

This is a recreation of text from Dra. Nicole Cabrera Salazar's Twitter (@jazztronomy), from a thread pinned as of 2/11/2020.

The link to the thread is here: <https://twitter.com/jazztronomy/status/961763183345225728>

How to Decide Which Grad School to Attend. A Thread.

Many of my brilliant [#MarginSci](#) students are starting to get accepted to their top grad schools because OF COURSE. they are geniuses.

not surprised bc not only do they work hard and have unique perspectives, but they are KILLING the research game and are some of the best presenters I've ever seen. ON TOP OF THAT they wanna give back to their communities & care about equity and inclusion in STEM.

in other words, universities are going to have to show these students that they are worthy of their presence. so at the end of the day, how will they decide where to go?

the most important piece of advice I can give you is this: you know yourself better than any of us looking out for you. you have it everything you need in your spectacular hearts and minds to make the perfect decision for you.

do not worry about what school looks best on paper. don't fret about what school is the most prestigious. don't listen too long to what your advisor or your parents or your mentors want for you.

whatever you decide, you will have to live with that decision for the next 5-7+ years. you will have to learn from those professors, live in that city, and work with those colleagues. you will have to earn that salary, deal with that health insurance, & pay those university fees

and no one, not even your most beloved family member or your most trusted confidante, can know what would be best for you.

maybe you would secretly pass up that ivy league school so you can be closer to your family. maybe you need to go with the highest stipend so you can send part of it home every month. maybe you want to live in a coastal town because it reminds you of your home country.

no matter what your reasons are or how "illogical" they may seem to others, you are the only person who will have to live with this decision. seek counsel, talk to people, weigh your options. but what I tell all my students: no matter what you decide, I will support you.

so now that we're clear on that, how can you effectively compare your options to make the best possible decision?

1. if the school that has extended an offer invites you to visit, GO. being there in person is the best way to gauge the vibe. talk to other students (especially other [#MarginSCI](#)) one on one and ask them to be honest about their experiences.
2. ask the faculty about their equity and inclusion efforts. do they have an E&I committee? do they have a strategy for recruiting and retaining students like you? are they familiar with the literature on [#MarginSci](#)?
3. ask faculty and students about the support structure in the department. is there help available for finding housing? can the department fund you to attend conferences like SACNAS and NSBP? is there a mentoring program?
4. ask other students about department attitudes to careers beyond the academy. are they supportive of students participating in professional development such as workshops, classes, and conferences outside the field?
5. ask students about the typical workload and faculty attitudes toward work hours and vacation time. ask professors too, but be aware that they may not be totally honest and in some cases may even outright deceive students about their expectations.
6. pay attention to red flags. do the students seem generally happy? are you only hearing from privileged students? do some students seem more isolated?
7. ask the senior grad students how many other [#marginsci](#) there have been around in recent memory. are you the first? faculty will not volunteer this information and it will be extremely relevant.
8. during your visit, speak to some affinity groups on campus such as Out in STEM, Black Student Association, and the Disability office. is there room for grad students to participate?
9. ask about funding! is your grad stipend guaranteed? what are the conditions? will it be tied to teaching or research? will it be tied to whether your advisor has funding for you or not? does the dept provide support for applying to outside fellowships?
10. ASK ABOUT THE QUALIFIER EXAM. is the exam written? oral? is there a research component? is it based only on classes? are you required to take all the classes to prepare? how many chances do you get to pass? how is it graded? how many people have failed out of the program?

the qual is important, so I'm gonna stay here for a second. there are some departments that use the qualifier as a way to "weed out" students. this means they accept more students than they think will make it to the phd, then have a cutoff score for the qual

most departments with smaller cohorts don't do this, and they expect everyone to pass. but I've still seen students get pushed out of their program, by being discouraged to retake the qualifier after they did not pass the first time for example. stay away from those departments.

ask about what you're expected to do to prepare, how the department supports students before and during quals, and if you're exempt from duties like teaching during your qual semester.

the date of the exam is also important! does it happen in the middle of a semester when you're also expected to take a full load of classes, teach, and do research? if so, that shows poor regard for students' well being and mental health

is there a committee of faculty that will review your qual? do you get to choose it? if there is an oral exam, how do the students who have taken it recall feeling about it? i.e. did it feel like a humiliating experience? did the questions seem fair?

does the department discuss and review the qualifier exam *every year* and with input from actual grad students? are they open to changing the exam to make it more inclusive? is the exam ACCESSIBLE for disabled folks?

you get the idea. before you even start visiting schools, talk to current grad students at different departments and ask them what they wish they would have known about the qual, what they didn't like about it, or how it could be better. then ask your schools those questions

11. scope out the location and determine if it's right for you. if you're naturey, is there nature? is it close enough to your loved ones? do you have/could you form a support system there? can you imagine yourself living there for half a decade or more?

...is there a nearby airport? are flights to your home city affordable? do they have your favorite things (hiking/surfing/rock climbing/underwater hockey)? do you have access to food or restaurants from your country of origin? do u have access to people from your place of origin?

12. if you are 100% sure about the research you want to do, interview your potential advisors. ask them about their mentoring style, how they prefer to give and receive feedback, and what they expect from their students, including work hours and vacation time...

13. even if you're 100% sure about your research topic, BE OPEN to changing your mind. in my opinion, your relationship with your advisor is just as if not more important than the science. it can make or break your career, and you want to be sure you'll be supported.

something that a lot of people don't realize is that research skills are transferrable and there are a LOT of overlaps in science. my research on solar activity helped me understand young stars. my research on eclipsing binaries translated to exoplanet transits.

ask yourself why you love that topic! is it that you love simulations? python? observing? instruments? calculations? these are more broad and can be found in a wide variety of subjects, which makes it easier to find a more supportive advisor, if it comes down to that.

14. is the city AFFORDABLE? is the stipend enough to cover the cost of living + 10% for contingency and 10% for savings? (this is highly unlikely, but it's good to know from the beginning so you can start to plan). will you go into (more) student debt just to stay afloat?

15. does the university offer career services, such as free one-on-one career counseling? do they have experience or are they willing to work with science-to-industry career changes? only 1/5 of PhDs will end up with tenure-track faculty jobs (a conservative estimate!).

16. are there any faculty members that share your identity? are they interested in cultivating an inclusive environment? is there at least one professor (URM or not) who is supportive of [#marginsci](#)?

this is all I can think of for now. just remember that YOU are interviewing THEM. don't be afraid to ask hard questions, & when in doubt ask students instead of faculty. other [#MarginSci](#): what did I miss? what are some things you wish you had known before choosing a grad school?

one last thing: sadly, no one school will live up to all these very reasonable expectations. but these questions are tools for comparison, and it's good to know what you're getting into so you can plan accordingly.