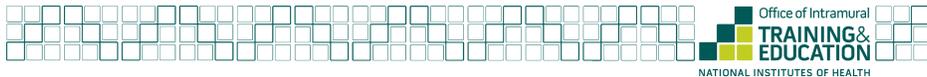


# Preparing For Graduate School Interviews

Dr. Sharon L. Milgram  
Director, NIH OITE



## Your Goals

- Present yourself enthusiastically and honestly
- Show that you understand your research and the field you are entering
- Clearly describe your current interests, knowing they will evolve
- Find out if the research being done excites you
- Show that you understand what a career in your field entails
- Explain any bumps in your past without making excuses
- Learn details of the program, students, faculty, community
- Figure out if this is the “right” school and life for you

## Setting Up Your Interview

- Respond to calls or e-mails promptly and professionally
  - Do not say 'yes' until you are ready to commit
  - Be clear if you need more time
- Read instructions carefully before calling with logistical questions
- Be as accommodating as possible regarding dates offered for your visit
  - Go during organized interview visits if offered
- Follow directions for planning your visit
- Be sure you understand:
  - The structure of the visit; expected arrival and departure times
  - Transportation and lodging arrangements
  - Financial commitments from the Program

## Remember

- Preparation pays off
- First impressions form quickly
- If you attend an interview weekend, the weekend is not only about you
- You are trying to connect professionally AND personally
- Even social activities are part of the interview
- You must have questions when asked
  - In individual meetings with faculty
  - During talks and at posters
  - OK to ask about social life and non-school activities, but balanced by more academic questions

## How We Form Impressions

- From your dress
  - Neat and clean
  - Appropriate for the institution and the event
- From your non-verbal communication
  - Posture and handshake
  - Eye contact and facial expressions
  - Gestures and nervous mannerisms
- From your verbal communications
  - Voice and tone
  - Grammar & sentence structure
  - Ability to organize & express ideas
  - Ability to listen and respond appropriately

## Preparing

- Re-read material about the school and program
- Learn about the work of faculty you will be meeting with
- Reread your application
- Practice your handshake and 'elevator speech'
- Practice common interview questions
- Prepare questions in advance
- Practice with mentors and then do a mock interview with someone you don't know as well

## Making A Good Impression

- Showing you understand the “big picture” and the details of your project(s)
- Targeting your response to the listener
- Asking questions about faculty/student research
  - Some wait for you to do this
  - Also fine during social activities, but take cues from your hosts
- Asking good questions about science
- Asking good questions about the Program
- Making it clear from your questions, answers and interactions that you are an enthusiastic, realistic and hard-working student
- Accepting responsibility for and any poor grades or blemishes on your record

## What We Might Ask

- Tell me about your previous research experience
- What do you enjoy most about doing research?
- What don't you enjoy about doing research?
- What types of scientific problems do you hope to work on? What approaches would you like to apply?
- Why do you think you are ready for gradate school?
- What interested you in our program?
- Why did you do so poorly in \_\_\_\_\_?
- Why do you want to be a scientist?
- What are your career goals?
- What are your strengths? What about weaknesses?
- How do you deal with people who are different from you?
- What do you think will be hard about grad school?
- Do you have a realistic view of the life of a scientist?
- Anything I didn't ask about that you want me to know?
- What are your hobbies? What do you do during your free time?
- Do you have any questions for me?

## Questions You might Ask

- What types of positions do students who graduate from this program typically take?
- How many mentors can I choose from?
- What journals do students publish in?
- Do students attend meetings; who pays?
- What is the average time for degree?
- Do many students drop out of the program?
- Are there teaching requirements? Teaching courses?
- Do many students have their own grants? Do they get help writing and submitting grants?
- Do current students feel supported?
- Is the campus welcoming and diverse?

## Unprofessional Behaviors

- Bad mouthing other schools and programs
- Talking too much about other schools
- Forgetting to thank each interviewer
- Drinking too much
- Ordering the most expensive thing on the menu
- Running-up movie and other charges in your room
- Skipping social events to study, watch movies, visit friends or family, etc
- Keeping your cell phone on and checking email during poster sessions and other social activities
- Showing up late for meetings

REMEMBER....

The program is interviewing  
you..

AND

You are interviewing the  
program

### After the Interview

- Send emails or cards to thank the Program Director (s), the program administrator, and student host
- Acknowledge offers with a prompt thank-you; find out when the program needs a firm commitment
- Do not hesitate to e-mail or call with questions
- Do NOT commit before you are ready to

## Final Thoughts

- Plan your travel wisely to minimize stress and distraction
- Be self-confident but not egotistical
- Ask yourself, do you think you would fit in well with current grad students & other interviewees?
- You are being 'interviewed' even when you are not in formal interviews
- Prepare a standard set of questions in advance
- Don't be overly swayed by the opinion of any one person you meet
- Take notes on the way home; your memory will fade
- Have fun; this is the start of a wonderful journey

## NIH Resources

- Practice with your research mentors
- OITE Career Services
- Mock interview details to follow today