Graduate Diversity Program
318 Sproul Hall • UC Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720-5900

(510) 643-6010
grad.diversity@berkeley.edu
www.grad.berkeley.edu/diversity/diversity.shtml

by Carla Trujillo, Ph.D.

Surviving and Thriving in Graduate School

A) Questions to Keep in Mind for Your Departmental Visit (as a prospective graduate student):

1. Number of faculty conducting research in your area of interest. At Berkeley, faculty in other departments may also be doing similar research.
2. Types of research being conducted in your area of interest. New research plans for the upcoming years.
3. Significant accomplishments by the department that you should know about.
4. General satisfaction of the graduate students (ask the students at a time when they can speak candidly).
5. Time to degree.
6. Type of financial support.
7. Job placement of its graduates, particularly in academia.
8. Whether student support groups exist.
9. General requirements for entry into the department.
10. Any particular subject knowledge you should have before starting at Cal.
11. Pros and cons of studying in this department versus going to X university. Feel free to bring up your questions of comparison with faculty and students.
12. The pros and cons of living in Berkeley or the Bay Area.
13. Connect with people so that you can ask additional questions or voice concerns.

B) Beginning Your Studies:

1. How are your financial needs going to be met? Will you be supported with fellowships, Graduate Student Research or Graduate Student Instructor positions, loans, or have an outside job? It's good to ascertain, if possible, how you will be able to finance your graduate study and the duration for fellowships you've been awarded. Ask your dept. or advisor if they can support you.

2. Know what your goals are (MA/MS or Ph.D.) and the coursework required as well as other requirements (including particulars of prelim/master's exams) to complete the degree. Find out the average time to complete the degree. Find out what it takes to enter the Ph.D. program if you've been admitted to the MS/MA degree and would like to continue. Find out if you need 1 or 2 minors and what the limitations are.

3. Know ahead of time what kind of academic preparation you will need for Berkeley and try to take care of this before arriving. (It might encompass taking summer school classes.)

4. Meet with a Diversity Officer if the department/division has one and also speak with current students, supportive faculty, and the graduate assistant about what courses to take your first semester. If possible, avoid professors who have reputations for being non-supportive to students during your first semester. Your first semester adjustment will be difficult enough without having to contend with these kinds of professors.

5. Attend the Department orientations at the beginning of the school year. They can be very informative.

C) Your First Semester:

1. It is important to do well during your first semester (3.5+ GPA) if you can, so the courses you select, and the **number** of courses you select have to be carefully thought out. You don't want to overload your first semester but you also want to show you're cut out for the program. Consult with your diversity officer, faculty advisor, graduate assistant, or current graduate students for advice.

2. If you're planning on pursuing the Ph.D., and have to take prelims/Master's exam, ask around about good classes to take to help prepare you for exams. The graduate students and faculty usually know these answers. There may also be old exams you can look at.

3. Learn what your weaknesses are, or where you have limited knowledge about certain subjects and take the proper courses to rectify this. (Note, this may encompass taking an undergraduate class—possibly more than one.) This is being strategic about insuring your graduate school success.

4. During the first semester begin speaking with professors and their graduate students about their research to see if you are interested in working with that particular professor for your research project. Look up the professor's work on the web and read a couple of their publications before you speak with them.

5. Focus on your intellectual passions, the topic you're really excited about. This is your driving force and will propel you to greater happiness in grad school.

D) During the First Year:

1. If you have any difficulty with midterms or final exams, see the professor to discuss how you did and what you can do to improve and learn from your mistakes.

2. Try to have a research project picked out by the end of the first semester or the beginning of the second semester. (This may not pertain to all departments.)

3. If taking prelims/Master's exams, anticipate studying a significant amount of time (20+ hrs per week in summer, or 40+ hours per week over the holiday break) to prepare. Try to get copies of old tests and have study partners. Try not to prepare for this test alone. Also, find out how many chances you get to take the prelim/MS exam. If taking an oral exam, make absolutely sure you practice solving potential problems orally with students who have already taken the exam. Oral exams are very different than written exams and practicing ahead of time is crucial. Practice answering questions from fellow students or helpful faculty who are willing to give you a mock exam.

4. When choosing a research advisor, look for a match of the advisor's research/project, personality, his or her support and most importantly, **belief** in you.

5. Have an agenda when you meet with your advisor. This way you get all your questions answered and issues covered.

E) Continuing On:

1. Make sure you meet regularly with your diversity officer, the Graduate Diversity Program Director, or someone you can trust to bounce off ideas. Join student groups for other kinds of support. Berkeley has the Black Graduate Engineering and Science Students (BGESS) and the Latino Association of Graduate Scientists and Engineering Students (LAGSES) as examples.

2. Don't isolate yourself from the department. Go to social functions, retreats, serve on committees, and so on.

3. When doing your research project, make sure you put in the time required (or more), work hard, consistently, independently, but also as a team player. Don't be afraid to be innovative and creative in your thoughts. Sometimes the best innovations occur by accident. Learn new data or language programs as necessary. Do supplemental reading if you think it will help you. Don't be afraid to make a mistake. Some of the best innovations occur from people taking risks, making errors, and learning from them.

4. Make sure you get a desk/office space once you've got a research advisor.

5. Go to conferences and present your research. Have your advisor see your stuff before you present it. Do an excellent job when presenting your work at a conference.

6. Learn to write grant proposals for funding your work or the work in the lab. This is good preparation for funding your work in the future and very important for pursuing life in academia.

7. If applicable, begin writing up your results in conjunction with your advisor for publication in research journals. It is very impressive to have publications as a graduate student. These are looked upon as an indicator of your future potential.

8. Prepare for your oral/qualifying examination. Know your subject matter and your research project well. Understand how and why things work (**conceptual knowledge**). Professors on your exam committee will be testing you on conceptual understanding of the material and not rote understanding. Be prepared to speak well about the research you're undertaking for your dissertation.

9. Conduct practice sessions for your oral exam with a team of graduate students who've taken the exam or sympathetic faculty, so you become adept at taking an oral exam. Do this several times until you are comfortable with this process. (Note: taking an oral exam is very different than taking a written one—practice is essential.) Find out the particulars of your qualifying exam, as it varies by department. Practicing ahead of time is very important to passing oral exams.

F) The Dissertation:

1. Seek a dissertation fellowship, if available, the year prior to your final year. This frees your time to write. It's much harder to try to work and write your dissertation.

2. Put yourself on a timeline to finish. Get buy-in from your advisor regarding this so that you both agree on the timeline.

3. Anticipate delays. Machines break down, things don't usually work right away, and so on. Be patient but persistent.

4. Be nice to the graduate assistant in your department. It can make a world of a difference in how pleasant your graduate school experience goes. It is appropriate to show appreciation for the work they do on your behalf.

5. Work one day at a time. Try not to look too far ahead. Tell yourself to do work today for today.

6. Consider joining a dissertation support group. These can help keep you on track and motivated.

G) Planning Beyond:

1. During your last year, or a little before, think about what kind of job you want or where you'd like to teach so that you can begin preparing for the job market.

2. If pursuing an academic position, you'll need a C.V. (curriculum vitae), a statement of research interests and future research plans, and a statement of teaching interests. You should be able to give a one hour lecture on a topic of your research (sometimes you're given a choice). Academic interviews often take at least a day.

3. Make sure you find a mentor to help you through the tenure/new professor process if possible. Or, if you fail to find one, stay in good contact with your former advisor. You may also have good contacts in other schools to speak with. Try to stay in touch with your fellow alums in case you need to help each other in some way.

4. Post-docs may also be an appropriate undertaking in some departments.