along with the boss', and 'what is the working environment like', are often answered honestly by the current graduate students. Ask for their email to contact them later if you have more pressing questions.

Other criteria that you may want to consider would be the prestige of the graduate program, their education standards, access to building facilities, and cost of the program (don't forget what the stipend is set at and what housing is available). When deciding on when to enter graduate studies, it is often the graduate coordinators that know all of the information. Keep track of your application deadlines, and equally important, the scholarship deadlines that are dreadfully early! Some of these scholarships allow you to apply with more than one supervisor in mind, and some even allow you to transfer between labs if you change your mind. It is very important to apply for these scholarships, as they will greatly increase your chances of getting more scholarships later in your research career.