Week 2: Choosing a Research Group and Advisor
A discussion of what students should look for in a research advisor and group

Instructors Outline

Outline: (Our Backgrounds):
Each of us (Erin, Dawn, Jian, Jingqiu, myself) give a short introduction of ourselves and a
discussion of how we chose a research group/advisor, include the following in your discussion-
defining the differences of importance placed on issues back when you were a first year students
verse what you now consider important.

♦ What questions did you asked then and in hindsight what question(s) would you ask now.
(what questions did you feel were most important back then verse questions that you now
feel would have been more important to ask – if your questions of importance are different
from then and now explain why, what changed.)

♦ Was funding a strong influence or factor when choosing a particular project or group? How
strong (ie more or less important than the particular group or project?). (this could also
include your teaching experience if you were not funded)

♦ Teaching expectations (also goes along with funding as well) Was it more important to be in
a lab where you would not be teaching verse a lab with the project you want but involves
having to teach for your funding. (Jian you have a nice positive spin on this if you could
mention it)

♦ Did you talk to the students of the lab before joining? If so, was it helpful? Did meeting with
lab group help sway you to a particular lab? If you didn’t, do you wish that you had met with
the group beforehand and what would you have liked to learn from them?

♦ If you did meet with students of particular labs, what were some of the questions you
asked them.

♦ Talk about what type of lab and research advisor was a good “Fit” for you (including their
level of involvement with you as an advisor, their work ethic, their requirements, the lab
atmosphere - group activities and outings, the group cohesiveness, dynamics).

♦ This would also be a good place to talk about the fact that once you chose an advisor, if
by chance you find out that they are not a good fit for you, that all is not lost -you don’t
have to quite or drop out…or live miserably with the decision – there are options and
many people with to whom you can talk, including the DAC committee. (Erin this would
be good to explain you experience of switching labs – if you like – since it had a very
positive outcome).

♦ Talk about how important or unimportant the work time requirements of your lab were
towards your decision (and has that opinion changed).
♦ Also if you came across limited lab slots as a decision, please talk about that and the impact it had on your decisions.

♦ Was the amount of lab space an issue for you (ie do you have your own bench your hood of concern? Or it is now)

♦ Did you consider the number of graduate students a particular advisor has graduated?

♦ Did you consider where the past graduates of the lab have gone (ie # going to academia verse industry or other fields? – did this play a role in your decision? Do you think it should have)

♦ Did you consider or place high value on the background of your advisor (ie where they received their degrees from)? Or their connections or collaborations with other labs and groups? Were these a factor? Or should they have been?

♦ Talk about an advisor's flexibility. Was this of high importance? Especially about vacation times, attending research conferences, or the number of hours or times in the day/night that you come into the lab and work. (Jingqu this would be good to talk about the fact the gill is flexible towards you traveling home for a month each year and that you make the time up by working the weekends). Also if any of you work odd hours or over the night this would be good to talk about that flexibility.

♦ Was being able to attend conferences and meetings of high priority with you were selecting an advisor? Did your advisor cover the cost? Have you gone to meetings were the advisor didn’t cover the cost because they didn’t have the funding – was this a big issue for you?

♦ Also if you know of alternative funding (like using Katinka) this would be good to mention it.

♦ How important towards your final decision was the project in which you were interested? And if not important, should it have been more of a priority? Has your project changed or evolved from what you originally thought it would be?

♦ Also mention whether having a post doc in the lab was of importance to you initially? And is it something now? Or something you later found out was importance? (also undergraduates)

Talk about the environment of your lab. Does your group do outing or activities together? Is/was this important?

Make sure when you are talking to be very careful as to not “trash” a particular lab or “air out your own laundry” about your lab…but at the same time try to be frank and honest with your responses and answers.
Also be careful not to sound condescending. Be aware of how the audience is receiving what you are saying and be prepared to adjust or modifying what you want to say if it seems that they might be taking it negatively.

Besides encouraging the students to recognize their own abilities and expectations towards finding the best match in a research advisor and research group, also stress the importance that students change and evolve over the course of their graduate lives…… and that one needs to make sure they really like and enjoy the project because they will be struggling with it for a very long time.

Also let them know that a lot of advisors tailor themselves towards the students and adjust to what each particular student needs… so when talking to group members one might get different opinions about a particular advisor from the different group members…. so it is important to talk to more than one group member to get a good idea about the lab group.

Also, be careful not to cause them to limit their possibilities when they are considering their expectations and own abilities…. Don’t let a weakness in a particular area of their background prevent them from choosing a project that is of interest to them…in which they might have a weak background (good examples here are my lab and Amy in Sean’s lab). This would also be a good place to talk about switching or changing your field of interest from when you initially applied to graduate school (Erin and I can talk about the fact we came in as org students switching to biochem…and then genetics for Erin). We want them to feel that they can join any lab or do any project of interest even if their background is weak.

I have also been thinking about the format and think it would be best if we all address and answered one topic/question at a time. We could initially start our topic discussions by pulling some of their submitted questions

I have also been reconsidering handing out a list of questions. I am thinking that they can write down the questions of interest themselves if they so choose or desire, but that we DON’T need to supply them a list.

If you guys think we should give them a list of questions, then we really need to start pooling that list together.

Research Saturday Schedule:
Sept 20th: Coker, Costello, Mohr, Mullin, Panek
Sept 27th: Grinstaff, Snyder, Straub, Tullius
October 4th: Keyes, Elliott, Schaus, Ziegler
Oct 11th: Caradonna, Georgiadis, Jones, Porco, Smith

Potential Questions of Importance for Students to Ask when Considering a Research Group and Advisor:
1. 
2. 
Please provide me (email me) any and all questions that you feel students should be either asking the students in the lab or the potential advisor.
These can be questions on anything you can think of….we can decide on the final list later.

1. Research Saturdays
2. rotations
3. funding expectations
4. teaching requirements and expectations,
5. lab atmosphere,
6. time requirements,
7. time working each week,
8. time to graduation,
9. vacation leave,
10. support for travel to meetings.
11. finding the best match in a Research Advisor.
List of Questions provided by the Students: