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Transcript for Back to School series, Season 2 Episode 3: "How to Apply for Grad School Part 1"

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STEMculture Podcast 0:00

[Intro music]

Will 0:17

Hello everyone!

Dani 0:19

Helllloooooo [Dani, like Mrs. Doubtfire, lots of laughter]

Will 0:25

Oh this is a great way to start an episode. So you're here because you're interested in applying for grad school, or interested in finding the right advisor for you. Today, you've got

Dani 0:35

Dani

Brooke 0:36

Brooke

Will 0:37

and Will, we're going to chat about how the thought you put in before you go to graduate school will help you get into a program where you can be as successful as possible. And enjoy the journey of graduate school,

Brooke 0:50

We often speak about how hard graduate school is, and it is hard, not gonna lie. But you may be trying to do something totally new. And even your advisor may not be able to help you with some of the details of your project while you're in graduate school. This is why graduate school should be hard because you're literally creating knowledge.

Dani 1:13

Graduate School should not be hard because you've gone to a university, a program, or advisor that doesn't provide the right support for you. But people run into this all the time. So maybe you're part of an extremely competitive lab as a person that doesn't thrive under those conditions, or maybe your advisors not the right match for you. But by the time you figure that out, you may have already moved

halfway across the country. This episode is to help you navigate the process before it gets to that point. So you can focus on making progress in your career.

Will 1:43

This episode goes out to all you lost puppies, kittens, and undergrads, may you find your forever home.

Brooke 1:50

PS adopt, don't shop.

Will 1:53

Come on people.

Brooke 1:54

Today we are talking about finding a grad program. Once you have decided to apply to grad schools, there are four main stages that you may go through. The first one, you need to figure out specifically what your goals are for grad school, then research an advisor, research the program, the department and the university to see if they all meet your needs, which we will further discuss. Number two, prepare your application packet, take the GRE and submit your application. Three, campus visits. So you're going to get an in person vetting of a potential advisor, your lab mates, the program, the department, the university, and four, shortly after the campus visit, you may get an offer letter. So figure out what your deadline to make your decisions are. And usually those are around April, usually, and then finally make your decision. So it's a really long process to get through all of these steps. So we are going to begin. Today we will focus on the first stage: your goals for grad school and questions to ask.

Will 3:04

So the first thing you need to do is figure out what your goals and your needs are in going to grad school so that you can find potential PIs [primary investigators], programs, etc. that will be good for you. This is super important. Because ultimately, you want to get something out of grad school. So the more thought you put into this stage, the easier the following phases that we talked about will be. So what are some kinds of goals that you might have? Just in general? What kind of job do you want to get as a result of completing your graduate degree? Do you want to get a position in government, maybe industry, or academia? And then what kind of needs are we talking about? Just generally, things like logistic and personal needs. Think: Is this graduate degree actually necessary for the career that you want? Where are you able to move? What kind of financial needs do you have? What kind of healthcare insurance do you need? Do you have any family considerations? So those are some different kinds of logistic and personal needs that you might consider? And then what about academic and intellectual needs? What kind of work environment is best for you? What kind of advising style do you want? How important is the specific kind of science that you want to do to you, all these kinds of things, your goals and needs, should drive the kind of research that you do when you're looking for grad programs. So to get into some of this stuff a little bit in more detail, let's talk a little bit about if we: Will, Brooke and Dani, were doing it again, if we were knowing what we know now applying to graduate school, what kind of things would we focus on.

Brooke 5:02

I think I can share kind of why I approached it the way I did. And the way I probably should have approached it differently. My approach was more because I have a family. And I really was aware that a big huge move would make a lot of - I guess, it would make life very, very difficult for myself and my family. And so I would have been moving into a completely new area and a new program and dealing with also navigating all of the newness for other people as well. So I made the decision based off of that I could stay in the same location that I did my undergrad at and go into the program. I think that if I were to do it differently, I would have followed everything that's laid out in this episode moving forward with

my family needs, also tied into that. So I think I would have vetted my professor, my original advisor, much more intensely than I did,

moving forward.

