Geological Society of America
Student Advisory Council

Demystifying the Graduate School Application Process

September 23, 2020

Science ■ Stewardship ■ Service
Introduction

• Today’s Presenters
  • Allie Nagurney, SAC Chair, PhD Candidate, Virginia Tech
  • Alex Villa, PhD Student, University of Wisconsin
  • Dr. Lisa Ely, Professor, Central Washington University
  with help from Rebecca Taormina, SAC Chair-Elect, PhD Candidate, Baylor University

SAC = Student Advisory Council
Allie Introduction

- Undergrad: Lafayette College
- PhD Candidate: Metamorphic Petrology
- Chair, GSA’s Student Advisory Council
- Typical day: TAing IgMet Lab, analyzing the chemical composition of rocks on a microprobe, coding, writing papers
Applying to graduate school can feel overwhelming

We are here to help
Why Attend Graduate School

Areas of expertise for geologists who are members of the American Institute of Professional Geologists

- Hydrogeology: 24%
- Exploration: 7%
- Environmental Geology: 24%
- Economic Geology: 7%
- Petroleum: 5%
- Engineering Geology: 5%
- Environmental Site Assessment: 4%
- Mining Geology: 3%
- Hazardous Waste: 2%
- Coal: 2%
- Management: 2%
- Other: 15%

Credit: American Institute of Professional Geologists
Grad School Is Not Like Undergrad

- The bulk of your time will be spent on research.
- Choose school based on research area or advisor.
- Research interests/overlap > university rankings.
Grad School Is Funded

- Teaching Assistant
- Research Assistant
- Fellowships: internal and external
- 9 vs. 12 month contracts
- Stipend range = $12,000 - $40,000 / average = $18,000 - $20,000 (location dependent)
Masters versus PhD

Masters
- 2 years
- research
- before a PhD
- prepare for a variety of careers

PhD
- 4-6 years
- become an expert in your field
- prepare for a variety of careers
Choosing A Research Area
Timeline / Steps

- Summer - October: research programs
- Sept-Nov: email potential advisors
- Sept-Dec: talk to potential advisors
- Nov-Jan: apply
- Feb-April: hear back
Finding An Advisor

• Talk to undergrad professors
• Start Googling
• Department websites / Social media (Twitter)
• Go to virtual conference (2020 GSA Connects Online is free for student members this year) and attend sessions in your research area of interest
Alex
Introduction

B.S. University of California
Los Angeles 2018
Undergrad researcher
M.S. UW-Madison 2020

PhD student; paleoceanography/paleoclimatology
Spend most of my day TAing, doing research
with microfossils, working on diversity, equity,
inclusion efforts
Contacting That Advisor

- this step is really important!!
- introduction email saying:
  - who you are
  - what degree you are interested
  - generally speaking what research you are interested in
  - if they are taking new students fall 2021
  - include a copy of your resume/CV (in pdf format)
  - ask them to zoom or talk on the phone about research
  - if you are presenting research at a conference this fall (virtually) tell them about it

I think I sent out 15 emails back in 2017, I probably got 75% responses and then I ended up applying to ~10 schools, I have no idea if that is the normal amount or if that is a lot or a little
Talking to Potential Advisors

- Ask lots of questions- this person could be someone you end up working with for 5+ years!
- Good questions to ask:
  - funding!
  - size of lab group
  - mentoring style
  - facilities available to do research

It doesn’t hurt to read a few of their publications before meeting!
The Application

- Personal statement
- Potentially research statement
- Letters of recommendation (and how to ask for them) ~3-5
- Transcripts
- GRE (no longer a part of the application for many schools!)
Visiting Schools

- Will that happen in 2021? Who knows

- How do virtual visits work? Going to depend highly on the institution

- Ask lots of questions

- Reach out to their current and former graduate students, and ask them of their opinion of the advisor (this conversation is meant to be confidential!) - they are always very honest about workload, department culture, finances, etc.
Many programs are eliminating the GRE (a standardized test) for graduate school

This is in an effort to make the application process more equitable

Cost of test is ~200, some schools have waivers to reduce cost to 50% (based on financial need)

Not all schools have eliminated the GRE
This may mean the other components of your application will be weighed heavier (GPA, Letters of Rec, etc.)
• Reading their publications gives you a perspective of what your potential advisor has done, but not where they are headed, so feel free to ask this

• Feel free to ask about department culture, potential fees, insurance

• Some advisors are using individual development plans (IDP) to focus on your goals
Lisa
Introduction

• Professor and Graduate Program Coordinator
  lisa.ely@cwu.edu
• Dept of Geological Sciences
  Central Washington University

• Research and teaching:
  Geomorphology, Natural Hazards
• Mentor undergraduate and M.S. student research, facilitate graduate admissions,
• First contact for all new grad students!
Faculty Perspective

What do faculty look for in an applicant?
- Potential to contribute to research program
- Complete a project from start to finish
  - Interest, scientific curiosity
  - Reliability
  - Motivation
  - Skills, knowledge, experience

How to show your potential?
- Get involved!
  - Undergraduate research, internships
  - Academic clubs
  - Outreach activities, volunteering
Faculty Perspective

- **Personal contacts = Most Important Factor**
  - *Contact* prospective advisors:
    - Connects person with application
  - *Letters* of recommendation:
    - Faculty rely on letters when evaluating apps
  - *Visit* in person--at least phone or virtual

- **Written Statement: Concise and to-the-point**
  - Mention personal contacts
  - List research interests in first paragraph

- **Grades and Standardized Tests**
  - Personal contacts and writing most important, but . . .
  - Very high or low scores do draw attention
    - What to do?
How and When To Address “Things”

- Low grades / one really bad semester
- Took a semester off in undergrad
- Long gap (many years) between undergrad and Masters or PhD

These obstacles are surmountable!

- Address them directly in written statement
  - Always start and end on positive points
- Ask letter writers to address them
- Bring up in conversation

Don’t despair--there are many schools out there
What To Do If You Don’t Get Into Any Programs

- **Apply again later**
  - Review and reconsider list of schools
    - *Are these programs the right fit for you?*
  - Talk with more people, make contacts
  - Gain experience--work, classes, undergrad research

- **Sometimes it’s not you**
  - Programs often admit applicants by subdiscipline
    - Distribution of applications fluctuates each year
    - Funding changes year-to-year

- **Ask if there is something you could do to become more competitive next year**
If you don’t plan on applying for graduate school for a few years you still can:

- Look for undergrad research opportunities
- Cultivate relationships with potential letter writers
- Attend virtual conferences this fall
- Join a professional society (GSA!)
Resourceful Organizations
We will now take any questions you have. Any questions that are not answered during this period will be answered and sent out to the attendees at a later date.

Contact Info:
- Dr. Lisa Ely: lisa.ely@cwu.edu
- Alex Villa: avilla2@wisc.edu ; @AValenciaVilla
- Allie Nagurney: nagurney@vt.edu ; @AllieNagurney