Information for Prospective Graduate Students

The graduate experience is completely different from undergraduate in virtually all aspects (prospects for admissions, expectations of professor and student, eventual goals, attitude of student, etc.). This means that the student has to adopt a completely different set of strategies for selecting, applying for, and getting the most out of graduate school. For students who think they might want to work with me, I’ve included below some of my philosophy about graduate education below.

The first question for you is why. If you are not sure, then you need to think about it. A professional degree is not simply the logical next step in the educational sequence that began with kindergarten - an advanced degree entails costs in time (several years), money, hardship, and a really enormous amount of effort on your part. For many kinds of jobs in the natural resources fields, a graduate degree may not help you much. So picture where you want to be in five years - what is your dream job or occupation? You may not know enough about the field to be sure where you want to be, but you absolutely must have a target to shoot for, or your graduate school experience may be misplaced. If you are really unsure about what you want to do, the best thing to do is take a year or so to work in voluntary, temporary or entry level jobs in the areas in which you think you want to eventually become a professional. This is a no-lose strategy - you get an inside look at the industry and what is entailed in the profession. If you decide its not for you, you've wasted a short time without committing to grad school. If you want to continue, then you will be a much stronger applicant to grad school because you have experience, and recommendations from your employers.

Masters and PhD degrees:

The masters degree is essentially an experiential degree - it takes 2 - 3 years to accomplish, and by the end of it the student should have become familiar with, and used, the major tools of scientific inquiry and professional discourse. This means you will have taken coursework, designed and accomplished some kind of experiment, performed research that is novel and a real addition to the field, presented your work in front of a scientific audience, and published your work in a refereed scientific journal. You may not have broken the code of life, or conserved the world's natural resources, but you can call yourself a scientist and perform studies that use the scientific method and provide findings that are based upon science.

The PhD degree is quite different. This is a degree that typically takes 5 - 7 years, and establishes the beginning of your scientific career. The research is usually more intensive and in depth than masters research, and ought to demonstrate both innovation, and a marked contribution to the field of study. The PhD student is expected to be a fully capable scientist by the time they graduate, ready to design and enact research programs, design and teach classes, and educate graduate students. While the PhD student is under the advisement of their major professor and doctoral degree committee, they are also expected to gradually develop independent research, and their own professional niche, so that they can strike out as an independently capable entrepreneur by the end of their degree.

PhD without Masters degree? In many schools, one can get a PhD without first getting a masters degree. In general, I believe this only rarely works to the student's advantage, since a graduating PhD with a masters will have a considerably fatter CV and more experience than one without, and will definitely be more competitive on the job market. Although some argue that the route to a PhD is shorter by skipping the masters, my experience has been that this is not true - the masters research topic often leads to the PhD and thereby cuts out one to two years of flopping around finding a study topic in the PhD program. In the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, we do not accept students to the PhD program who do not already have a masters degree.

Since graduate advising can only be done by tailoring a program to the individual, I believe that graduate education starts with a fairly close understanding, and frequent discourse, between student and professor. Although I like to have frequent discussions about the course of a student's research, and want to provide help and direction where its needed, I believe strongly that independence is the key to empowering professional students. This means students must perceive that the success or failure of their project is in their own hands. Collaboration is also an important...
part of all my relationships with graduate students - this is the essence of “working with” a professor.

**Getting into Grad school - The courtship dance**

One does not simply apply to graduate school - its a different strategy from undergraduate. In general, the student must pick a specific professor to work with, and the professor must be willing to mentor the student - without that, the application is meaningless. So spend your time finding the professor/research lab/funding - if you have good grades and test scores, the rest will probably flow from there.

We both might have to spend some years together if all works out, so its really important to size one another up. The courtship dance *(I credit Katie Sieving for coming up with this label!)* begins with my “display” - that’s all the stuff I have laid out here on my web page. You need to find out all you can about me, and if you choose to, then its your turn to display. The process might go on for awhile, and might end at any time because one or both of us decides its something doesn’t suit. So read on, and think about the next step in the dance.

In graduate students, I am looking for men and women who believe strongly that they know what they want out of a degree, and what they want to do with it eventually. Your directions and desires for a professional life WILL change as time goes on and as you become more informed - thats ok. But you must have a target to shoot for and you need to know what you want out of it at each stage. Students should be genuinely excited about the area they are working in, and about the scientific method. The enthusiasm must be genuine- students may have to endure harsh field conditions, poor pay, fickle grant support, demanding and intimidating graduate advisory committees, etc. Students (all scientists are students too…) must be open minded, and psychologically prepared to follow their studies wherever they may lead, regardless of whether the study site, the animals, the question, method or answer fit some initial conception or comfort level.

I will probably be able to serve as major advisor for no more than 25 graduate students of my own in my lifetime - I am therefore understandably selective in taking students on. Prospective graduate students should be familiar with and especially interested in my areas of research interest (our interests do not have to be identical…) before applying to work with me (see the publications list and CV on this website). Prospective grads should also have 1 -3 ideas for their own research projects prior to contacting me. This demonstrates to me that they have really thought about the research process, and about whether my expertise will honestly help them. In fact, there are many professors who can probably help you - so look around! Prospective students should have some prior experience in the natural sciences (preferably field work), excellent academic credentials, and favorable recommendations from professionals in the field of natural sciences. They must also meet the minimum requirements (GPA and degrees) for admittance to the Departmental graduate program (see Graduate Programs on this website [http://www.wec.ufl.edu/grad/](http://www.wec.ufl.edu/grad/) ).

**Graduate support** - Most of the students in the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation (http://www.wec.ufl.edu/) (and all of mine) are supported on grants and contracts. Graduate work is a full-time job, and I do not think it’s a good idea for the student to take on a second or outside job to support themselves while in school. I therefore take on graduate students as I have financial support, on a necessarily somewhat unpredictable schedule. If a student is interested in developing a project with me for funding, I may be interested in seeking funding collaboratively, but the funding must be in place before I can accept the student. Students may also apply for fellowships and scholarships prior to applying - these may or may not work out, so I like to have confirmation of meritorious support prior to admission.

If you decide you are interested in pursuing graduate work with me, please send me a letter (email [mailto:pfred@ufl.edu](mailto:pfred@ufl.edu)) of interest, resume, and an indication of your GRE scores, GPA, educational history and experience. If we both remain interested past this initial phase, its probably in our mutual interest for you to visit University of Florida, and for us to have an interview.