Will 6:23

Yeah, I think that's completely legitimate. And I think that even if you are limited to one university, there are probably 10, or more science programs that you could look at at that one university. And there are dozens and dozens of advisors that you could look at. So if you're sort of willing to relax your requirements for the very specific topics of research that you want to look at, even at one university, you can almost certainly find a fit that works well for you. So for me, when I was applying grad school, I had already realized that, that I really sort of wanted to dive into science and become an academic. And I really wanted to find something where I was going to get to work on mathematical abstractions of biological systems. So I had that as my, my primary goal, but I don't think I did a really good job, at least when it came to, like Brooke said, vetting the advisor. I don't think I did a really good job of evaluating whether or not the advisors would be able to support me in the kind of work that I wanted to do. And that's super important. I think, given what my priorities were, I didn't have a family at the time. I was footloose and fancy free. And, you know, I in fact, did move 1500 miles in my little Subaru station wagon. And, you know, sort of started a whole new chapter, thinking that I was going down this very heady life of the mind, you know, academic monk kind of thing. And it didn't quite work out that way. If I had gone through a process, like the one that we're describing, and really done my due diligence, it may have worked out differently. I think I would have given myself a better chance.

Brooke 8:28

I have a quick question. Because I know that you said we want to or like that people should be know what your goals are before going in know what you want to do in the end. But what happens if you don't know what you want to be when you grow up?

Dani 8:45

I think that's absolutely okay. There's, there's so many people out there that we don't know, we might have an idea of what we want to do. But let's say all three things that we mentioned, government, industry, academia, those all sound cool, to you. That's also good to know. You could even say, you know, I know, I definitely don't want to go into academia. And that narrows it down. And that's really good, too. So then you can look at your university that you might be interested in looking at. That, okay, well, it seems like they only have resources for people that want to go into academia. So I know that that might not be the university for me. Or if I do go there that I'm going to have to find other professional development activities.

Will 9:26

Yeah, so you in that situation, you know that you like science, you know that you want to do something that involves science, but you don't know specifically too much more than that. That's fine. Absolutely. And actually going through the process that we're describing, and thinking about all these things, and then sort of applying your understanding of what you do know that you want to your search for programs and advisors may actually teach you a little bit more about what you what you think you might want. And then, you know, the other thing is that you can always focus on skills. So even if you're not sure what kind of programming you want, or what kind of job you want to have, you want to pick up some technical skills on the way, and you can certainly do that in a graduate program. It's a great place to do that, which we talked about a little bit in our previous episode.

Dani 10:26

Yeah, I was gonna say, do you mind if I step in?

Will 10:28
No, go ahead.

Dani 10:28

I was gonna say Brooke often does this where she does job searches, not because she's looking for a job right now. But because she wants to know what skills she needs for jobs that she sees that she likes that she wants in the future. So if you find that you're not - You know you want to go to grad school, but maybe you're not quite sure what job you want at the end of grad school. Start job searching, and see what there is out there for you.

Brooke 10:51

Yeah, I just such a side note, I noticed today that Nature came out with a paper that basically is saying that graduate schools are not doing enough to prepare students for jobs to look at jobs outside of academia. And I think that's really great that that's being acknowledged by these higher publications.

Will 11:12

Yeah, absolutely. So another possibility is that you might go through this process and start to think, man, maybe grad school is not such a good fit for me. And that's fine, too. There are lots of things that you can do, probably, with the degree that you're working on now if you're in a STEM undergrad position, that are worthwhile and satisfying. And you can always decide next year. And I think that from my experience, if I could go back, I would have probably gone that route. And, you know, maybe try to find a job where I could use my undergrad degrees a bit more, and had some more time to find a program that I was really more confident was good for me.

Dani 11:56

Awesome. So at this point, you know, hopefully you have assessed your goals and needs in moving forward. And now it's time for what you should look for in your research. So let's talk about the preliminary search that you're going to be doing. So you need to look for the fulfillment of your goals, how do you see your goals reach fruition, look at the restrictions and needs specifically when you look for your potential PIs programs and universities. So quite a bit of this episode has to do with choosing the right university and program and advisor for you. In particular, as you've already heard, Brooke and Will mention choosing the right advisor for you is incredibly important. And I knew that when I was applying for grad school that the right advisor can really make your program because the wrong advisor can break it. So and it's because you will have a really close working relationship with this person for many years. So keeping that in mind when you're trying to think about the program or potential PIs. One good way to do this is to read papers in your field. So when you read a paper about, let's say plant biology, and you're like, wow, this paper is super cool and interesting, who wrote it? And you might see that the last author, it might be from some university and maybe the first author's from that same university that might likely be a PI-PhD relationship. But that might be a university that you'll want to look into if you're interested in plant biology. There's also - you might be able to find kind of a recent review in a journal, you know what papers are mentioned that are current and important in that review. You also want to find current papers because that means that these are papers that these people are - or these are topics that these people are working on at that moment

and not something old.

