Asking EPSP: What to consider when selecting a graduate program

The perfect fit?
Many of our EPSP tweeps cited the “right fit” as the most important factor in their choice of graduate program. But what does “fit” actually mean? It’s not so obvious.

There is no right answer here! Fit can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. Fit could mean that...
- You have the opportunity to work on your dream project
- The program is well-connected to future industry/academic opportunities
- You get along well with your potential advisor
- The graduate community in the department seems supportive and happy
- The program is in a location you like (there are mountains, museums, good food, etc.)
- The school or area works well for your partner or family
- and so on!

Fit is likely a combination of all of these things and more. Sometimes, you just feel it in your gut - but there are lots of things that you can weigh when making this choice

Robert Mahon @RobertCMahon · 3h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
It was all about fit. I felt I fit in to the town, the department, the scope of research my advisor was interested in, and that I would get along well with my advisor.

Andrew J. Moodie @MoodieStrat · 4h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
I chose based on a combination of location of school and project/advisor. I wanted to try living somewhere new and of course wanted an advisor I thought would work well with me.
Visit!

Many graduate programs have accepted students weekends where all of the prospective graduate students for a particular department have the opportunity to visit. During these visits you'll meet with faculty, students, and EACH OTHER! This is the opportunity to explore the place you might call home for the next 2, or 6, or 10 years and meet your future colleagues.

Max Dahlquist @DahlquistMax · 14m
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
I had no idea what I was getting into. I didn't solicit enough advice during undergrad and had no idea what an advisor/advisee relationship was supposed to look like. Made a decision based on the project and location my wife and I both wanted to live for a few years.

Max Dahlquist @DahlquistMax · 14m
I really just lucked out getting a very patient and supportive advisor. If a few things had gone differently I probably wouldn't be finishing up now and certainly wouldn't be pursuing academia.

Dave Whipp @dave_whipp · 9h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
The hardest part of the decision for me was choosing the advisor/department over the location of the school. I wanted to live somewhere mountainous, but chose to stay in the Midwest (US) because my future advisor and department just felt right. Very happy I did.

Flavien Beaud @GlacialGeomorph · 20h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
Grad school takes a while and there are some hard times, so choose a place where you actually want to live. Work life balance can help a lot. Then do some fishing on the advisor and make sure you would go along. Contact past and present team members to ask questions.

Nicole Gasparini @NMGasparini · Feb 7
A day late and I’m not sure if this is helpful... I chose my program bc it was the closest school to my then boyfriend. Seems like both a good and bad decision in retrospect. Bottom line: life is complicated!
If this visit isn’t offered up front - ASK! This may be the only chance you have to get to visit your future department before making your decision. If you can’t make the scheduled weekend - ask to reschedule! Most schools are able to accommodate this. Also, if you’re traveling internationally, it’s more likely you’ll have to ask to visit - don’t let it deter you!

While you’re visiting, take every opportunity that you have to ask questions and get the lay of the land. Can you picture yourself in this place for the long haul?

Will Struble @StrubleWill · 1m
And visiting places (paid for by your host institution!) made a huge difference! Probably wound't have ended up at UO if I hadn't visited.

Kristin Sweeney @rezofknowledge · 3h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
Even if they don't offer, ask to visit if you can. When there (or via email), chat with students esp. in prosp. lab: do students seem worried about funding stability? Do they have a fun / work balance that matches your personal ideal?

Joanmarie @itsJoanmarie · 59m
Also, visit (try your hardest and get the school to cover $), do what the students do, observe them in their natural habitats. The degree to which the students and department go out of your way to make you feel welcome relates to how supportive they will be to you as a student!

Marisa Repasch @MarisaExplores · 22h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
Definitely visit before making a decision! Being abroad might mean being away from family/friends, so it may be isolating if you’re not surrounded by supportive colleagues. It helps to find a supervisor who allows flexibility and encourages travel to int’l conferences.

$! $! $!
Whether we like to admit it or not, getting a graduate degree is a full time job. You deserve to be paid for the work that you do. Plus, your work will suffer if you have to take on the added stress of not knowing where your next paycheck is coming from. Graduate school is tough enough as it is. Will you be able to make ends meet while you complete your degree?
DO NOT BE AFRAID TO ASK ABOUT THIS. This is information that you deserve to have when weighing your decision. So many of us think it might be taboo to bring up money, or that just by getting your degree you’re somehow getting paid, THIS IS NOT THE CASE!

