

Choosing a graduate program supervisor

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Before choosing a supervisor, get to know them—and get to know yourself.

Ask any of my family members and they will tell you that my middle name should be “indecisive.” I am in a constant battle with the “shoulds” and “shouldn’ts” of life. When choosing my undergraduate institution I couldn’t make a decision, so I did what any rational person would do: I rolled a fuzzy dice. Even numbers were one institution and odd numbers were the other. I rolled an even number and based on that one moment in time, the next four years of my life were decided (please note, I do not recommend this method for others).

So, when it came to choosing a program and institution for my PhD, I felt overwhelmed and paralyzed. How was I going to make this decision? Should I decide based on the cache of a potential supervisor within my chosen field? Should it be based on the funding package being offered? What about the institution itself? Now, a year post-graduation and on the other side of this decision, I can tell you that all of these elements are important to consider but there are many less obvious factors to contemplate when choosing a PhD program. One is the importance of getting to know your potential supervisor beyond the credentials listed on their curriculum vitae.

For some, the choice of a PhD program or institution may be fairly limited. You may not suffer from the dilemma of endless possibilities, but rather a different kind of problem related to specialization and therefore limited spaces. Within the realm of academe there are particular areas of study which are so specialized that if you wish to pursue graduate work in these areas you may only have one or two options. But, for the rest of us, the options can be overwhelming.

One of the more obvious “shoulds” to consider when choosing a graduate program and institution is our potential supervisor. I couldn’t agree more with this recommendation, but probably not for the reasons you would expect. After finishing my Master’s degree, bright-eyed and optimistic, I was told that when choosing a PhD supervisor it was integral to select one based in large part on their cache within the field. How well-connected was this individual and what was their reputation within the discipline? I would be remiss to say that these aren’t elements worthy of consideration, but there are other aspects of a would-be supervisor which are equally—if not more—important to consider.

Before choosing a supervisor I have two recommendations: get to know them and get to know yourself. Remember that you may be entering into a four, five or even seven-year relationship. Even beyond the completion of your PhD, your supervisor will likely play a role in your life as a mentor or a reference, whether it be for a job inside or outside the walls of academia. When put into this context, it seems absurd that we would make this decision based on reputation and prestige alone.

Learn about your potential supervisor beyond what they have written in various prestigious journals. Get to know them as a person. How do they work? Are they a hands-on supervisor who sets weekly meetings or do they check in once every three or four months? Do they greet you with a fresh pot of tea and scones (yes, these supervisors exist, mine did this) or do they keep their academic and personal lives separate? The best way to answer these questions is to speak with a student who is currently being supervised by your would-be supervisor; you will walk away with a better understanding of the person whom over the next few years will see you at your best, worst and everywhere in between.

The other half of this equation is getting to know yourself. What are your expectations from a supervisor? What are your “relationship deal-breakers”? Having completed an undergraduate degree and a master’s degree you have likely had direct exposure to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. What worked or didn’t work in your previous experience? Ask yourself the questions outlined above. There really are no wrong or right answers, but your sanity

and success in a PhD program hinge heavily on understanding what you need out of the supervisory relationship.

So, when confronted with choosing your PhD supervisor, think beyond the obvious “shoulds” and “shouldn’ts” and please resist the urge, however tempting, to make your decision based on the roll of a fuzzy dice.

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