

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL INTERVIEW

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

Science Training and Diversity (STaD) Office

We have collected advice from the following faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill regarding what they ask candidates, what candidates can do to impress them, and things that turn them off about candidates.

Dr. Robert Nicholas, Professor of Pharmacology

Dr. Corbin Jones, Associate Professor Evolutionary Genomics and Genetics

Dr. Henrik Dohlman, Professor of Biochemistry

Dr. William Coleman, Professor of Pathology

Dr. Miriam Braunstein, Associate Professor of Microbiology and Immunology

Dr. Tom Kawula, Professor of Microbiology and Immunology

Dr. Mark Peifer, Hooker Distinguished Professor of Biology

Dr. Jeffrey Frelinger, Keenan Professor of Microbiology and Immunology

Dr. Mara Duncan, Assistant Professor of Biology

Dr. Rosanne Farber, Professor of Pathology and Experimental Medicine

Dr. Ilona Jaspers, Associate Professor of Toxicology

Dr. Jeff Sekelsky, Professor of Biology

Dr. Bob Duronio, Professor of Biology and Director of Genetics Curriculum

Included are general tips about the graduate school interview weekends, a list of questions you may be asked, questions you can ask and the top 10 tips for interviewing at Graduate School.

GOOD LUCK AND BE EXCITED ABOUT SCIENCE!

THE STaD STAFF

Patrick Brandt, Ashalla Freeman, Joshua Hall, Jessica Harrell, Erin Hopper, and Eileen Hayter

WHAT IMPRESSES THE FACULTY?

The students need to be able to convey that they know what they are applying for...interviewers often look for this and view the naive applicant poorly.

The applicants should know (at least in general) what they want to do (cancer research versus vascular biology, biochemistry versus genetics, etc.), but should avoid being overly simplistic about their knowledge of a specific field. For instance, if they are talking to a cancer researcher, they should not express views on what the field needs (like a better understanding of ras signaling) without knowing the state-of-the-art.

The applicant needs to have a couple of canned questions to ask related to the school, the program, the specific researcher (and/or his/her lab). Even at the end of the day, it does not come off well to have an applicant indicate that they have no questions at all. Emphasize to them that it is better to get several answers to the same insightful question than to appear to have no questions at all.

A candidate who answers the question tell me about your research experience who gives a response that is impassioned and shows a real understanding of the issue.

A clear understanding of grad school lifestyle, self-motivation, enthusiasm, and someone who is able to carry on an intelligent conversation and can formulate questions on the fly.

Understand your research from the bench to the big picture. Know WHY your work is a worthwhile project.

Glance at the website and give good reasons for your interest in UNC. Interviewers tend to look more favorably on applicants who seem likely to enroll here if admitted, but don't say UNC is your 1st choice if that isn't true! It is okay to be unsure at this point.

Have an answer about your long-term career goals – the answer isn't important but you must have one.

Ask questions about the interviewer's research. Don't be afraid to interrupt when you don't understand something, and be sure you understand the PI's big picture questions. (Some interviewers will specifically grade applicants down if they don't ask about their research).

BE HONEST, ENGAGED, and make eye contact. Act excited about research.

Practice being outgoing if you are shy. Realize that science/research is social and you must convey that you can function well (if not thrive) in this environment.

DO ask about the PI's science! There is a "rumor" that some faculty will even continue small talking just to see if students will eventually ask about their research. Be interested, or at least act interested!

Don't forget during the interview weekend you are always making an impression. Just because you're riding back to the airport with a grad student or at dinner, you should still be professional.

Be able to answer why you want to be a grad student in the first place. Make sure you really do know the answer to this before you start going on interviews.

Dress appropriately for a professional interview! Avoid clothing that is too short, too tight, etc. First impressions are important and you don't want your dress to be a negative.

WHAT DOESN'T IMPRESS THE FACULTY

Pay attention to fidgeting, especially if you tend to get nervous. Don't scare the interviewer.

Casual dress, heavy perfumes (PI is allergic to many perfumes)

Too shy to interact with faculty

Can't articulate their undergraduate research experience, being late

Look bored or stare out the window when the interviewer is describing their work. Though you are likely to be bored some of the time, DON'T SHOW IT!!!!

