These quotes are some of the responses made on the Survey of Doctoral Education and Career Preparation. The quotes are sorted by discipline. You can see the response from other disciplines. These quotes supplement an article of advice for selecting a doctoral program. Students responded to the question: "Knowing everything that you know now, what advice would you give others entering or in the early years of graduate school?"

The quotes are sorted into six categories. Generally, there are a half dozen comments per category, the alternating colors are different student's comments. These categories were applied by us, as we read through the thousands of comments. They are the most common categories of advice pertaining to the selection of a doctoral program. The frequency with which various kinds of advice emerged varies by discipline. You can see the relative distribution here.

### Ecology

**Know yourself and know what doctoral study entails**

17.7% of the ecology students surveyed offered advice about this topic.

Know yourself as well as possible. When choosing a school and an advisor, make sure that you know what you're getting into, and that you know what kind of an advisor you'll work best with. Be prepared to take responsibility for your own choices, and if something isn't working out (the program, the advisor), deal with the problem immediately. I've seen more students than I'd like who have personality conflicts with advisors, and who blame it wholly on the advisor or the system, which I think is inappropriate.

Know EXACTLY what you're getting yourself into. Make sure you are serious about grad school! It is not a vacation or a way to avoid the real world. It IS the real world, especially if you want to be a research scientist. Know what you want to do before you apply.

People need to have a clear idea of what they want, and they need to thoroughly research the faculty they'll be working with. Of course, this is all hard to do if you haven't been to grad school yet. I have been consistently amazed at the lack of guidance graduate students get. I'm not really sure why they call us students when nobody is really teaching us.
Don't go to grad school unless you've tried enough other things to think your talents, disposition, and motivations are suited for it (I didn't make this mistake, but it's still my main advice).

For me the most difficult part is the solitary nature of the work. If it becomes a stifling or destructive experience, it can't possibly be worth it.

There are so many great things intellectually talented people can do, so view your own life broadly and don't feel trapped.

Before entering: be sure it's what you want to do right now, because once you start down the path lots of opportunities are closed. It's better to explore things that you might like to do someday *before* starting graduate school. That's the best time, and doing something different will only help you in graduate studies.

The thing that has helped me most in graduate school is having a clear idea of my goals and motives for being here. Knowing my goals has helped me make decisions about what courses to take, how to spend my time, what research to do, etc.

**Investigate the program thoroughly**

15.3% of the ecology students surveyed offered advice about this topic.

Make sure you take time off before and decide whether you really want to go to grad school. Have a good idea about why you want to go and what you will accomplish by going to grad school. Find someone like me who has been here a long time and who can help you with both general questions and your professional development; the faculty in this department do not provide much.

Do intensive interviewing before deciding where to go and with whom to work. Make sure you know what you're getting into and that the fit is right. I've done both the wrong way and the right way and there's a big difference.

Don't choose a program or advisor based on prestige. Most of my friends at other schools have dropped out of Ph.D. programs finding themselves too limited in research choice, or the advisor's slave.

Make sure this is what you want to do, and research all aspects of a program before you enroll. I hate it when students whine that their grad program sucks when a little preliminary research would have shown that.

Being in an interdisciplinary program is often difficult. I would encourage future students to make sure that this program will meet their needs.
Make sure you are in the right program, at the right school, and that you have an open line of communication with your advisor. If you question any one of these three things, you are in the wrong place.

Also, a Ph.D. student needs to be focused, have a good idea about what research she/he would like to pursue, and have some idea of how to make it happen. If the student doesn't have an idea of how to make her/his research work, it often doesn't. Even the best advisors can't make all of the decisions for us.

Take the time to talk to students in the programs at the different schools that you are interested in attending. I think that the students have the most realistic perceptions of how the programs operate.

Also, talk to students (past and present) of the potential advisor that you might work with in the program, to get an idea of how that person interacts with his/her students, how quickly and efficiently their students graduate, etc.

Take the time to visit your prospective schools and departments. It's worth it in the long run.

**Understand the job market**

10.3% of the ecology students surveyed offered advice about this topic.

Make sure you know what you're getting into--do you know if you want to stay in academics or do something else? If you don't know, or do not want to be in academics, does your program encourage or discourage this course? If you want to be in academics, do you have an idea of what the job market is like? Do your advisors? Will they help you get a job?

And once you're in, keep perspective. The world does not end at the bounds of the lab, no matter what others may want you to think. You're in graduate school to make a career for yourself, so make sure you get what you want out of your program and not the other way around.

Career opportunities, compensation, and quality of life issues are all substandard at this time in academic science. At least one or two high pressure post-doc appointments appear to be necessary in order to compete for faculty jobs. The salary is not in line with the amount of education and time spent on the job. Researchers and teachers alike are spread too thin and often have to sacrifice family life and outside interests.

