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Transcript for Back to School series, Season 2 Episode 4: "How to Apply for Grad School Part 2"

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STEMculture Podcast 0:07

[Intro music]

Dani 0:14

Hiiiiiiiiiii, welcome back to part two, how to apply to grad school. If you haven't listened to part one, go do that first. It has a ton of great information about how to find a university, a program, and an advisor before you start applying. Today, we're going to move on to the other three stages of applying to grad school: preparing your application packet, the campus visit, and the offer.

Will 0:32

This episode goes out to all those grad school applicants - you appli-CAN.

Dani 0:37

So I'm going to kinda give a broad overview of the application and then we're going to dive a little bit deeper into a few of these. So one of the first things you might have heard about is your statement of purpose/cover letter/research statement - might be one or all of those that are needed. You're also going to need letters of recommendation, you'll need a resume and/or a CV, and you might need a writing sample (if you have one, you might not even need it. If you have it, you can include it.) Now, you'll also, for some universities, need a GRE score. And for some universities, even a subject GRE score. So I'll go into that a little bit deeper later. And you're also going to need to keep track of all the due dates for the applications because - there are not - it's not the same due date for all the applications. They're all different. Some start as early as October and a lot of dates, due dates, are November and December, and then some are as late as February or even on a rolling basis. And then finally, you're going to want to keep track of application fees. This really may limit how many programs you can apply to you. But there are fee waivers you can look into. So we'll start first with Will, who's going to talk a little bit more about Statement of Purpose stuff.

Will 1:53

Right, so your statement of purpose, or cover letter or research statement, you may have to do one or more of these for different applications. But there are lots of online resources that you could find with lots of different advice about how to write your statement of purpose or your research - research statement, you should talk to your current advisor, talk to a trusted TA who's gone through this process recently, or another mentor. And you could also possibly ask people at the programs that you have identified like your potential PIs, if they really want you to get in, they might give you some advice on how to write this. But it's also highly subject dependent. So we can't give too much specific advice,

because we only know about our experiences. Very generally, usually these things are going to have some general and some specific information on it. Your general stuff should be sort of prospective looking out towards a career. And this specific stuff should make it sound like you know what you're talking about. But you shouldn't get too hung up on the details being something that you're committing to 100% now and forever, you just want to make sure that it's coherent.

Brooke 3:14

Going a little bit deeper into the letters of recommendation. every university will probably have a different requirement on the number of letters of recommendation that you will need, but you will always need a letter of recommendation. You want to be very deliberate on how and who you're asking for letters of recommendation. It is really great to have somebody write you a letter who knows you really well. And I think it's really important that when you go to ask for a letter of recommendation, one, you should have had some sort of a professional relationship with this individual, a mentor of some sort, maybe somebody who you've worked in their lab, or you've had a really great classroom experience with them. And you've had interactions beyond just sitting in the class, where you've gone to talk to them in their office and have created some sort of a rapport. When you ask for a letter of recommendation, make sure that you ask them for a good letter of recommendation. So when you're asking say, "Would you write me a good letter of recommendation?", it's very important to use that as your verbiage when you're asking because I have overheard a lot of professors say, "Yeah, I just know this student they made an A in my class, what am I going to say about them?" That's, that's not a good reflection on you. Another thing is that sometimes professors are very busy. And they don't have the time to write everyone a good letter of recommendation, you can approach and ask, if they say yes that they're willing to write you a good letter of recommendation, I think it's great to follow up with a "Would you like me to share some information about myself?", if they don't know all of the things that they're - that you are involved in, write up a list of things that you are involved in: things that you've started, things that you feel should be highlighted in that letter, and send that with a follow up email, because that will really help guide them on how they're writing that letter of recommendation for you. And then also make sure that they are submitting it how it needs to be. A lot of times you can't submit a letter of recommendation that they've written for you, they have to submit it. So make sure that the instructions are very clear on what they need to do and how they need to handle their part of it so that they're not guessing what needs to happen.

Dani 6:09

And this is something you don't have control over: them submitting it on time. So do not be shy about reminding them repeatedly about upcoming deadlines for when that letter is due.

