The Graduate School Admission Process

Dr. Ina Martin and Prof. Jesse Berezovsky
Who we are:

**Professor Jesse Berezovsky**
Associate Prof. Physics, CWRU
B.S. U. Minnesota (physics)
Ph.D. UC Santa Barbara (physics)
PostDoc: Harvard (applied physics)
Chair of graduate admissions committee for physics

**Dr. Ina Martin**
MORE Center Director of Operations
Adjunct Prof. Mat Sci. Eng.
B.S. Chemistry, U. of Arizona
Ph.D. Colorado State University (analytical chemistry)
Postdocs: Technical University of Eindhoven, The Netherlands (applied physics), National Renewable Energy Laboratory (applied physics)
Who are you?

- Year in School
- Discipline
- Degree to be sought (MS vs PhD vs other)
Deciding Between a Master’s Degree and a Ph.D.

- **Ph.D.**: academic, research degree
- **Master’s**: specialized preparation
- **Consider**:
  1) How interested am I in research?
  2) Am I interested in a career in academia?
  3) W/in a department, what is the relationship between master’s and Ph.D. students?
  4) Which is easier, to get into a particular Ph.D. program if you’re already a master’s student in the program or to apply from the outside?
Outline

Timeline
Deciding where to apply
Organizing letters of recommendation (LORs)
Personal Statements
Networking

Much of what we will discuss here can be applicable to applying for summer REU program
Timeline

- About sophomore year on, take it all in...
- Pursue research opportunities (school year and summer)
- Look for opportunities at CWRU, then different universities, schools, PIs
- NSF Research Experience for the Undergraduate (REU)- different focus for each school, usually like previous research
- Talk to new graduate students
- Keep a network of people you know who have recently gone to grad school (LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.)
- Local and Regional Meetings
### Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soph/Jun Year</th>
<th>Beginning of year</th>
<th>November 15</th>
<th>November 30</th>
<th>December</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What type of research and school appeal to you?</td>
<td>Look at schools/programs and narrow down to no more than 8; Contact PIs?</td>
<td>Have draft of personal statement - visit Career Center; have grad student read it</td>
<td>Have a strong draft of personal statement to PI, organize information on excel sheet</td>
<td>Deadlines - Be aware of overlap with finals and holidays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep your resume up to snuff!!!</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Berkeley: 12/1 Stanford: 12/6 MIT 12/15 CWRU: 1/15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Subject GRE
- Registration deadline is 6 weeks prior
- Given: 9/16/17, 10/28/17, 4/14/18

### General GRE
- Year round
- ets.org/gre

- Do you know people who went through this last year?
- Are you close to graduate students who recently applied to schools?
- Are your friends or classmates applying?
- There are multiple good choices and paths
Where to apply?

- Location
  - Metropolitan or rural? Big or small school? Big or small department?
- Outside obligations
  - Family/friends
- Lifestyles
  - What is the department culture? How many hours are you expected to work?
- Multiple PIs you would consider working for at each school
  - You can ask directly if they will have funding/will take a student
  - Is the PI retiring/taking a sabbatical?
- Applying to multiple schools: remember time and application/transcript fees)
  - Do not just apply to the “top” schools!
  - No such thing as a “safety” school
Faculty, Program, and University Fit

- Literature review – note faculty research interests & expertise
- Accreditation status
- Quality & reputation of your chosen program
- Tuition & availability of financial support (start to finish or year to year?)
- Financial aid
- GPA & test scores for the average admitted student
- Time required to degree completion
1. With whom do you wish to work? Are you familiar w/ his/her research?

2. Why is this particular program the right fit for you & your interests?

3. What do you bring to the program, what is your contribution?

4. Why do you want to undertake graduate study @ this particular university?
Contacting Potential PIs

- Some PIs like it, some ignore it, some don’t like it
- IF you email, be polite, objective and to the point
  - If you don’t hear back, don’t worry
  - Avoid the thought “tl;dr”
- Use a professional email address

For example:

Dear Professor X,

I am currently a senior undergraduate and planning to apply to XYZ University to pursue a PhD in chemistry, starting fall 2016. As your research on Blah is of great interest, I was wondering if you plan to take PhD students during this time. I have attached my resume with more information about my experience and interests. Thank you very much for your time!

Best Regards-

Emily
● General GRE available any time at test center
● Subject GRE (Chemistry, Biochem, Bio, Math, Physics, Psychology). Only given at specific locations, and given September, October, and April - must register in advance!
● General is required (glorified SAT), subject may not be required (but a great way to show off and prep for fellowship apps)
● **Study for Subject!** Ask department for resources
● Details: [https://www.ets.org/gre](https://www.ets.org/gre)
Letters of Rec.- Usually 3

Who to contact?
- Someone you feel is responsible and knows you well enough to speak of your character and abilities as a researcher and potential for success. Should be professor (or have a PhD)

When to contact?
- At least 1 month ahead of time.

What to say?
- Can you write me a strong letter of recommendation, what can I provide to help? (CV, personal statement, etc.)

