Finding the Right Program

- Where is the best program for me?
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TO BEGIN WITH...

This section is presented to stimulate questions to ask yourself about programs you find of interest. The goal of your program search is to formulate a list of five to twenty schools offering the program you want. In the appendix, there is an example of a worksheet to help evaluate each of the chosen programs.

WHERE IS THE BEST PROGRAM FOR ME?

When trying to find a program, one of the first things students ask is, “Where is the best program?” Students often refer to popular reports written by various agencies and magazines listing top universities. While these list good schools, will the listed schools meet your needs?

The first step (and perhaps the biggest one) to find the right program is determining which type of program you want. Do you want a specific kind of program such as forensics, Dairy Science, or Nanotechnology? What schools offer the program you want? How do you find out? Most schools have websites with their degrees and programs listed. Also, there are many reference books available in bookstores or university libraries and lots of websites to help you locate programs including:

Peterson’s Annual Guides to Graduate Study
Peterson’s publishes many guides to graduate programs. They also provide information on-line at: http://www.petersons.com/

Hobson’s Guides to Graduate Study
This is another company producing guides listing of graduate programs areas. You may view graduate program information on-line at: http://www.gradview.com/
Gradschools.com
An on-line resource offering a comprehensive listing of graduate programs, this web site listings contain basic descriptions and contact information. The web page allows students to locate schools by discipline and subject area in the discipline.  
http://www.gradschools.com/

Professional Societies
Many professionals’ societies will offer lists of programs they accredit. For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) annually prints the APA Guide to Graduate Study in Psychology. Check with the professional society within your subject area to see if they have a graduate school guide.

WHAT FACTORS SHOULD YOU CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING PROGRAMS?
You have a list of schools offering the program you want, and you need to shorten your list. Do this by evaluating whether each program meets your educational needs and goals. Below are some criteria to consider and questions to ask when reviewing programs. To narrow your program list, select three to five criteria that you want in any program. Evaluate each program in terms of meeting those criteria.

University Reputation – You do not necessarily have to consider a program in terms of the University in which it is set. Graduate programs are contained within departments of universities. The reputation of a program may be far more positive or negative than the reputation of the university. Look specifically at the program and what it offers that you will not get from another program. Also ask if the university is appropriately accredited and if the program qualifies for accreditation from a professional society.

Programs Offered – What specializations are offered in the program? Does the program emphasize theory, original research, or practical application of knowledge? Does the program provide or require experiences such as practicum’s or internships? Is the curriculum structured or flexible? Does the program encourage or require students to work on research projects? What resources such as computers and laboratories are available? Is the program just starting or has it been long established? What is the graduation rate? How long does it take students to complete the program?

The Program Faculty – What have they published? Where have their latest publications appeared? From what schools did they graduate, and was it in the field they are teaching? What are their areas of expertise? Are they actively pursuing their research areas? Does the department include nationally or internationally known scholars? Is there ethic/cultural diversity in the faculty? What is the faculty-to-student ration?

Admission Criteria – What is the application deadline? What are the requirements to be admitted? What criteria are used to evaluate applicants? Are standardized tests (e.g., the GRE, MAT, or GMAT) required for admission and what are the required or suggested minimum scores? How important are grade point averages (GPAs) in the admission decision? How many
applications does the program receive, and how many students are accepted? What background of students does the program attract? (Admission criteria are covered in depth later in this document.)

Cost – What are the tuition and fees per credit hour? What are the tuition rates for nonresidents if you will be coming from out-of-state? What financial aid is available to students in the form of assistantships, scholarships, or internships?

Psychical Facilities – Are there adequate facilities available for faculty to perform research? Are there areas for students in the program to gather and interact such as a student lounge? Are there sufficient classrooms and seminar rooms to hold classes? Are programs housed in relatively modern space with relatively new computers and equipment?

Multicultural Experiences – Will you have an opportunity to work with students from other backgrounds, cultures, and countries? What is the faculty and student composition? What multicultural experiences do the faculties bring to the classroom? What is the atmosphere on campus?

Library - Are there comprehensive reference collections in your area of specialization? To which journals in your area of interest does the library subscribe? How many volumes does the library hold? Are the materials accessible by a computerized system? To which electronic databases does the library subscribe?

Career Assistance – Does the program offer student’s job search assistance? Does the school have a career center offering job fairs, employment leads, and job search resources? Where are recent graduates employed? What are the average annual salaries of recent graduates from the program?

Additional Activities – What recreational facilities are offered on campus? What housing opportunities are offered on campus? What is the cost of living in the area? What cultural activities does the school attract? If you have children, how good are the public schools?

Geographic Location – This is one of the most limiting factors to use when choosing a program but is often one of the first people consider. Generally, location should be the last criteria used for choosing a program. Judge programs based on matching your interests, not necessarily the location. Consider that this might be your one chance to travel to a new town, state, or country. Ponder the possibilities of what a new location will mean. Do you have family that will come with you? If no, then the world is really open to you. If yes, the location considerations will need to be a collaborative discussion. Items to consider include:

• Will I be happier in a small town or a large urban area?
• Is this where I want to live for several years?
• What impact will the move have on my family and friends?
• What are the employment opportunities in the area to support me (or my spouse) during school and after I graduate?
Remember that once you complete the degree, your employment opportunities might be in a completely different part of the country prompting another move.