Ask about how much you'll be expected to work (or share that you never want to work more than 40 hrs a week)

NEVER indicate that you don't have a question.

Don't sit quiet for 20 minutes and let the interview become a one sided conversation.

Tell the faculty another school is your number one choice. You can say what other schools you are interested in but do not rank them. Take the opportunity to have an open discussion about how the different schools you are interested in fit your research interests.

Students are not expected to know in detail what the PI works on, but they should definitely ask questions. If there's something they don't understand in the early stages of the conversation, ask then. Don't be worried about trying to "look" smart by pretending you know it all. There is more interest in students who are inquisitive about the things they don't yet know.

Some of the biggest mistakes students make when describing their research.....

1. Giving no introduction to your research and plowing right into techniques or data
2. Giving data but no interpretation
3. Not understanding your work.

When the candidate forgets the interviewer's name.

When the candidate talks too much and interrupts the interviewer.

When the candidate makes excuses for weaknesses. I got a D in biochemistry because the instructor was bad.

Their cell phone goes off. Worse when they answer it.

They forget to thank the interviewer before they leave.

They criticize another university or PhD program.

QUESTIONS FACULTY WILL ASK

Tell me about your research. Then he looks for a response that shows the student understands the hypothesis not just the experimental procedures. Must be able to clearly speak about their research.

What do you hope to get out of a PhD? Looking for a passion for science and a career goal.

Why UNC-CH? – Looking for a thoughtful response about the research environment

Tell me about yourself.

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

If you're not accepted into graduate school, what are your plans?

What do you know about our program?

Why did you choose to apply to our program?

What other schools are you considering?

In what ways have your previous experience prepared you for graduate study in our program?

Any questions?

What do you believe your greatest challenge will be if you are accepted into this program?

In college, what courses did you enjoy the most? The least? Why?

Describe any research project you've worked on. What was the purpose of the project and what was your role in the project?

How would your professors describe you?

How will you be able to make a contribution to this field?

Explain a situation in which you had a conflict and how you resolved it. What would you do differently? Why?

Describe your greatest accomplishment.

Tell me about your experience in this field. What was challenging? What was your contribution?

What are your career goals? How will this program help you achieve your goals?

Why should we take you and not someone else?

What do you do in your spare time?

QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT WANT TO ASK

What journals do students publish in?
Do students attend meetings; who pays?
What is the average time to degree?
What are the course requirements?
What are the teaching requirements?
What is the qualifying exam like?
Do students have extramural funding?
What types of professional development activities are available?
What type of career support is available?
What do you expect from your graduate students?
What have your graduate students gone on to do after they completed their PhD?

The Interview Weekend

Dress – Do not overdress, business casual is fine at UNC CH and there is no need to wear a suit. Bring casual clothes for the social events. Dress comfortably but neatly. Some schools may have different dress codes. Feel free to ask the faculty or administrative contact that invited you what the appropriate dress is. You will be walking across campus so **wear comfortable shoes**. Bring an umbrella just in case!

Meetings with students – The students also provide feedback to the faculty on the students so enjoy meeting them but be aware they are interviewing you too and looking for students who they would enjoy collaborating with.

Some interviews include **social events** like parties. Don't drink too much (even if others do). Remember that even though it seems like a party, it's an interview.

There will be numerous activities. Do your best to actively participate in all activities and use the opportunity to meet more faculty, learn about their research and gain insight from other students.

Read about the faculty's research that you may interview with but also know you may not end up interviewing with the faculty you wanted to meet due to schedule conflicts. You want to be able to follow their research when they describe it to you and ask good questions. Think about some questions ahead of time. Bring a copy of the faculty member's paper and have specific questions about it, bring a recent graph or data from your research and talk about the findings and what they mean.

Ask questions after faculty talks, at poster sessions, during the interview and at the social functions. Engage faculty you did not interview about their research or your research interests.

Remember – the program is interviewing you AND you are interviewing the program

After the interview – Thank the Director of graduate services, the faculty you interviewed with, the program administrator and your student host by email.

Acknowledge offers with a prompt thank-you, and find out when the program needs a firm commitment.

You do not have to finalize a decision with any program until April 15th. Keep your options open until you have completed all your interviews. If you have any follow-up questions – contact faculty, students or program administrators you met during your interview weekend.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST – HAVE FUN!