Brooke 6:21

Absolutely. And trust me, they will appreciate being reminded. You're not pestering them, you are literally making them accountable for that timeframe to get it in.

Will 6:32

And if they really want to write you a good recommendation letter, it's because they want to help you. And so help them help you. Yep, they should appreciate it.

Brooke 6:40

Yes, absolutely.

Dani 6:42

So the last thing I wanted to just get a little deeper into are those application fees. Many programs, many universities have fee waivers for the cost to apply to a university because these application fees, if you're applying to more than one university, this can easily stack up. So thae- Really the best thing to find the fee waiver, you're not gonna be able to find it on the University website. It's impossible. So

instead, Google the "name of the university fee waiver", and it should come right up. Otherwise, like I said, it's going to be really hard to find. So for all of us, how was the application process? Do you remember?

Will 7:25
Dizzying?

Brooke 7:27

Yeah, it felt like kind of a whirlwind because of the timing of when I graduated. I was graduating while writing, you know, statement of purpose and gathering letters of rec and studying for my GRE. So I had kind of a lot going on at that time. So yeah, it just- it felt like a whirlwind. And it felt like I was chaotic and not on top of anything. So planning would have been good.

Will 7:56

Yeah, I really wish that I had set up a calendar. Maybe had that information about PIs and universities and stuff all sort of maybe in the same planner or calendar as the relevant deadlines that I needed to know. I feel like it would have been less stressful.

Brooke 8:13

I feel like this whole episode is all about what if I had done this? [Laughter] What if I had done that?

Will 8:21

Well, I mean, legitimately the mentors that I had at the time, at least the ones that I talked to, they did grad school in the 70s or earlier.

Brooke 8:31

Good point. So talk to somebody who's gone through it recently.

Will 8:35

Or [melodious voice] just listen to the STEMculture podcast. [laughter]

Brooke 8:40

Shameless plug.

Dani 8:41

Yeah. But I mean, if you're listening to this, you are so HI. [laughter] The other thing about this application process and something I really wish I had known in my undergrad, my senior year of my undergrad is that you have to start really early. If you want to start grad school, the next year, in August or September of the next year, then you need to apply in November the year before. That's bananas!

Will 9:07

Actually think they've moved it up even more.

Dani 9:09

Barf.

Will 9:10

I think that applications are starting to be due in September, October more.

Dani 9:15

I'm gonna rage vomit. [Brooke making a high pitched noise of fear] That's really far in advance. And so that means you have to be really on your toes and all the sudden if you're an undergrad and you haven't

thought about what you - You're a senior undergrad and you're ready to graduate in May or June, you need to be thinking and applying for grad school, potentially in September/October the year before. That's so- That is really intense!

Will 9:38

It's bonkers. Yeah. So you know if you want to go straight from undergrad to grad school, junior sophomore, start start now. Yeah. At the same time, there's absolutely nothing wrong with taking time off between undergrad and grad school. I did it and worked. I worked for nonprofit tutoring kids and and lived at home like a like a dweeb. [Brooke and Dani: Aw, no!] Yeah, no, it was good actually.

Dani 10:09

Like a smart individual to save money!

Will 10:13

Like all the rest of the millennials, [laughter] living in our parents' basements, but not leeching off the system.

Dani 10:19

Whatever. Millennials are 40 now, so it's fine. Okay, so after submitting your application, let's say no one says yes. Okay, so what if you don't get into grad school at all? And that happened to me. Two years in a row. And then finally on my third try, it was a yes for my PhD program. And what I did during that time was reevaluate. Okay, well do I- do I still want to do grad school? And usually after, I would submit an application, it'd be- it was very exhausting. So I would take a few months off and just not think about it. But usually, after a few months, I think, okay, let's get back on and try again, maybe I can do some different things. So for me, I tried, if I- Well, I had several weird jobs in between. One of my jobs, though, was being a community college teacher, that was not a weird job, that was a great job. And I also taught at a four year institution during that year as well. And that actually helped me get familiar with anatomy, physiology, and reproductive physiology, which is some of the stuff that I do and teach now. And my advisor, I remember, when I spoke with him, he was excited that I knew how to teach that stuff, and that I knew it well enough that I could teach it. And so that was actually a boon for my application at my university. Now, so, you know, I, every time I would submit an application, I'd be like, this is the last time if I don't make it, like I'm not doing it again, because it's exhausting. And it's really disheartening when it doesn't happen. But, you know, re re - Look at your priorities, again, figure out what makes sense to you. And maybe you find a job in the meantime that you really like, I actually really enjoyed being a community college professor, and teaching at that four year university. But I like what I do now better. So I'm glad I kept trying.

