

Questions that you should ask

Picking a PhD program is very difficult. Typically, at some point during the process, students are asked if they have any questions. Knowing the right question to ask and who to ask it to is critical. Below are many possible questions. While this list is definitely more relevant for STEM programs, there may be overlap into other fields. Also, you will notice that some questions appear more than once. It is always a good idea to ask multiple people the same question and correlate answers. Also, these questions are not in any kind of priority order.

General program questions (could be asked of anyone):

- Is there an advisor rotation process or are students admitted directly into a PI's group? When are advisor-advisee assignments finalized?
- What is the academic process for getting a PhD? Specifically, what courses are required, what are the exams (and when are they taken), and what is the graduation rate? If I fail one of the exams, can I re-take them?
- Can I do research with faculty outside of the department?
- What is the average time to a PhD? (In the program and in any specific groups that you are considering?)
- How are students supported (RA/TA/other)? What is included in support (stipend, tuition, healthcare)? What is the stipend? Is support guaranteed for the duration of a PhD?
- What department or university resources are available to students? For example, are there conference travel grants?
- How does the department or school oversee a student's progress in their PhD?

Specific faculty whose groups you are interested in:

- What ongoing research projects are you most excited about and are you looking to recruit students for?
- How does a new PhD student get started on research? What would my first semester or two look like?
- What are your criteria for completing a PhD? Do you have defined quantitative or qualitative metrics that you expect your advisees to achieve?
- Are you planning to accept students next year? If so, how many and what is my chance of being one of those?
- What is the average time to a PhD? (In the program and in any specific groups that you are considering?)

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- How are students supported throughout their PhD in your group (RA/TA/other)?
- How often do you meet with your advisees individually and/or as a group?
- How would you describe your mentoring style and how does it contribute to the lab culture?
- What do you value in a PhD student?
- Where do your group alums go after graduation?
- Are there current or former group members that I can talk to?

Current/Former PhD students in the group and in other groups:

- How does a new PhD student get started on research? What was your first semester or two like?
- What was your background going into the program and how did you find the coursework?
- How would you describe Prof X's mentoring style? How often do you met with them (in-person, virtually)? Do you interact other ways?
- If the group is large, how is the group structured? (Do you interact directly with the PI or with a sub-team leader? Is the group split into silos?)
- What is the average time to a PhD in Prof. X's group? How long was yours? What contributed to this time?
- How are students financially supported throughout their PhD?
- Are there sufficient resources to perform research? (both experimental resources – like facilities – and financial resources to buy equipment/materials and travel to conferences)
- What are the lab culture and dept/school culture like?
- What is the attrition rate of PhD students (from the specific research group and the dept)? Why do students leave? (Or, if there is a high rate of students changing into the PI's group, why?)