Selecting a Graduate School

Watch the video above to see an unscripted discussion between my mentee Chelsea and me. During the discussion, I give Chelsea some important factors she should take into consideration when selecting a graduate school.

Your applications are in, meaning you have completed the hard part! You have: taken the GRE, written your personal statements, paid expensive application fees, and most importantly, fought through senioritis and completed your last semester of your undergraduate career (or almost finished). You are now going through arguably, the two most nervous, most important times of the graduate school application process:

1. Receiving acceptance/rejection letters, or as I like to refer to them, “reassurance/motivational letters”
2. Selecting the graduate school that will put you in the best place to flourish

First thing is first, breathe… Know that reading the decision on your “reassurance/motivational letter” only provides insight into the next road in your path, but it DOES NOT dictate your end goal or destination. Now open the letter (or email in 2014) and read! If the letter is an “accept”, place it to your left, gasp, smile, laugh, celebrate, call your parents/friends, tweet, update your Facebook status, etc. If the letter is a rejection letter, do not panic or be upset. Do one of two things with this letter:

1. Stick the letter on your refrigerator, look at the letter, and say “Thank You For The Motivation!” (I learned this from my friend Mike J)
2. Shred or throw the letter in the trash and never look at it again

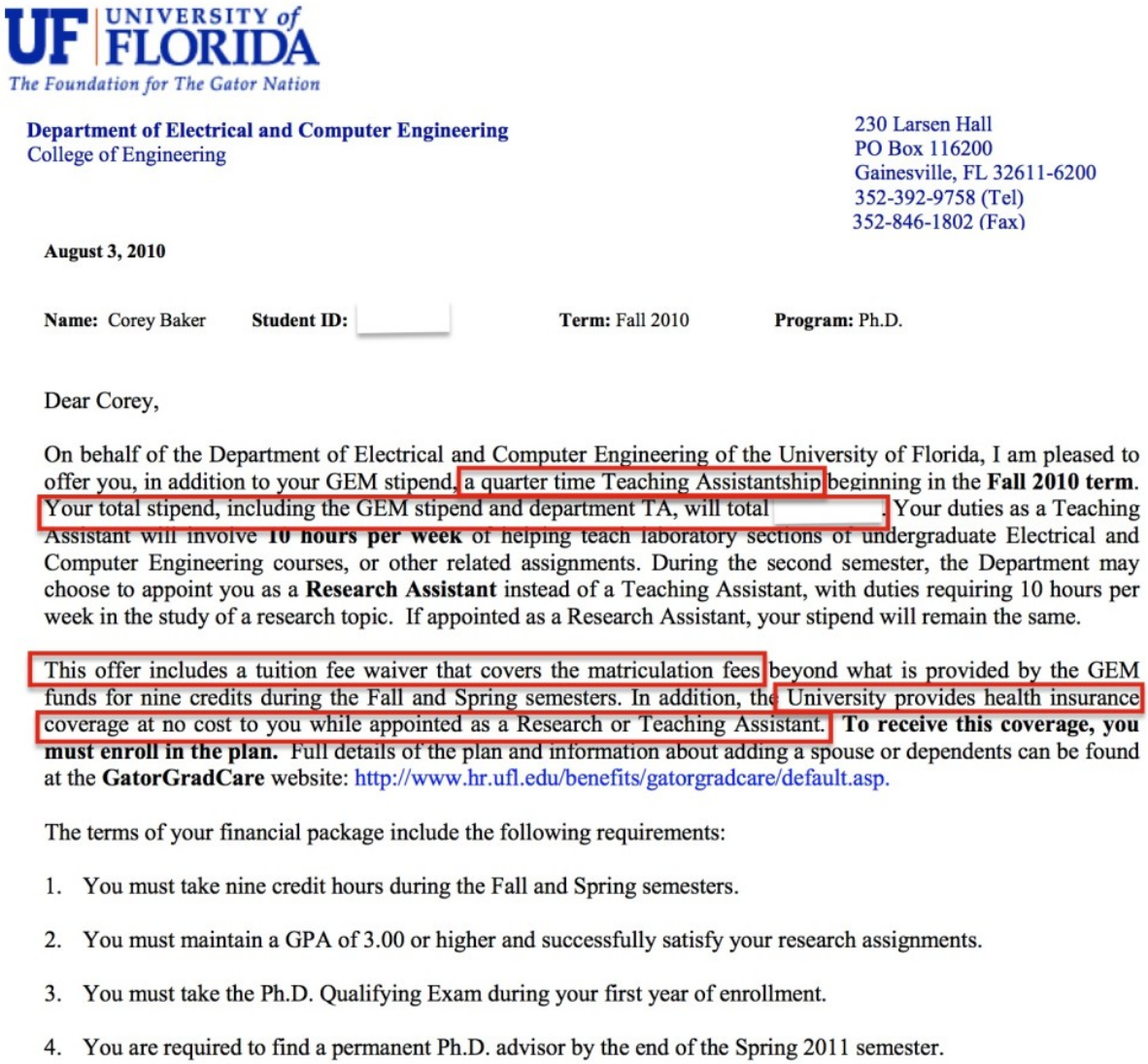
Either way, the “rejection letter” is now your “motivation

letter”.

