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# Fundamentals of Applying to Grad School

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with some slides from Prof. Joe Hellerstein 1

# Is grad school for me?

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Are you fascinated with

- building what was thought impossible ?
- clarifying what was not understood?
- teaching or technological leadership?

Do you want to work on an influential project?  
or even start a cool new one

Gain qualifications for advanced tech work

# MS or Ph.D.

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MS: 1-2 years. Two flavors:

Professional MS (soon at Berkeley, too)

“Research MS”

PhD: 4-7 years

MS typical along the way

Better if you love it!

# Is grad school for me?

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## How do I know if PhD is for me?

Try it. Dropping out is not a failure.

It's just like changing jobs and getting a raise.

## Grad students usually funded from a grant

Tuition + salary of roughly \$2000+/month.

More in summer during internship.

# My history

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undergrad, Tech. Univ. in Kosice, Slovakia

PhD in Computer Science at Univ. of Pittsburgh

Assistant professor at Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison

Accepted a UC Berkeley faculty position in 2002

# My application mistakes

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- Not enough undergrad research
- No letters from recognized people
- No real statement of purpose

# Applying to grad school

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A stellar candidate:

Published a paper in a top conference as a first author

Impressed her advisor

This advice best taken at the end of sophomore year

should start research very early (> 1.5 years before applying)

==> take the relevant upper-level course in 4<sup>th</sup> semester

and find advisor during this course or right after

# From my experience, standards vary

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In some schools,

excellence demonstrated in course projects will suffice

Some research areas more competitive than others

in some areas in top schools, a published paper is a must



# Safe Moves

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Do well in school, get good scores

- especially in the major
- GPA > A- (3.7?)

Specialize a little bit

- Get ready for your grad school area

**LEARN TO WRITE & SPEAK WELL!**

# Smart Moves

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Remember the ideal the applicant!

Get involved in research

- Approach your favorite instructors and TAs
- Tinker
- Look into URAP, etc
- Prioritize research time!

Take graduate courses

Summer internships (esp. in Research!)

# Your application

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## Ideal candidates

Demonstrated they'll succeed in graduate school

Published research papers

## Your goal:

approximate this ideal

stand out from the pile

# Less important

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Highest GPA, best GRE score, etc.

Not that these don't matter

- evidence of research ability more important
- don't obsess about the numbers

# Applying

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## Apply lots of places

- Randomness in the process
- You hope to choose among a few
- “Stretch” and “safety”

# Get Good Letters of Rec

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You need Profs who know you

- See “Smart Moves” above!

Question: “Would you be able to write me a strong letter of rec to grad school? I’m considering <School X>, for example.”

- You want genuine feedback

# Rec Letter Code Phrases

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“More promising than Richard Karp was at this age!”

“One of the best students I’ve worked with in years”

“A top student in my CS186 class”

“Bright and enthusiastic”

# Other app stuff

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- GREs should be good (90's?)
  - Importance of verbal varies widely
- Statement of purpose
  - HAS to be clear and organized.
  - Safe: describe one technical topic in some detail
  - Personal details can help, if they're really interesting
  - Whimsical things work only if they're truly superb
    - Usually not worth the risk in engineering



# Reaching out

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- It is appropriate to approach a faculty member or two at a school you've applied to
  - MUCH better if you get an intro from a prof or grad student here
  - Don't be disappointed if you get the cold shoulder

# After You Hear

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- Rejected? It's not personal!
  - In fact, it's more random than you may imagine
  - Don't let this slow you down in life.
- How to choose among accepts?
  - Visit
  - Work the gossip grapevine: faculty and students
  - Goal: happy and successful

# Selecting a school

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- Go to the Department Visit Day
  - It will a few weeks before you need to decide
- Talk to students, professors
- Find a match for your interest
- When deciding, listen to your heart
  - Not to a few \$k

# Evaluating a school

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- Good people in your area of interest
  - Are you sure what this area is?
  - Better to have >1 choice of advisor
- How have grads of that school done in their careers?
  - Ask for examples!
- Are students happy there?

# Have you considered Berkeley?

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- Mixed message:
  - Healthier to go somewhere new
  - Though ... if you're the best, this is probably the best place for you...