Make it as easy as possible!
- Provide all information as early as possible and one document with all schools/deadlines

When to remind them?
- Most PIs don’t write until week/day it’s due. Be patient. Ask if you can help.
How to write an email to letter writer

How to approach:

● Email, address as: Dear Dr. or Dear Professor
● If you request a meeting give times you’re available
● Keep things short and sweet (“TL;DR”)
● Be direct- don’t “bury your lead”

After they’ve agreed:

● Provide excel (or google sheet) table of information on where you’re applying (or whatever they request)
● Let them know when they’ll have your “package”
● Ask if they want a reminder email (1 week before?)
Give info to letter writers in an easily digestible form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Dept.</th>
<th>Profs</th>
<th>GRE</th>
<th>Subj. GRE</th>
<th>Due date</th>
<th>How?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North-western</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Mirkin, Scheidt, Nguyen</td>
<td>Required</td>
<td>Required</td>
<td>12/1</td>
<td>You will be emailed a link</td>
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<tr>
<td>UMass Amherst</td>
<td>Polymer Science</td>
<td>Emrick, Hayward, Crosby</td>
<td>Required</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1/01</td>
<td>Mail to:</td>
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<td>530 Goodell Building</td>
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<td>University of Massachusetts</td>
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<td>140 Hicks Way</td>
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<td>Amherst, MA 01003-9272</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case Western</td>
<td>Chem</td>
<td>Sauve, Burda, Pentzer</td>
<td>Required</td>
<td>recommended</td>
<td>1/31 (Rolling)</td>
<td>You will be emailed a link</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*if no official due date, it’s good to make it the same as one of the others…and order them chronologically!
*provide a stamped envelope if required to send it in by mail
Personal statements

There is a lot of help available, **USE IT!**

- If you know people who applied in previous years contact them (great way to keep in touch)
- Be honest
- Take a draft to the Career Center for help (set up time), have friends read it
- Specify- why, with whom
- Provide near-complete draft to letter writers!
- Excellent overview: [http://grad.unm.edu/resources/gs-forms/letter-of-intent.html](http://grad.unm.edu/resources/gs-forms/letter-of-intent.html)

**Be professionally personal and matter of fact; talk about how your experiences qualify you for graduate school** (engaged in research, what you’ve learned about the research process etc.)

*If sensitive issues are relevant (such as low GPA due to medical diagnosis), consult with your advisor.*
At the VERY LEAST

- Spell check
- Read it out loud
- Make sure the name of the school/department/professor is correct
- DO NOT plagiarize

Answer this question: “Does this person have the potential to succeed in this program?”
I want to pursue a PhD in chemistry at Case Western Reserve University to prepare myself for a career in research. My undergraduate research focused on the synthesis of conjugated polymers, and I wish to pursue this interesting and evolving field in graduate school. My research interests lie in the synthesis and characterization of organic materials, and for that reason I am interested in performing research under the guidance of Professor Pentzer, Sauve, or Burda.

I’ve always loved chemistry. I’m also really good at it. It’s kind of my passion. It makes me happy and I feel like a butterfly when I think about doing research. I have no idea what I want to do for the rest of my life. However, graduate school will definitely help me figure it out. I will totally be a successful student. From what I’ve read on your website, I assume I’ll fit in well with Pentzer, Burda, or Sauve, but I’m totally open to anyone else as long as I get into your program.
Real Examples:

While I had been interested in science throughout my childhood, I didn’t decide to major in science until junior year of high school. When I realized I wasn’t satisfied with my current knowledge of science, I immediately decided to major in chemistry in college.

When I started my freshman year at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU), I chose chemistry because it was what I was best at in high school. I had no profound love of the subject, and thought I would figure out what I loved to do as the time passed, and exactly that happened. I started doing research in a chemistry lab at the beginning of my junior year of college, and soon realized that I love doing research and want to get a PhD in chemistry.

I write to you to declare my intent to pursue a doctorate in the Materials Science Department at UWisconsin-Madison. My interdisciplinary background and familiarity with the fast-paced nature of working in a start-up biotech lab lay a strong foundation for a research project focused on biologically-inspired polymers and targeted drug delivery. My specific interests fall within the groups of ...
Following up with schools

- Make sure you know point of contact at schools and work with them (probably not a professor…)
- If you get into one school with a deadline for acceptance before hearing back from others, you can negotiate an extension (nat’l deadline 4/15)
- You can ask when they will make decisions
- If you don’t get in, don’t take it personally
- It may be stressful, but there are many right decisions
Visiting Schools

- Visits are in the spring, many overlap - 4 is a comfortable number
- Visits are often Thursday night to Sunday morning and on assigned weekends, meet with profs and social events
- A great opportunity to meet prospective roommates
- This is your opportunity to explore the environment
  - Talk to students! Ask where recent grads have gone, average time to PhD, how is the group run? What they like/don’t like (best part/worst part of the program)
- Can you picture yourself working and living there?
Resources

- Website of your chosen academic program
- Resource Guide: Suggested career websites every prospective PhD candidate should visit:
  - www.phds.org
  - www.gradschools.com
  - http://versatilephd.com/
  - www.admissionsessays.com
  - http://community.livejournal.com/applyingtograd/
  - http://www.studentdoctor.net
  - www.academiccareers.com
Financial Aid Resources

• www.finaid.org
• www.gradview.com
• Gradschool.about.com/cs/financialaid/index.htm
• www.college-scholarships.com
• www.collegeboard.org
Questions?

Good Luck!!!!