Know that if a particular institution did not accept you, a different path will lead you to your END GOAL.

After your pile of “acceptance letters” is complete, it is time to split this pile into two:

1. Schools offering funding
2. Schools not offering funding



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August 3, 2010

Name: Corey Baker **Student ID:** **Term:** Fall 2010 **Program:** Ph.D.

Dear Corey,

On behalf of the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering of the University of Florida, I am pleased to offer you, in addition to your GEM stipend, a quarter time Teaching Assistantship beginning in the **Fall 2010 term**. Your total stipend, including the GEM stipend and department TA, will total . Your duties as a Teaching Assistant will involve **10 hours per week** of helping teach laboratory sections of undergraduate Electrical and Computer Engineering courses, or other related assignments. During the second semester, the Department may choose to appoint you as a **Research Assistant** instead of a Teaching Assistant, with duties requiring 10 hours per week in the study of a research topic. If appointed as a Research Assistant, your stipend will remain the same.

This offer includes a tuition fee waiver that covers the matriculation fees beyond what is provided by the GEM funds for nine credits during the Fall and Spring semesters. In addition, the University provides health insurance coverage at no cost to you while appointed as a Research or Teaching Assistant. **To receive this coverage, you must enroll in the plan.** Full details of the plan and information about adding a spouse or dependents can be found at the **GatorGradCare** website: http://www.hr.ufl.edu/benefits/gatorgradcare/default.asp.

The terms of your financial package include the following requirements:

1. You must take nine credit hours during the Fall and Spring semesters.
2. You must maintain a GPA of 3.00 or higher and successfully satisfy your research assignments.
3. You must take the Ph.D. Qualifying Exam during your first year of enrollment.
4. You are required to find a permanent Ph.D. advisor by the end of the Spring 2011 semester.

One thing to note, I am a strong advocate for selecting the institution/program that is BEST for YOU and YOUR success; not for anybody else, not just based on prestige. Knowing this, I have created the ***Selecting the BEST Graduate School For YOU List****:*

1. **Funding**
2. **Perceived Advisor/Research Lab Relationship**
3. **Supporting Cast**
4. **Research**
5. **Prestige**
6. **Location**

Quick disclaimer, I grew up in a military family (Hey Dad!) and have become accustomed to moving around every few years. If you are person who prefers to be around family, "location" should be correlated with "supporting cast" in the **Selecting the BEST Graduate School For YOU List**. Also note, This blog is tailored towards PhD or STEM majors, but is also relevant to other fields. There will be future blogs aimed specifically at: Non-STEM, MBA (Prestige may be top two on the list, possibly even #1), and Law School.

Selecting a PhD or MS program (this is Information I have gathered over the years. The original person who showed me the graduate school ropes is my mentor Dr. Kim Cross (love you K.Crossover!). I have also gathered a wealth of knowledge from other mentors: Michele Lezama, Dr. Renetta Tull, Dr. Gary May, Dr. Njema Frazier, Dr. Janise McNair, Dr. Reginald Archer, and Dr. Pierre St. Juste). Lets step through the **Selecting the BEST Graduate School For YOU List** to see what schools make the final cut:

1. **Funding** – Only look at your **Schools Offering Funding Pile**. As a STEM major, you should EXPECT to receive full funding for your PhD. If your number 1 school does not offer you funding, but your 2 – 10 schools do, guess what school has just become your number 10 school? Okay…
    1. Is the school offering you tuition, fees, and a stipend? If not, is the School offering you enough stipend money to offset tuition and fees? If not, put the letter towards the bottom of the **Schools Offering Funding Pile**

2. *Is the stipend enough to cover cost of living in the respective city? Does it cover this cost after tuition and fees? In my opinion, your stipend should be at least $15,000 a year. Is the school offering free insurance? Place schools that satisfy this criteria towards the top of the* ***Schools Offering Funding Pile***

3. Is the institution offering you a Teaching Assistantship (TA), Research Assistantship (RA), or a hybrid of both? How many hours are you being asked to TA a week? Does the RA say only 20 hours a week? Know that when you truly began your research you will be working at least 40 hours a week.
4. Are there large differences in the funding amounts in 1 through 3 when cost of living is considered? If there is not, then you can consider these schools on the same priority level for now.