Will 13:52

The name and the university gives you the entree into looking at their lab web page, which should have their contact information on it and you should, especially when someone piques your interest, you should save it while you're going through the search. So you

got it later.

Dani 14:05

Next, you might want to look at department websites of the faculty members that you made a list for. So you might want to look at their bios and their web pages. Sometimes they don't have bios or web pages. So that might make it a little bit more difficult. But this is becoming more and more common. It actually might say on their website if they're even looking for graduate students, if you - if they are, that's a really, that's a boon for you. That's really good news for you. And if it says that they're not, it doesn't mean definitely no, but it's much less likely that they're going to take a grad student this year. When you're on a department website, take a look at the other faculty at that university, there might be other people there that you would be interested in working with. There might even be research groups and multiple faculty working in the same group that you could work with. And sometimes there might even be inter-departmental institutes that are dedicated to related group of fields. So you can look at professors at those institutes as well. Another thing you can take a look at on the website is the graduate student or the graduate school handbook. This will have general information about the program. So like how many units you're going to have to take, and a list of requirements to finish your masters or your PhD. And there will be really specific information about what classes are offered. Something else you can keep an eye out for if kind of none of that is really working for you. There are scientific societies out there. And often they have job boards. Also, LinkedIn has a surprising number of job listings. So that is a good - good to make an account there it is totally free. And just searching through the job listing. There's often PhD opportunities and even postdoc opportunities there. There's also forums and list serves that you can find postings for. So forums like Ecolog-L or the Texas A&M forum. I had I heard about my, my PhD through a listserv, which I have to explain now, because listserv is really old fashioned, but you basically sign up and you get - kind of every time somebody sends an email to the listserv, once it's approved, you get sent to everybody that signed up for that. So you might hear about new papers, PhD opportunities, internship opportunities, that kind of thing. Another really great resource that I feel is often underutilized is: do you have a mentor or advisor now, if you do ask them if they know of anyone that's looking for students that they can really recommend you. Or if they know of a particular University, that would be a really good fit for your interests. So use those connections. And the last thing here I want to mention is, is: how many programs do you want to apply to? You might think, you know, as many as possible is great, but each application costs money. So you might not be able to afford as many as you would like to apply to. There's also a lot of research that goes into looking at each university, clearly as I - as we've just talked about. And each application might be slightly different. And it takes time to apply to those as well. So I wanted to ask my fellow hosts here today, how you investigated the programs you applied to and were interested in?

Brooke 17:22

Well, like I had said, I stayed at the same university. And so I was familiar with the program, because I was already kind of plugged in to the program. So I also had the luxury of asking graduate students who were already in the program, what to expect and how to apply and how to navigate that process. So I was really lucky in that respect.

Will 17:52

I mostly went and looked for mathematical biology institutes. And then I did some individual PI searches. But I ended up going where I went, sort of by chance. So my particular search method didn't, didn't lead directly to where I ended up going.

Dani 18:21

I did a - I did a shit ton of research when I was first looking. So when I was an undergrad, and then when I was finishing up my Masters, I was looking at a lot of different places. And I honestly would Google like marine mammal research university. [laughter] And that is because that's what I wanted to focus on, because I think marine mammals are dope. But so then from there, I could end up like whittling down kind of what universities I was looking at, what would have been a really good idea is if I had created a

list, because what ended up happening is I just kept looking at the same universities over and over again and wasn't taking good notes about like which one I could apply to or which one - because some universities are actually only, they only provide master's degrees, they don't provide PhDs. So that was kind of a learning moment for me like whoops, can't go there because they don't get PhDs. And I definitely emailed and called, or emailed potential advisors first and then might have talked with them on the phone.

Will 19:21

And you had your masters when you were doing your search. Is that right?

Dani 19:24

for my Yeah, for my PhD?

