

# Questions to Ask of Potential Graduate School Advisors

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Graduate school is a big commitment. Students who are undertaking graduate study should interview their advisors or mentors to make sure it is a good fit. Independent Educational Consultants (IECs) can help prospective graduate students by sharing these important questions with them prior to an interview.

## 1. How many graduate students are you currently advising? International students? Ratio of men to women?

This question addresses the social dynamic of the advising group. It helps if there is at least one other English-speaking student in the mix. In typically male disciplines such as engineering (or vice versa), a mix of women and men often makes a more collegial group atmosphere. Students often learn from each other so having at least one other student in the group is helpful. However, grad students are expensive to support, so a professor of interest to you may not have funding for many students.

## 2. How many graduate students have graduated under your advisement in the last five years?

If this number is zero, you need to ask more questions about the professor's experience as a mentor.

## 3. How long does a graduate student usually take to finish?

This is an important question. Some advisors have extra requirements for publishing or experimental work that may take a very long time to fulfill. You should also ask other graduate students in the department about this.

## 4. How much funding is available for your students? Are there teaching or research fellowships available? Are they competitive? Will the funding last as long as the graduate program?

Financial support is important to the successful completion of graduate school. For budgeting purposes you should

obtain specific answers to these questions. It is horrible to be part way through a program and realize that you don't have enough money to finish.

## 5. Are there funds available for students to travel to professional conferences?

Conferences provide valuable opportunities for students to network with possible future employers or collaborators. Some programs have rules about travel support that are tied to presenting research.

## 6. Do your students share authorship on papers that you publish? Are they ever senior authors?

This can be an area of contention because research ideas come to fruition. It is extremely frustrating to have a major advisor take all of the credit for student work. It is best to be clear about these boundaries from the beginning.

## 7. What are your research interests? Do you have specific topics in mind for a potential PhD student?

Prior to the interview, you should have looked up some of the professor's publications to get an idea of the types of things he or she is working on. The research should spark an interest in you. After all, you will spend years digging into the topic so if you are not excited about the research, it will be a hard journey in graduate school.

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