No project is so perfect that you should do it for free. Or at least, this is a choice that you should make for yourself with all of the available information. You can always plan to try and obtain funding later, but know what you’re taking on by doing this. It is 100% okay to opt for a position that can guarantee funding for the work you do, even if it seems less “prestigious” or like a less “cool” project.

Kate Potter @astoldbywater · 3h
Reverting to @AGU_EPSP

Ask about project funding! Is there any for the project you are applying to work on? If not, ask your potential advisor if there is a plan for obtaining funding? Ask other grad students/post docs if your potential advisor is likely to advocate for you and help you get funding.

Kate Potter @astoldbywater · 2h

“wait people advertise for grad student for nonfunded projects?” Yes, this happens all the time (& is not necessarily bad). I had friends in grad school struggle because they came to work on projects that weren’t funded & they were responsible to obtaining most/all of the funding

Kate Potter @astoldbywater · 2h

A lot of these people left grad school because the pressure was so high and they were so unhappy. The ones who didn’t had advisors who really supported them and worked with them to parse together funding.
"Gathering data" aka ASK A LOT OF QUESTIONS!

There are plenty of ways to gather some data in order to get an idea of what your grad experience might be like at a particular place. This is especially important if you’re unable to visit.

Make sure you talk to your potential advisor on the phone or on Skype (you can even do this before you decide to apply). This can help you get a better sense of their communication style and to see whether or not your personalities “click”. Remember, this is the person that you’ll likely be working the most closely with in your program - so you’ll want to have a some sense of what that working relationship is going to look like.
Different styles work for different people (Will they be hands on or hands off? Are they easy to reach when you have a question? Do you feel like they would support you if your interests change? etc.). What do you feel like you need from a potential mentor? Talking to them will likely be a lot more informative on these points than chatting over email.

Daniel Scott @GeomorphDan · 57m
Repeating to @AGU_EPSP
As best you can, pick an adviser who cares about you. Your project, classes, funding, career trajectory, etc. can all change, but having peers and mentors who form a support network for you when times get tough (grad school is tough) is key.

Jens Turowski @JMTurowski · 8h
Repeating to @AGU_EPSP
Ask your potential future advisor about their teaching philosophy. About how they handle conflicts. And how much freedom you would have in pursuing your ideas.

Kieran Dunne @GeoJiamin · 3h
Repeating to @AGU_EPSP
I wanted to make sure that my advisor's interests encompassed my own, but at the same time would also push me in ways that would make me uncomfortable and force me to grow in unexpected ways. Also, I wanted a fairly hands-on advisor with whom I seemed to get along with personally.

Donovan Dennis @donovan_dennis · 2h
Repeating to @AGU_EPSP
Unequivocally, no. 1: the person (supervisor) matters as much, if not more than, the project. Shitty people aren't worth the seemingly-amazing project. The project won't be nearly as amazing when your life is totally shitty. (1/x)

But your advisor won't be the only person that you work with during your graduate program. The rest of the department can provide a broader network of collaborators. You'll also likely be working closely with other graduate students. Think about what you might need in a broader community. A larger department could provide more potential mentors, but a smaller one could
provide a closer-knit feeling, there is no one-size fits all department climate. Getting a sense for the department as a whole and the graduate student experience is key, because it can vary wildly.

Sarah Schanz @SarahSchanz1 · 3h
Having a network was the biggest part of my decision - friendly and supportive grad students but also lots of faculty mentors. I had one "official" PhD advisor, but so many faculty/staff/peers were behind the scenes offering support.

Joanmarie @itsJoanmarie · 1h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
1. The "vibe" you get from potential advisor, other faculty and grad students should outweigh whether or not the proposed project is "cool enough." You will not be excited to work on something in an environment that isn’t supportive or what you want

Tyler Doane @thdoane · 10h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
I was lucky to end up with an advisor that allowed me to explore, and was patient enough to allow me to understand material on my own terms. I was equally lucky to land in a department that was very supportive and fun. Didn’t know to look for that before going, but would now.