Will 12:20

So a related question is, What if you get in some place or a couple of places, but you think it might not be a good fit either? When you do the campus visit, or even after you show up? What do you do then? And my best advice is, of course, depends on how bad it is. It depends on what options are available for you. Are you close enough to, to a masters say, to finish the project you're working on now and master out? Do you have other job prospects in your back pocket before you go to the program? So a lot of these questions are important to consider. But don't assume that the right thing to do is just buckle down and deal with it.

Brooke 13:14

Yeah, good point.

Dani 13:18

Yeah, there are ways out if it's not the right fit, like you can leave, you can change labs. That's okay. People do it all the time.

Will 13:25

Changing labs is a completely valid thing to do. Because it's so complicated that it shouldn't be the expectation that you walk in and find the professor that's good for you, the projects that's good for you on the first try. That's why things like masters and rotations exists.

Dani 13:39

Yeah. And that's why rotations can be really good.

Brooke 13:42

Yeah absolutely. Yeah. So let's say you have vetted out the potential PIs, you've decided where you want to apply, and you do get an invitation to come visit the campus. This is a really great way to continue to vet, both the PI, the lab, the university, and the department. This is a very important part of your decision process. So when you go to your campus visit, I think it's really important to have a face to face conversation about the things that you initially reached out via email. This is a great way to see if the answers are the same as what they had, you know, maybe promises that were made in the email, are they matching up with the conversation that you're having. Confirm that you really understand what's expected of you. And it's important to confirm that the lab has the resources that you need in order to get your research done. So. And I think that really use this to the fullest advantage. Also, make sure that the culture of the department is right for you, does it have resources that you think you need for completing. So it's not just your lab, you know, your lab is kind of nested within the department. And it's really important that, you know, does your PI have a good relationship with the department as well, because that will impact you eventually. So you will have face to face time with the advisor that you're going there to meet. And you can ask all of those questions that we talked about before face to face. But make sure that you also have time with the potential lab man that you have, both on campus and off campus. So a very important thing is to assume that everything you say or do when the professor is not there will come back to that professor. It's the the graduate students who are in that lab are also vetting you do they want you to be a part of their group. Because you know, somebody who maybe is not, doesn't seem like a team player comes into their team, and can kind of ruin the entire experience for everyone. So just be aware that the things that you say and do are being watched closely by everyone. Also, make sure that you have time to ask questions to those lab mates off campus, because they might not want to say anything revealing about the lab on campus, but they might feel much more more comfortable if they're in, you know, a different setting that's not on campus. So this is a great time to ask all the questions that you've already asked your PI. And you know what those answers are asked the same questions to the grad students, they - see if those questions [she means answers] are the same or if they've- they're answering differently in some way. That might be a red flag. Also, it's really important to answer how that- or ask how the advisor handles any type of conflict, conflict between students, conflict between the advisor and the students? Um, how do they address it? Do they ignore it? Do they lash out emotionally? How is it that they're they're dealing with it? And then how do they handle it when a mistake is made? Because mistakes will be made. We don't know everything going into graduate school. We don't know how to handle things. Sometimes you're going to waste an 1100 dollar kit, because you messed up. [Dani: Mm-hmm!] And how is that advisor going to handle that situation? You can also ask if they have conflicts with faculty or administration - do it in a very diplomatic way. But you can usually ask if they get along or how the department views them. So also, another important thing to kind of talk about with the- your potential lab mates is are the things that they are offering, like the projects that you are being offered. Does that seem doable within the lab space that you have? Because your lab mates will probably know if, if that seems like a realistic question. And so with all of that being said, and are these it- Were you, Will and Dani, did you have an opportunity to talk to other graduate students who were in your lab before you actually went in or during a campus visit? Did you have that time to do that?

