Moving On: Transitioning to Graduate School

Tips from graduate students with disabilities

Women, people with disabilities, and some racial/ethnic groups—blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians—are underrepresented in challenging fields such as those in science and engineering. They constitute smaller percentages of science and engineering degree recipients and of employed scientists and engineers than they do of the overall U.S. population. Additionally, people with disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to be unemployed or out of the labor force.

Real World Advice

AccessSTEM and *AccessComputing* project staff, with funding from the National Science Foundation, are working toward increasing the success of students with disabilities in earning degrees and securing careers. In both projects, staff seek advice from individuals with disabilities who have "lived it" to better understand contributors to success, and share advice with others.

In an active e-mentoring community, individuals with disabilities and mentors shared advice included in this publication about how individuals with disabilities can successfully transition to graduate school. Their disabilities include vision, hearing, mobility, learning, mental illness, attention, and other chronic health. Their experiences, perceptions, and advice can help others, including those with disabilities, transition to, succeed in, and graduate with advanced degrees. Advice related to succeeding in a graduate program is included in a companion publication *Succeeding in Graduate School* at *www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/grad_school.html*.

Note that some of the comments shared below have been modified for clarity.

Graduate School Experiences
- "When I first began graduate school, I was using magnification software, large screens, and closed circuit televisions. About half way through the program my vision worsened, and I made the switch to text-to-speech, audio, Braille, and tactile graphics. Graduate school is full of challenges, but is also really great."

- "Earning a graduate degree in science is, in some ways, actually easier than undergraduate studies. You often are paid to do something you're interested in, as opposed to working at an unrelated job or finding scholarships. Also, you work closely with your advisor and professors, making accommodations more convenient and flexible."

- "When you are in graduate school, look for opportunities to gain lab and field experience, travel to conferences, network with others, and learn what it really takes to be a scientist."

Choosing a Graduate Program
- "Decide what you want out of your career. If you don't need a Ph.D. for your career, or aren't sure what you would do with an advanced degree, it may not be worth the effort, stress, and expense. However, if you want to be a researcher or professor, earning it can be a great experience."

- "The program you choose will impact your career. Universities tend to compare themselves to their peers, and tend to look most closely at students from comparable schools. For example, it may be tough going from a Ph.D. program at a small school to a professor position at a top-tier university. If

you're really set on a job at a top-tier school, try to get into a graduate program at one of them. If you don't get into these schools on your first try, consider reapplying later."

- "Look very closely at what the typical graduate program/professional school in your field is like and decide if that is a lifestyle you want. Talk to current students and instructors and attend on-site workshops—don't base your decisions only on what you read online."

- "Develop an application plan and timeline. Remember that all schools, departments, and fields are different. Some schools have due dates months before others. There are often application requirements such as references, standardized test scores, writing samples, and resumes—all of which take time to assemble for each program."

- "Understand how the program operates. Some programs recruit you specifically into a subfield or to work with a specific advisor. Other departments admit you into the program and within the first year or so you determine your field and advisor and this is essentially etched in stone. Still other departments allow students to move more freely between advisors and fields of study."

- "Learn about the campus climate and support services for students with disabilities. Choose a school that is forward-thinking when it comes to universal design, assistive technology, and providing a support structure and community for students with disabilities."

- "Consider the surrounding community. Graduate school is a lifestyle commitment; it will be the dominant aspect of your life for several years. Think carefully about your prospective new city in regards to culture, geography, lifestyle, and climate."

- "Consider health care issues. Costs of your health care (co-pays, medication costs, specialist visits) may change in a new state or be invalid, depending on health insurance policies. Some graduate schools may offer student health care that may or may not cover all of your needs. Also, transfer your medical records, prescriptions, and continued care to your new healthcare provider early. Medical records can often take weeks to process."

Applying to Graduate School
- "Admission to most graduate schools is very competitive. It is important to put effort and care into your application."

- "Maintain high grades in your undergraduate work. Grades are a large part of the admissions process."

- "Participate in undergraduate research projects and internships to develop a competitive graduate application. For certain programs, research experience is extremely valuable. Also, consider interning for a year or two to gain field and job experience."