I would seriously consider all career options and pursue opportunities to learn more about career options early on (or before starting) in order to be better prepared for the job market when finished.

I would also consider working for a few years in the field, rather than going straight to grad school after college (which might have focused my career interests).
Given the limited employment possibilities, the large number of currently enrolled students, and the great length of time needed to complete the program, I'd encourage them to seek other alternatives.

Be clear and realistic in your expectations about what you want from a graduate degree and what it is likely to get you. Be aware of the market value of a degree in your field. Take courses and pursue research that broaden your career options. Do not assume a faculty job is going to be waiting for you when you get out. If you are going to be serious about the academic track, then do it well! I know too many grad students who, upon finishing their Ph.D., still don't really know what they want or what they can do with it.

**Understand and get funding**

17.7% of the ecology students surveyed offered advice about this topic.

Be sure that your advisor is well-prepared to either provide you with research funding or is willing and committed to teaching you how to write grants and find funding.

Seek advice concerning grants, writing, and research from students, postdocs and other faculty as well as from your advisors.

Choose your advisor carefully. Talk with his/her current students and make sure you don't have unrealistic expectations about his/her involvement in your research. Be sure you are choosing a thesis topic that you are excited about, not just one that your advisor is anxious to have someone do. If you and your advisor choose a topic that requires travel or expensive lab work, make sure he/she is willing to help you secure funds or you are likely to spend much more time than you expect trying to keep your research costs funded.

Select the school based on your advisor. Make sure your interests and theirs are compatible and that you can work with her/him. Talk with that advisor's students and see if they are enjoying their graduate experience.

Second, chose the school based on the funding it can provide to you.

Get yourself a fellowship, get your ideas funded, and then do some great research. There is no reason why you cannot. Choose an advisor who will respect your ideas and allow you to do this. If your advisor won't let you pursue the research that you are really excited about, drop them and find someone else. Enthusiasm is contagious and there are a lot of professors out there looking for self-motivated people.
Know that you will be poor for awhile.

**Select your advisor carefully**

*44.8% of the ecology students surveyed offered advice about this topic.*

Choose your advisor carefully. In addition to the standard criteria (e.g. research interests, funding), take the interpersonal relationship into account. How well do you and he/she interact? How effectively do the two of you communicate? How well are you able to exchange ideas? It is important to be on the same wavelength, or to at least understand each other.

Talk to the grad students already in the lab about how they get along with their advisor. Is he/she a good advisor? Fair? Involved? Constructively critical? Does he/she supply any funding? This is a big one. I supported myself entirely thru TA ships which substantially lengthened my stay at the university by a couple of years. Make sure you are interested in the research you will do, and find out if your advisor will be amenable to you “exploring” other career options outside academia.

Select your advisor very carefully. It is important to consider the amount of time and energy this person is willing to give you. It appears to me that the big names don't give much advice, it is the younger professors looking for tenure who really care and spend time with their students.

Be sure to get concrete commitments for funding: don't believe the line, “All my students get funded.”

Ask around and talk to your potential advisor's other grad students.

Immediately evaluate their advisor to determine if this advisor will meet their needs academically. For example, will this advisor be a mentor; teaching the student how to develop and formulate research questions and experiments, help the student conduct experiments and present and publish these findings, and teach the student how to become a successful researcher at the postdoc and faculty level throughout their grad career? If the current advisor does not meet these criteria, then the student should change advisors and possibly programs immediately--being supported academically by your advisor is extremely important to your success as a graduate student.

Decide whether you like hands-on or hands-off advisory style. Pick an advisor you like, then pick the research topic; unfortunately, I had no choice given the limited selection.

Choose a Ph.D. advisor very carefully. They can make or break your program and enhance or confound your time in graduate school. Personal sensitivity may be as important as intellectual guidance.
Demand a lab rotation. Get an advisor with an active research lab.

Get an advisor you can live with and don't be afraid to switch advisors.

**Take time off between undergraduate and PhD studies**

10.8% of the ecology students surveyed offered advice about this topic.

Take time off before entering grad school. I did and benefited, but I have seen others who did not and have suffered.

I would definitely have gotten more research experience in college as an undergraduate and perhaps worked for a couple of years before entering graduate school. It's the only way to know ahead of time if you've the talent and inclination.

Make sure you take time off before and decide whether you really want to go to grad school. Have a good idea about why you want to go and what you will accomplish by going to grad school. Find someone like me who has been here a long time and who can help you with both general questions and your professional development; the faculty in this department do not provide much.

Quotes from other disciplines. | Article of advice for selecting a doctoral program | Distribution of quotes in all fields. | Survey of Doctoral Education and Career Preparation.