

By Samantha H. Jones

Choose a program, have a life

As I formally accepted the offer to join my Ph.D. program, the massive weight on my chest began to dissolve, my shoulders relaxed, and my headache subsided. Choosing a program had been quite the roller coaster ride, filled with uncertainty and sleepless nights. “Phew, well that’s finally over,” I said to myself. But just before that moment of relief, I felt a brief but intense wave of panic: Had I made the right choice? More than 4 years later, I think I chose well, and I hope that my difficult decision process offers some tips, and some solace, for others who are struggling with similar decisions. Looking back, I see that the key was realizing that it wasn’t enough for a program to meet my research interests; I needed to weigh factors outside the lab as well.

One of the first considerations was location. For each program, I asked myself whether I would be happy living there for 5 to 6 years. For example, I value the stability that hobbies bring, and I’ve found that having an outlet away from the lab—such as swimming or community outreach—drives me to work harder when I’m there. I worried that I might be making a mistake by not exploring scientifically exciting options in less exciting environments, but I reminded myself that I could only have a successful graduate school experience if I was happy both in the lab and beyond.

As I traveled to seven programs across six states for a whirlwind of interviews, I gauged the culture and environment of each one. It was only after I met the students and faculty members that I gained some clarity about which schools would truly be a good fit. I asked students about their work, and I also probed other issues. What did they do outside of the lab? Did they have any regrets about choosing their program? Above all else, were they happy?

In a few cases, I was greeted by disillusioned students who answered “What do you like about being in this program?” with a shrug, or mildly hostile faculty members who seemed irritated that they were required to take the time to interview a prospective student. A couple of programs in particular felt riddled with arrogance, leaving me puzzled that anyone would want to spend 5 or 6 years in such a negative environment. But there were just as many where students seemed tired but hopeful and faculty members asked tough but fair questions. I felt confident that I could be happy in one of them—but I still didn’t know which one.

Scientifically, the Biomedical Sciences Graduate Program at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), seemed



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to be the best fit for me. I also believed that the university’s culture and surrounding environment would support my outside interests, and that the city’s vibrant research scene would offer valuable career exploration opportunities. But it lay across the country from most of my family and friends. I knew that my family members would be disappointed, although they would try to be supportive. When I called my mom the morning after my interview to tell her how I had been blown away by how intelligent and thoughtful the students and faculty were, my eyes welled up with tears at the thought of being so far away from home and all that I would miss.

In the difficult days leading up to my decision, I reached out to my network for advice. One mentor shared her story of taking a position at another institution, even though she worried that doing so would disappoint a good friend and colleague. Not only did her friend understand and support her ambition, but they continue to be friends to this day. Hearing this story helped me realize that the people who love and care about me would understand. And I decided that in the end, the benefits of choosing UCSD were too great to pass up.

Could I have been happy somewhere else? Yes, absolutely. Did I make the best choice? I guess I’ll never know. What I do know is that I’ve avoided the intense burnout I see students around me experience, which I attribute in part to prioritizing location and quality of life. By taking care of my life outside science, I was able to be my best self in the lab. ■

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Science

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Science **357** (6355), 1058.

DOI: 10.1126/science.357.6355.1058

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