For -Yeah,

Will 19:26

Yeah

Dani 19:26

Yeah. So I do think that helped me figure out much more what I was looking for.

Will 19:32

Yeah.

Dani 19:33

And so I knew I wanted someone that was really excited about me, as a, as a potential person as a potential scientist. So I was really, but I'd also been living my own life for a few years. And so I knew that wherever I moved, I wanted to feel like I could be comfortable there and be happy there.

Will 19:54

I wanted to just because you, we were just talking about masters versus PhD, and we're talking about program searches. One of the things that we've mentioned before is that oftentimes, master's programs are not necessarily funded. But I still think that the masters is a really worthwhile thing to do, especially if you can find one that's funded. And then there are PIs that have masters positions that are funded because they have money. And if you can find something like that, or a funded master's program, what you end up with is sort of an intermediate where, if you're not 100%, sure, you get to work on a project, that's sort of a one year project instead of a four year project, and get a feel for it on terms that are a little less drawn out.

Brooke 20:51

Yeah, I agree. I, I tell my current PI all the time, I wish I had a masters because I think that that's a great time to grow into or mature as a scientist, or just not even just a scientist, but as an academic. Because there's a lot of things that you learn, you know, foundations of writing and foundations in taking a project through and tell your thesis, you know, things that I think I would have really benefited from not only that, but learning a lot of techniques that I am having to learn now, it would have been great to be able to come in straight into a program feeling comfortable and confident in my techniques, and not spending so much time learning them. So I really wish that I had had that time to mature in a master's program.

Dani 21:45

Yeah.

You know, a lot of a lot of departments now and don't even like so in chemistry for instance.

Brooke 21:53

Yeah, that's a very good point.

Dani 21:54

There's zero like they're not masters offered in chemistry or physics.

Will 21:58

I think some of that might be institution, I

Brooke 22:00

think it's specific to our institution, I do have friends elsewhere, that that's all they need. And that's where they stay in chemistry is, is with a masters because they can get really great jobs with a masters. So I think it's specific to our department.

Dani 22:17

Okay

Will 22:17

I'm sure that there are some other institutions that are like that. And I think that sometimes institutions make a financial decision to bring people into the PhD track exactly for the reason that it's less turnover, the same cost to them.

Dani 22:34

What I'm seeing too, is rotations becoming more common. And it's and I have nothing to back this up. So let me know if you have heard differently, but with rotations, it seems like people just come straight from undergrad, do rotations, and then I mean, they they come right into a PhD do some rotations, and then they're off. Rolling along with their PhD without that masters.

Will 22:57

Yeah, I mean, I think rotations are - so what rotations are, for, for the folks out there in TV Land. It's been a while since I said that, you're all welcome. [chortling]

Dani 23:09

Thank you.

Will 23:11

Rotations are when you enter a - usually a PhD program, because masters are sort of too short for rotations. When you enter a PhD program, you'll rotate between several labs, working with those lab groups for maybe a month, usually in your first semester or your first year, and try to tackle a very small project, even if it's just learning a particular technique, learning a little bit about the stuff that they do in the background, and then you transition to another lab and repeat the process. At the end of that time, at the end of your rotations, you pick a major advisor/a PI/a lab. And that's where you finish your PhD.

Dani 23:58

And hopefully they pick you

Brooke 23:59

Yeah, I think that's a really great way to put it, because you're getting exposure to a lot of different techniques and equipment, like you said, but you're also, hopefully, contributing enough that you're

getting authorship on some of the papers that are coming out of those projects that you're, you know, learning with,

Dani 24:26

You know, some universities will do - so our university does just a one semester rotation. So people are rotating multiple - in multiple labs for just one semester, but other universities will do a whole year. Yep.

Will 24:39

Yeah. Yeah. And I think that with both the masters and the rotations, one of the sort of subtle things that you get out of it is there, I don't think that there's really any way to understand what a grad program is like. So the, you know, the people, the labs, the department culture, all that stuff without actually being there. So you can do all this work. But showing up and spending time there and working there with the people, I think probably like a lot of other jobs is ultimately the the true test of whether or not it's good for you.

You've done some preliminary research, you've identified a number of scientists and programs that might be good fits for you. What's your next step?