- "Decide if you are going to disclose your disability during the application process. I have a visible disability, which I sometimes disclose in written applications. Saying, "I have a disability," isn't going to help my application, and some people may react negatively to such a statement because they think I'm looking for special treatment. However, I have mentioned my disability as it relates to my school and research work. For example, I've written in some applications that my experience with adapting to technology gives me a different perspective than others."

- "Apply to multiple institutions. The top programs in most fields are hard for people with or without disabilities to get into. I personally had a perfect grade point average

(GPA), over 1500 score on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), undergraduate research, and great letters of recommendation. I was still rejected at the top schools, but I was accepted at two other schools, and I like the school I am now attending."

- "Remember that much of the admissions process is out of your control. Admissions may also be considering how many funded spots the department has for someone in your specialization or whether they believe your background would add to their diversity."

- "The admissions process is tough. I was denied by seven top graduate programs that I had applied to before being accepted to a school. My grades and GRE scores were good, I'd done solid undergraduate research, been a Woods Hole summer fellow, and had great recommendation letters. It is important to apply to a range of schools, and be open to finding the best place that is willing to give you the opportunity to pursue your degree."

- "Prepare a customized cover letter, personal statement, and curriculum vitae for each program you apply to. Remember to highlight your strengths."

- "Use your application to stand out from the crowd. Emphasizing your disability may help, but community work, research, internships, awards, and scholarships can help you stand out. I would also highlight interesting experiences even if they're not directly relevant—as long as they demonstrate a good quality about you."

- "If you had to withdraw for a semester due to your disability, you may want to include an explanation about the gaps. Be sure to focus on how the situation has been resolved."

- "Get good letters of recommendation. It's important that your recommenders are able to write strong, detailed letters. Make sure that you spend time talking to your recommenders about your experience and goals. Some letter writers expect you to provide them with a written list of your accomplishments and goals, so be sure to provide them with all of the information they will need. Give your recommenders at least four weeks to write your letter, preferably longer."

- "Remember that some schools require just a letter, others require a recommendation filled out online."

- "Your letters of recommendation really matter in the application process. These should be people you have worked with over the years, such as those you have taken classes from, done research with, and collaborated on projects relevant to the program you are interested in. While you might have had a great relationship with a history professor, he may not be the best person to get a letter from if you are applying to a biology graduate program."

Taking Admissions Tests
- "Plan to take entrance exams early and work on earning high scores. A good score on an entrance exam may be important, so study and request accommodations if you need them."

- "Consider purchasing a study manual for the standard test you will be taking. Many come with a disc and practice exams."

- "Allow enough time to schedule accommodations for the standardized test. For example, the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) has a four-

to-six week lead time for approval of accommodations. The GRE test requires an eight-to-ten week lead time for accommodations."

- "Preferred testing dates for standardized tests, such as those in October through December, fill quickly, so register early."

- "Taking the test early enough can also give you enough time if you would like to take the test again."

Engage in *AccessSTEM* and *AccessComputing*

For Students
If you are a high school or college student with a disability and are interested in pursuing a career in computing or in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM), consider joining the *AccessSTEM* or *AccessComputing* team. These teams provide opportunities for you to connect with mentors online and gain experience in your field of interest through projects and internships. For the *AccessSTEM Team Application*, visit *www.uw.edu/doit/Stem/team_app.html*. For the *AccessComputing Team Application*, visit *www. uw.edu/accesscomputing/team_app.html*.

For Educators and Employers
AccessSTEM and *AccessComputing* also host Communities of Practice (CoPs) where individuals share perspectives and expertise and identify practices that promote the participation of people with disabilities in STEM and computing fields. For the full list of *AccessSTEM* CoPs, visit *www.uw.edu/doit/Stem/cop.html*. For the full list of *AccessComputing* CoPs, visit *www.uw.edu/accesscomputing/cop.html*. For further questions on opportunities available through *AccessSTEM* and *AccessComputing* email *doit@uw.edu*.

AccessSTEM is directed by the DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) Center at the University of Washington (UW). *AccessComputing* is co-sponsored by the UW Department of Computer Science and Engineering and the DO-IT Center. The DO-IT Center serves to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs such as those in science, engineering, mathematics, and technology. .

For further information, to be placed on the DO-IT mailing list, request materials in an alternate format, or to make comments or suggestions about DO-IT publications or web pages, contact:

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