2. **Perceived Advisor/Research Lab Relationship –** Now you should have a re-ordered **Schools Offering Funding Pile**. The next step is arguably the key indicator in predicting the possibility of **YOU** finishing your doctorate degree. The **Perceived Advisor/Research Lab Relationship** istheinitial gut feeling you have when you meet/talk to your Advisor and the students in the lab. Know that your Professor is the person you areexpectingto be with for the next 5-6 years. You can consider this a short-term marriage and should put in a large amount of effort before making your decision. Also, the Professors lab will be your Family for the next 5-6 years. You should make some of the following observations when tryingtodetermine the perceived relationship:
    1. Know yourself!
        1. Have you been exposed to research and

produced publications in the before?
    2. Are you trying to conduct research based on your own ideas? If so, selecting an Advisor who wants you to carry out their ideas is not for you. You need to find a Professor who is open to their students research ideas
    3. Are you willing to take on a Professors research/projects? Find a professor that has a list of potential projects that pique your interest
    4. Do you need someone assigning daily/weekly tasks to you or are you a person who is self driven and set your own tasks?
    5. Depending on how you answered the questions above, move the Schools that have Professors that compliment your answers towards the top of your **Schools Offering Funding Pile**
2. Are there one or many professors at the prospective University that seem to be interested in YOU and YOUR success?
    1. Does the Professor/Lab seem receptive of you and eager to have you in their Lab?
    2. If the Professor does not seem interested in you. Remove them from your prospective list
3. How many PhDs has the prospective professor overseen in the last few years?
4. How long does it take for the typical graduate student to graduate in the prospective lab? If it's more than 5-6 years, I suggest you move this School/Professor towards the bottom of the pile
5. These next few items are sensitive, but in my opinion are essential andneedto be HEAVILY considered when making your decision. Try to strategically find the answers to the questions below without having to ask the prospective Professor directly.
    1. Are you a minority (Black, Latino, or Native

American)? Is your Professor a minority? Okay… How many minorities have been in the prospective Professors lab? How many of the previous minority students have graduatedwithPhDs? What's the ratio? What's the ratio for everyone else? Do you sense any potential issues between you and this Professor?

    1. Note, I am not saying that just because a Professor is a minority or because they have not graduated any minorities that you should not select this School/Professor, but if it is the case, you should do some more research into why.

2. Are you a Female? Is your Professor a Female? Okay… How many women have been in the prospective Professors lab? How many of those have graduatedwithPhDs? What's the ratio? What's the ratio for everyone else? Do you sense any potential issues between you and this Professor?

    1. Note, I am not saying that just because a Professor is a female or because they have not graduated any women that you should not select this School/Professor, but if it is the case, you should do some more research into why.
    2. Do you have children or are you thinking of having a family during your PhD? Has the prospective Professor/Lab had similar situations before? What is the Professors first response to the possibility of you having children?

6. Look at the make-up of students in the lab:

    1. Is the professor always around to aid the students? If not, are there post doctoral or senior doctoral students in the lab to help?
    2. Is the lab diverse? By this I mean male/female and different Nationalities
    3. Try to have a conversation with some of the students without the Professor being present. STRATEGICALLY ask them about 1-5 listed in this section. Are their answers what you expect?
3. **Supporting Cast –** at the prospectiveUniversitycan be the research students in the Lab. What is important is that the University has people you can interact with outside of your research. The supporting cast will help bring stability to your life during your PhDandshould not be taken for granted. The cast can also consist of:
    1. Other Professors/Mentors at the University
    2. Other graduate students in other Labs or programs
    3. Graduate student clubs
    4. Family
4. ***Research –*** *What type of* ***Research*** *is conducted by the prospective schools? Does this research pique your interest? Know that many students' current PhD research area differs from what was initially written in their personal statements. This is because interests change and the exposure to unfamiliar areas typically happen when a person attends graduate school. Do not feel limited by selecting a school purely off of your first research interests. If a school has 1 – 3 in the* ***Selecting the BEST Graduate School For YOU List*** *and Professors who care about YOU, an interesting research area will not be far out of reach.*

5. **Prestige –** When it comes to the **Prestige** of a particular University try not to place too much weight on this. If multiple Universities rank high in items 1-4 in

the **Selecting the BEST Graduate School For YOU List**, then prestige can be a determining factor. Remember, a PhD in STEM is more about the type of research you are conducting and the ability to complete your PhD. Opposed to the name of the University you get your degree from.
Note, people who receive their PhDs from more prestigious Universities typically get more attention, but your specific research can make you just as competitive. Of course, if you are accepted to all highly prestigious schools then this does not matter to YOU. Read **Life in College Matters for Life After College** (Thanks Tasha Zephirin!) for a study about this

6. **Location –** The ranking of **Location** depends on the type of person you are. If it is a necessity to be around your family or if your family is already established in a particular city. You should move schools with the proper place to the top of your list

Disclaimer: This is a blog of my opinions, not facts or rules. When it comes to selecting a graduate school, you should always take bits of information from multiple sources and use them to form your own opinion.