Brooke 25:22

So now it's time to reach out and contact your potential PI. Because you really want to confirm that this will be a good PI for you in many ways, but not just that the PI is good for you, but is the university something that you could thrive at as well. So after you've searched out who could be a potential advisor, it's really important that you send them an email, of course, look on their website, see if they have any special instructions on how to contact them. But mostly, it's just a general good practice to reach out and email them right out just kind of a simple clear email of what it is you are looking for. And you know, you're looking for a advisor at a program that has x, y, and z that you've determined is right for you. In this email, it's probably a good idea to include a resume or a CV. And if you don't know what a CV is, it's essentially a very long resume. But it's only focused on your academic endeavors. And so if you've also authored any papers, you can include those papers, so they can take a look and see at the type of research that you've done. If you have not authored any papers, that's okay, hundred percent okay, I didn't have any authorship when I applied.

So you won't necessarily be able to say if your advisor is 100%, right for you, I think Will and I have laid out pretty clearly that we both chose advisors initially that were not a good fit. And sometimes that's even hard, when you do ask a lot of questions to make sure that they're the right advisor for you. But there are questions that you can ask that could really help you kind of navigate this portion of it. Because ultimately, you know, you are, of course, probably nervous reaching out, you want to interview for a position or make yourself look the best that you can for this position. But you're also vetting them and making sure that they are right for you. Because it's a it's a really long time. Graduate School is a very long time frame. And you need to make sure that you will get out of it exactly what you need. So we're going to talk a little bit about expectations, what you should expect from the advisor and what your advisor will be expecting from you.

And then I think that it's really good to know how many graduate students have graduated from their lab, and then how long it took those graduate students to graduate? That's a very important question. And then on top of that, where - what are they doing after graduation, were they like no more, I'm not in academia anymore. I'm not doing science anymore. [chuckling] I'm not, you know, I don't want to think about that anymore. Because that might indicate that there was a negative experience. But if you see a lot of people going out and doing a lot of great work from their lab, you could probably make an assumption that it was a pretty good experience for those graduate students who did graduate. So another really important question is, how will you be funded? Does, you know, will you be doing a teaching assistantship to be funded? Or will you do they have money that will allow you to do a research

assistantship, which means that you don't have to teach you can spend your time investing into your research in in their lab, and oftentimes, it is the advisor who bring in grant money, and they write that into the grant for research research assistantship for you. So and then oftentimes, you'll want to know does that PhD track? Will you have tuition waived, and what type of stipend and that ties back into the TA assistantship, or the research assistantship? Sometimes masters tracks, they may not have tuition covered, and that's something that you really need to look into beforehand, as well. So I think that if I had followed a lot of these things, I probably wouldn't have had such a rough rocky start the first year of my program, I think I would have been able to that the lab I was going into much, much better.

Will 31:54

Yeah, a lot of these questions are great to ask your PI but another thing you can do, especially once you think okay, maybe this PI is going to be good for me is you can look at other people in the lab, like other grad students that are currently there, or lab managers maybe. And other people in the department, like the graduate program director, or equivalent. And you can ask some of these questions about funding and general, things like that to them as well. And you can also ask other general questions of them, like things about professional development programs and other kinds of programs, writing help, statistics help, other things like this, that might be available at the university, other people, if your PI doesn't know these things, may be able to answer these questions for you. Your, your potential PI, might be able to point you in those directions, but you can also - so go and look on their website, again, look on the department's website, maybe look on the graduate school's website and identify some other people at that university that you can talk to you to find out about programs that you're interested in.

Fees and costs as students: sometimes universities, when you're looking at the page for prospective students are not super transparent about what student fees they might charge. So they tell, they're telling you that you're going to make, you know, X dollars per year, but then they know that they're going to turn around and take, you know, 5% of that back as a student fee. This is a common gripe of graduate students at our institution. And I think that everybody should at least be informed before they show up so they can make a smart financial decision. Another thing you might think about is what kinds of social and personal support you would like to have at a university in a campus that you're going to be at. So for example, are there diversity and inclusion centers that are relevant to the issues that matter to you on that campus? Another question that you might ask of various groups, and ask about people that you're contacting is, there may be a second or several other potential PIs in the same program in related programs at the same university, that just on the chance that this first professor that you've identified doesn't really work out for you, for whatever reason, there might be other people that are right there that you can transition work with, or partially transition and work with. So you don't have to move schools because that initial contact didn't work out. So you guys, yeah. Dani, do you have anything to add?