Dani 19:18

Yes. And so we as part of the campus visit, we went to a local bar, and everyone just shared a drink or two, really all their answers were the same as what it had been on campus. But if you have the opportunity to talk to someone that's been in the lab for a little bit longer, you might get more of a full story. But I'm really happy I did that.

Will 19:41

Yeah, I did get a chance to talk to the students who are in the lab. But it wasn't quite as straightforward of an experience as you're describing. So I didn't get a chance to talk to them off campus at all. So they showed me around the science building. I think maybe we went to lunch or something like that. So we weren't in the direct environments of that professor at all. But we never sort of like went out and and kicked back [and] I didn't have a chance to ask them a question in what I would call a relaxed social setting. Really, they basically told me "Oh, yeah, he's great guy. Fantastic to work with, super relaxed." You know. And, and "There's really nothing bad to say about working with him except maybe, you know, you might be a little bit on your own here and there. He He's, he's not much of a micromanager." It's been a long time since I had but that's what I remember in those conversations. There were no things that I didn't, I didn't press them, particularly, but but they didn't make any indications to me that that there's anything wrong. And then in fact, when I'd accepted the offer, and came and showed up, they all said, "We didn't think you were going to come."

Dani 19:41

Oh wow.

Will 19:41

So we didn't tell you how we really felt because by that time I got here, and I heard the way that they, you know, expressed themselves about our then-advisor after I got here, and it was very different. So one thing I might suggest, in addition to getting perspectives in a relaxed social setting, is maybe talking to some other grad students in the department in a relaxed social setting. And I don't think there's anything wrong with any of this, you're talking about spending, maybe, you know, almost definitely more than half of a decade, working directly for this person. And then after that, they're going to be keyed into the same very small, probably professional, academic, or industrial network as you are. So you're really looking at a lifelong collaborator, probably when you're looking at your potential PI. And so some of this stuff might seem like, "Oh, what's the worst thing about about him?" No, that's the right thing to do.

Dani 22:15

Yeah. And, you know, if your potential advisor finds out that you've been asking these kind of questions, and they get upset, that is a red flag.

Brooke 22:23

Yes, absolutely.

Dani 22:23

So they should really be encouraging you to have alone time with these other graduate students in lab or outside of their lab. The other thing I think people might be thinking as well, if it's a really horrible advisor, won't people just offer this information up? No, they will not. You have to ask these questions, to bring it out in them. And again, it really needs to be in a location that's not on campus where they don't feel like it's going to get back to the advisor.

Will 22:52

Right? If it's their advisor, their future success, or certainly the path that they're going to take, depends on this person that you're at asking them to give you, you know, sometimes tough info on.

Dani 23:06

So before we move on to this next portion here, we did want to say not every university has the money to invite you for a campus visit and pay for the whole thing. So you may want to visit on your own. But you may never get to visit until you show up and start and that's okay too. But making sure that you ask these questions -try and Skype with people, or some kind of like video conferencing so that you can get a sense of what's going on would be a good option as well. Now, after all of that, let's say you get multiple offers.

Wooooohoooo!

Will 23:42

Yay!

Dani 23:44

Each of those... Brooke is unexcited.

Brooke 23:49

Woop woop [laughter]

Dani 23:52

Now, each one of those offer letters is going to come with a deadline to respond. So you need to let them know by a certain date, if you're going or if you say no. That offer letter might also include what your stipend is going to be. It might also mention your fees. So these fees, you might think, "Oh, well, like I'm getting a I'm getting the tuition waived. And I'm getting a stipend. So they're just telling me the fees just to let me know, like, I'm probably not responsible for them." And that's what happened with me. You are. You are responsible for those fees, just like extra shit tacked on because we are all made of money. I'm not bitter about it, it's fine. [Sarcasm] So, So now you have some time to consider your options. Maybe not a ton of time, but maybe- what you say probably two weeks a month, maybe?

