



Advisor Selection: Advice from Faculty & Graduate Students

In any employment scenario, one has the opportunity to interview their potential employer and seek more information. Similarly with the advisor selection process, this opportunity allows graduate students to learn more about the advisors and research groups. However, unlike other employment scenarios, this process is placed in the hands of the students because the students can select their “employer” or advisor. Thus, it is critical to learn as much about the advisor and research group before “diving in.” Each student should selectively choose several advisors that meet their research interests and prepare questions to be asked regarding anything from research to conferences and publications to group and one-on-one meetings. This applies not only to advisors but also to the current group members. It is critical to familiarize yourself and visualize yourself working with the group. Ask whether your personality and work style mesh with those of the advisor and group members. Because by having some degree of rapport with the advisor and group members, the following years spent within the research group will be that much easier. So, it all boils down to asking questions and then asking more questions. In the end, you will have a better understanding of the group dynamics making selections easier and placing your mind at ease for the years to come. - Anand Patel

Selecting your advisor will dictate what you do for the coming years of your life until you graduate with your PhD. Picking an advisor that you get along with is very important because you will be interacting with them on an almost daily basis. Also, make sure that you are passionate about the research that you might do under and advisor's direction, or you may regret your decision down the road. Just remember that there are many types of advisors: some are hands on, some are hands off. Take some time to get to know the advisors you are considering and you will benefit greatly. - David Latshaw II

In my opinion, interest is the most important. Talk with the professor who you are really interested in and show your passion for the project. - Qian Zhou

The first thing to do when selecting an advisor is determine if you can stand doing the project they have planned for more than five years. If that is a yes, then take a few minutes to figure out the working environment that fits your style best (frequent meetings, infrequent contact, group meetings, etc). Talk to current members of the group and the advisor and discuss how things operate in the group. Are you expected to be in the office at certain times? How does your advisor handle vacation? How often will you meet with your advisor or group to discuss the current work? If all of these questions and others like them are answered satisfactorily, then look at the current group members and potential new members. Can you work with these people for the next few years? Is there a set of guidelines that determine office behavior (no talking, music, desk selection, etc.) that you can be comfortable with? If there is nothing that you disagree with or cannot work around, congratulations, you have chosen an advisor. Remember, for the next few years you have to work on a project with a boss who expects things a certain way and you have to deal with coworkers who have a system in place already that you will have to accept and adapt to, at least until you have seniority. Most important in all of this decision making process is to be honest with yourself about what you need and what you can tolerate. - Erin Phelps

The advisor selection process involves cooperation between students to place each individual in a research field where he/she feels most likely to succeed. The ideal situation occurs if each student is able to work for the advisor that they select as their #1 choice. This, however, does not always happen. It's important to understand that advisor "popularity" changes each year and that the advisor you choose may also be the top advisor choice of many others. It's important to stay open-minded when selecting your advisor and understand that having a "good advisor" does not mean you will be successful! Sometimes a field you may not think you're interested in can catch your attention. What's important is that each individual finds a research field that they are genuinely interested in and has an advisor that you can openly discuss your work with. The support of your advisor is usually much more important than their reputation! - Joshua Allen

Advisor selection is the most important selection for any graduate student. The reasons are self-evident years into the graduate student's research. However, the importance of advisor selection should not be realized several years into one's research, but rather up front through extensive one-on-one interviews with current students/advisors. This provides a nice overview of things to come in the next 4-5 years, and allows new graduate students to narrow their focus to a research topic of interest. Once a new graduate student has an advisor in mind, they should move forward in their thought progress to the various tasks at hand. - Joshua McClure

In my opinion, your advisor is the most important person in your PhD experience. I would recommend getting to know all the faculty that you may be interested in first at least on a casual basis before making a decision. Also speak with current students that work for those faculty because they will give a very good view on how things work in the lab and how hands off the faculty member is. For me I was not "in love" with the work that any faculty member was giving out as projects, so I made my decision much more about the person that I thought could get the most out of me and who I thought I would get along with well. So far I am very happy in my group, but I am just starting so speaking to older students who have been with their advisors a while should be enlightening. - Phillip Schoch

The personality and level of involvement of an advisor are arguably more important than the subject matter he or she researches. Without making a judgment as to whether an advisor is "good" or "bad", 4 years is too long to work for someone who does not mesh with your personality. And do not rely on an advisor's self assessment of his or her style! Ask their graduate students how often they meet with their advisor, the nature of their conversations (does the advisor just professes what should be done next, or is it a two-way conversation), and the level of flexibility the advisor allows with working hours, vacation time, due dates, etc. Also ask about the number of conferences students typically attend, how many papers they write before graduating, and how much extra-curricular work can be expected (help with writing proposals and grants, writing text books, mentoring undergraduates). - Sara Arvidson

Selecting an advisor is pretty nerve wrecking. The checklist for advisor selection that I used was: (1) professor; (2) area of research; (3) projects offered; (4) group. Most students will be considering the area of research and projects offered as a first priority, which is normal but do not forget to consider the people for whom you will be working and with which you will be working. Also, do not strictly consider the project, because projects can change and you most likely will have more than one so consider the field of research more than the project being offered. When meeting with professors that you want to work for, you should see how well you can communicate with that professor and get a feel for how they do things. You also have to consider how involved the professor is with his/her students. If you need someone that you can find most of the time and can meet with at least once a week to talk about your research, look at professors who have time for their students. The people in the research group should also be

considered. These will be the people that will mainly be training you on the equipment in the lab, helping you get started as well as people that you may potentially collaborate with on projects. You will also have to share space with them in the lab as well as the office, so go around and meet the students/post-docs in the different groups. Also, do not put down as one of your three choices someone that you do not want to work for; putting a professor down as a choice that you think you will help you get the one that you actually want can backfire. Think of it as putting down three first choices instead of a first, second and third choice. The professors will try to work things out so that everyone gets one of their three choices; however, just remember that you are as just as likely to get choice one as choice three. - Stephanie Lam

Do not forget to consider how a prospective advisor's personality and working style mesh with your own. You will hate graduate school if you are constantly embattled in conflict with your advisor, regardless of how interesting your thesis may be. Do not be afraid to pick a project that has multiple advisors. Although you have to report to multiple people, you have more opportunity for help, feedback, and (eventually) contacts for employment than everyone else. **Other Things:** Make friends with the older students. You will likely have the same questions regarding administrative procedures and life as an NCSU graduate student that they did, but they already know the answers. The University Graduate Student Association (UGSA) website is a useful resource. You can obtain funding for travel and thesis expenditures, answer a lot of general questions about graduate school, and learn more about opportunities across the entire campus community. - Jessica Jenkins