Dani 35:04

Yeah. And so we had kind of discussed this before we started recording today. But when would you all ask these kinds of questions?

Will 35:16

Yeah, so to come out strongly and present one side of it. I think that, of course, you don't want to make an annoyance of yourself. So it's a good idea to sort of measure the questions, don't ask them all at once. And start with the things that are most important to you. But as you sort of narrowed down the range of people that you might work with, you know, you figured out okay, yes, they have projects for me to work on. Yes, there's funding available. Yes, this person has a personality that will mesh or advisors style that were mesh, mesh with my personality, I think, more or less, all of these questions could be asked, even before you put it in an application in some form or another according to your priorities.

Brooke 36:08

Yeah, um, I do agree, I think you need to feel out if, if you even like what the professor's doing, but I think, from my perspective, I think because I am not just a singular entity heading into grad school, I

Will 36:30

You are Legion. [Laughter]

Brooke 36:32

I am Legion, yes. I am thinking about you know, at the time I two kids who are in school, and it's not an easy move, and then moving with my husband's job, and family and business, all of those things, I would have probably been, I would have benefited from asking all of the questions up front and being very clear, and being very positive that this was a good experience for me to move everyone. So I think I would have used all of these questions beforehand, in order to make sure that I'm not taking time out of my life, taking time away from my family, to even go move on to a campus visit, or it needs to be a really, really good fit for me in order to make the decision for graduate school. So I wish that I had vetted more. But I think it's important for, for my - somebody in my position, I think it would be really beneficial for somebody to vet extensively before taking the time to invest even more into that lab and into that advisor. But that's coming from my perspective, in my situation.

Dani 37:57

Yeah. And that's that's the reason I asked too, because we we found out pretty quickly when we were kind of chatting about this before we started recording that we all have very different experiences with when we would have when we preferred to ask these questions. Because for me, it was my third year applying for a PhD that I did finally get accepted. And so I was honestly exhausted. And I knew the most important questions to me. And so I kind of asked a few questions and spoke with the potential PI before applying. But once I came to the campus, that's when I got like, really aggro with my questions. [Laughter] That's a 90s term. It means aggressive in case you don't know.

Will 38:43

It's also a Video Game Nerd.

Dani 38:46

agro, yeah. That's a that means a Video Game Nerd.

Will 38:50

No, no, no, it's a term that video game nerds would know. Especially I think,

Dani 38:53

welp

Will 38:53

think they use a lot in World of Warcraft.

Dani 38:56

Okay,

Will 38:56

related games

Dani 38:57

might have outed who my friends were in high school. [Laughter]

So that's, that's why I asked because we all depending on what we were looking for, and kind of where we wanted to put that effort... [to Will] Did you ask questions beforehand?

Will 39:11

I did. I did. And I asked some of these questions you know about about projects and stuff. But I didn't, because the thing that really mattered the most to me was having a sort of a intellectually enriching experience. I didn't ask enough questions. Because when I got here, it turned out that the thing that I was supposed to work on was really not in the purview of my initial advisor. And that wasn't clear, initially. If I had done more work, and had better, more specific technical questions to ask before I accepted, I don't think that it would have held up, and I would have known. Of course, hindsight is 2020

Dani 39:59

Yeah I was gonna say, don't be so hard on yourself. Because I mean, that's why we're making this episode, right, is so that other people don't have to know, somehow just from the ether, that they should be asking all these questions. We've come up with these questions, because we have had, you know, Brooke and Will in particular, have had bad situations with advisors that now they're looking back thinking, Oh, if I'd asked these questions, exactly, like Will just said, like, it wouldn't have held up. Red flags would have been everywhere.

Will 40:26

Yeah. And you're never - I mean, you're never going to be 100% sure.

Dani 40:31

Yep. So now, having discussed a lot of these questions here, for each of us, let's talk about kind of, in retrospect, what we wish we would have asked our advisors, or what we did ask our advisors that helped reveal red or green flags.

Will 40:46

Yeah, so the thing I just mentioned about specific questions about the proposed project that I was coming in to do, and how I would be supported in doing that.

Dani 41:00

Yes, if you felt like if you'd asked those questions, then you would have, you would have seen kind of that that wasn't very well planned out.