Will 24:39

It depends so much on which programs you applied to, what the differences between the application the deadline dates are- some places they'll have rolling admissions. So you might get some letters like before your campus visits, you might get some letters right before the deadlines, it really depends. And I think you know, having your ducks in a row on your end is going to make it much less stressful.

Dani 25:02

Yeah, so so just know they're going to be deadlines, keep track of those. And when you're deciding between multiple programs, you know, it's going to be helpful to make a pro con list. And this might be when - maybe you didn't give it much weight before maybe you did but you know: can you be happy in the city that this university is in? Can you do the hobbies that you really like to do? Is it easy to find the food that you like to eat? Do they have good places to eat out? Are these you know, keeping track of those and adding that to your pro con list might be helpful. But overall, you really want to feel that the university and, most importantly, your advisor is really excited to have you on board. For me that made the biggest difference. My advisor made it really clear that he thought I was the bomb. And that made me feel, like, really wanted and like we would have a good relationship. And that's that's worked for the most part. So for Brooke and Will, how did you make your decision to attend this university?

Will 26:10

So very briefly, for me, part of the reason why the stuff that I described before was so destructive and horrible for me, which, it was really bad, is that 100% the reason that I came here was because I was excited to work with that advisor.

Dani 26:27

And then it didn't work out.

Will 26:28

It worked - it didn't work out. It failed in the most catastrophic imaginable way. Yeah, yeah. And you know, sure, I had some hand in that by -

Dani 26:38

No, you did not.

Will 26:38

- not not knowing some of the things that we're talking about now.

Dani 26:41

You had no hand in it. [laughter]

Will 26:43

I hope that all the people out there listening to this now will be better prepared than I was.

Dani 26:48

Yes, and not blame themselves. It's not your fault. We're gonna have a Good Will Hunting moment.

Will 26:54

I like that movie. I wish I was a math genius.

Dani 26:57

Awww, you are, to me.

Will 27:00

I just worked hard at it.

Brooke 27:01

I made my decision based off of the fact that I could stay here in one spot and not move my family. And it was catastrophic - just like what Will said [laughter]

Don't do what I did.

Will 27:20

So do we get our point across, people out there in TV Land? Fill out a poll and tell us how we're doing. You can find the poll on our Twitter or Facebook, you'll answer the following questions: [1] I know how to search for graduate programs. [2] I know how to prioritize my own needs when searching for and applying to graduate programs. [3] I know what questions to ask to find the right supervisor or PI for me. [4] I know how to prepare for a campus visit. And [5] I know what questions to ask, and what red and green flags to look for.

Brooke 27:51

Wow. So that was a lot of information. We covered how to find a university, a graduate program advisor, lab mates, all the things that fit you. Plus, we briefly went over how to do an application packet and the process that that takes. 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 28:29

Go, ye wee berrns, and apply for grad school - live your dreams! Thank you so much for listening. And next time we'll be publishing the second part of our interview with Dr. Katie Wedemeyer-Stromble, where we discuss more with her about her graduate student advocacy and her work as a sea turtle scientist.

Brooke 28:46

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Dani 29:05

If you like what you're doing throw some cash. We have two tiers right now \$1 in \$5. For one dollars, you get a shout out and some warm, fuzzy feelings that you're supporting the show. And at \$5 you get access to extra Patreon content and our undying love - genuinely. And everything we get from Patreon goes back into the show, not in our pockets.

Will 29:27

Until next time, don't forget to consensually hug a graduate student or at least buy them a coffee, straight espresso, No Doze, matcha or whatever. We need the caffeine.

[Start of blooper] Hello, everyone. Do you [Dani interrupts]

Dani 29:47

HELLOOOOOOO [laughter]

Will 29:47

Sabotage!!

Dani 29:50

I thought you said you were ready for it??

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>