Your potential mentor isn’t the only one that you can chat with while making your decision. It’s not uncommon to try and get a sense of the broader department or lab climate by reaching out to existing post-docs and students. You might also have some luck with department or lab alumni, who might feel more comfortable sharing some of the less-than-perfect parts of their experience. Don’t be afraid to ask, many folks are happy to share their past experiences!

Jean Dixon @GeoJeannie · 4h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
For those students with acceptances, chat with existing students and post docs about lab culture, expectations, and mentorship. Think about what you need and expect, and have an open chat with the advisor to understand their expectations and set your own!
There’s no need to make this decision in isolation - especially if you’re not sure. If you have an existing undergraduate mentor, this is the time to turn to them - these programs and potential mentors are likely in their orbit, and even if they aren’t, these folks have been through this and can talk you through your options. If you don’t have a designated mentor, think about reaching out to current professors (start with those who wrote your recommendation letters) or graduate students in your department.

Donovan Dennis @donovan__dennis · 2h
Regardless of where you visit (which means VISIT): ask the hard questions: has anyone quit early in the group? Why? Do students maintain good relationships w/ PI after finishing? Why/why not?

AND ASK LAB ALUMNI alongside current students. They’ve got (slightly) less at stake.3/x

Lejo Flores @HydroLejo · 13h
You can learn a ton by meeting with grad students in a lab and it is invaluable. @NMGasparini sat and chatted with me for ~2 hours amidst trying to get her dissertation done and gave me the ins and outs of the lab and the institution. A lab is its people!! #WednesdayWisdom

Karl A. Lang @iamskeptikarl · 23h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
ask around for tips about who to work with/who to avoid. do not undervalue the well-informed advice from a trusted mentor.

Will Struble @StrubleWill · 3h
Replying to @AGU_EPSP
Getting recommendations from my undergrad adviser was super useful. He knew not only who the good scientists were, but who had a history of being a good adviser and mentor! Past students of each person I applied to work with provided great insight on daily life in the lab.
Looking forward (and inward!)
Time for some soul-searching.

What do you want to get out of your graduate experience?
Do you want to focus on certain approaches or topics? Fieldwork? Experiments? Modeling? Everything?
Do you want to be prepared for academia? for industry? For government? Or have the flexibility to decide later?
Do you want a project with clear objectives or space to define it yourself?
What if your interests change? Can the program/advisor that you’re considering support that?

Things don’t always work out
If a program doesn’t meet your needs, it’s better to decline than to try and make something work that you don’t have a good feeling about. If you just don’t click with an advisor, don’t force it because a place is prestigious. If you don’t get the financial support you need, don’t go into debt. There are other paths and other options out there to explore!

There’s nothing wrong with taking into account a program’s strengths, but it’s ranking or reputation shouldn’t be the only thing you use to make your decision. Remember - “fit” is a combination of lots of things!
Depending on what you’re looking for, there might be some opportunities beyond the US that are worth considering.

**Donovan Dennis** @donovan__dennis · 3h

Don’t like your options in the US this round? Look abroad. Many countries hire PhDs year-round with short lag times between posting the job and starting the PhD. Also I would look abroad regardless—the best decision I’ve made so far!

(2/x)

**Marisa Repasch** @MarisaExplores · 22h

Replying to @AGU_EPSP

Often, European projects offer fully funded PhD positions within a collaborative framework. This gives students access to diverse datasets and teaches them how to collaborate. Lots of opportunities to develop presentation and scicomm skills too!

**Marisa Repasch** @MarisaExplores · 22h

Replying to @AGU_EPSP

The period after finishing undergrad or master’s, but before starting your career/family is a great time to experience a different culture abroad. Scientifically, you have a rare opportunity to work with scientists with different perspectives and visions than those in the U.S.

And above all else...

**Be kind.** To yourself and to others!

Remember, not everyone gets good news and you may not either. Very few people get accepted to every graduate program that they apply to. This is a stressful time for all, and a rejection can just be an opportunity to find another, even better path.

**Jean Dixon** @GeoJeannie · 17h

Replying to @AGU_EPSP

Grad declines are rolling out too! Be kind and know that for every offer letter there are students who are receiving no response or rejections. Grad positions require lots of advisor and dept support (financial and time commitments). Lots of great applicants don’t get offers.
This blog post was borne out of AGU EPSP’s new #WisdomWednesday initiative on Twitter. See the full tweet thread [here](#) and look out for future #WisdomWednesday posts!