Will 41:08

Yeah. So what happened was basically, I explained before I came from my campus visit, I explained what my interests were. And my advisor that I ended up coming in working with, suggested a sort of a category of, of project. And then when I got here, we - meaning so the whole lab group, during the lab meeting, read a couple of papers about the topic that he had proposed, I work on. And then I came, and six months after I got here, he told me that he couldn't support that work. So if I had had, at least, if I had had specific correspondence with him, preferably in email, at that time, I could have said, Well hold on a second. This is exactly the reason that I moved 1500 miles across half a continent left my entire family and everything I've known behind, to come to this program. So this is not okay. And I'm going to leave now. [Laughter] But at the time, I was sort of like starry-eyed and bushy-tailed. And I'm using a lot of phrases like that: footloose fancy-free, starry-eyed and bushy-tailed, and

Brooke 42:34

I love it.

Will 42:36

I was so gung ho - it's never gonna stop! [Laughter]

I just don't know how to talk in normal language. So I use the fanciful kind. Yeah, so I was I was so invested in, in, in graduate school and the experience and getting my PhD in being a productive member of the lab and all these different things, a good lab citizen, it's actually a phrase that that that he used. I was like, Okay, all right. Little little change in course, here, but it's gonna be okay, without really thinking about what I wanted.

Brooke 43:14

Yeah, yeah. And I think, a pretty blaring red flag that I look back on is the right off the bat. When I was being recruited by this PI, he was basically talking smack about his other grad students. And in that same in that same, basically that he thought I would be a good fit, because I obviously didn't have those other qualities.

Dani 43:49

What a dick.

Brooke 43:50

Yeah, I mean, that should have been like, walk away, walk away now. But you're so entrenched already, in those conversations, and I just want to get into a program. And and I think a lot of a lot of the reasons why we just choose a bad situation and don't look at red flags is because we feel like: oh my god, I don't belong, you have this imposter syndrome heading into graduate school. And so that can hinder you from asking the tough questions. And I think I think once you start asking those questions, you start probably realizing that or being very grateful in the future to your future, your future self will be very grateful to you right now, if you're asking those questions. Yeah. And really evaluating the answers like don't just say, Yes, I'm going to do this right now. Because you're right in the middle of whatever conversation you're having, and they're telling you all these great things this thing get through, really evaluate the things that they say and and and make sure it sounds honest, and truthful and doable. Like, does that sound like something that could really work?

Will 45:19

Yeah, you can ask other people about that, too, especially if you have a current mentor advisor, bring the proposed project from your potential PI back to your current advisor and say, Hey, does this sound like a realistic plan?

Brooke 45:32

Yeah, I think that's, that's very, very smart to do that.

Dani 45:36

Or you can ask the graduate students in that lab now.

Will 45:38

Yeah, no. I mean, I think yeah, I think that that's, that that's an important thing for you to do. And it's the kind of thing that you could do over email before you even get there. It's also the kind of thing that you could do in person.

Brooke 45:54

We covered how to find a university, a graduate program, advisor, lab meets, all the things that fit you. Dani has a PDF of all of the questions that we talked about up on her website, and we will link that in the show notes and tweet out that link as well. But we also have a searchable transcript on our show notes and web pages for all of the episodes in case you want to look through that.

Dani 46:28

L'Shana Tova, we wish you all happy Rosh Hashanah, eat some apples and honeys for us. Thank you so much for listening. Next time we'll be publishing the second part of how to apply for grad school where we'll will cover the last three stages of applying to grad school: the application, campus visit, and the offer.

Will 46:42

Come find us on the webs. We're on all platforms: Twitter, Facebook, or insta- Instagram as STEMculture (one word) podcast. Please subscribe so you never miss an episode. You can also find STEMculture Podcast at our amazing website maybe by Dani: [STEMculturepodcast.com](https://stemculturepodcast.com).

Brooke 47:04

Money, pleeeeeease. I really hope that everybody knows where that came or it's gonna sound really desperate. [Laughter]

Will 47:13

What's it from?

Brooke 47:14

From Parks and Rec

Dani 47:16

Monalisa asks for money from her dad, I use it all the time

Brooke 47:19

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Dani 47:46

Until next time, don't forget to consensually hug a grad student or at least buy them a coffee specifically a drip coffee, no room.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>