

Nancy Hewitt's Bicycle (or How to Select a Graduate Program in Your Sleep)

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When my mother told me to “follow my dreams” after a conversation about which graduate program I should attend, I am sure she did not mean it literally. After all, I frequently dreamed of sequined fish flying above me as I ran through fields of golden maize and often, soaring next to me as I flew above patchwork patterns of land. My dreams often took me to strange places to say the least.

But one night, after making a list of pros and cons for each graduate program in U.S. history I had been admitted to and failing to determine a clear winner, I had a classic anxiety dream: I was running late for a life-defining meeting, and I had no way to get there. If I missed the meeting, I would be doomed forever.

As my heart raced and sweat beads danced on my forehead, I suddenly saw the most amazing red bicycle in the distance, sparkling and glistening in the sunlight. I ran toward it, hoping I could ride it to my meeting. I asked the owner, a bookish woman with bobbed hair and a warm smile, if I might borrow it. I promised to return it immediately after the meeting. “Yes,” she said calmly and without hesitation. “It will take you wherever you need to go.” As I climbed onto the seat, the bike suddenly transformed. Now it had a roof, windows, side panels, and heat—it was an enclosed capsule that completely protected me from the elements. And, when I pushed down on the pedals, this amazing contraption zoomed forward *really* fast. I was awestruck. I waved goodbye to the woman and sped off. I arrived at my meeting, safe and secure (and sweat-free) in a matter of seconds. After the meeting, I returned the bike to its generous owner and thanked her. As I turned to walk away, I asked her name. “Nancy Hewitt,” she replied with a smile. “I’m glad I could help.”

I woke up the next morning sure that the dream was a sign I could not ignore. Nancy Hewitt and her amazing womb-like bicycle saved me from impending doom. I knew at once which school to attend—Rutgers, where the real Nancy Hewitt, an incredible scholar and generous mentor, held court.

We can’t all count on big, neon-sign instructions from the universe. And I should point out that I had the Nancy Hewitt dream only because I had already met Nancy Hewitt in the flesh, had researched the History Department at Rutgers, and so on.

So, before you make a decision based on dreams, you need to gather as much information about prospective departments and their inhabitants as you can. Because there are many programs to choose from, you will want to find a way to narrow your list. Some things you might want to consider:

- Where do you want to live? Bear in mind that this only means, where do you want to live for a few years. If you go to graduate school in a city you

love, it is unlikely that you will be able to live there forever. (It will only seem like forever.) For example, you should not go to Berkeley just because you want to retire in California; you are likely to get a job in Michigan or Mississippi with your California Ph.D.

- Where is the bulk of your research? If you are interested in nineteenth-century southern history, for example, you might want to consider a school in the South. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, the southern civil rights collections at Wisconsin are quite strong, and you can always get the rest done on research trips—that is, if the school you choose will fund them.
- Can you afford the cost of living? Yes, it would be fabulous to live in New York or Chicago, but can you survive financially on graduate student fellowships or sub-poverty teaching assistant stipends? (Does the program even offer TA gigs or fellowships?)
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the departments you're interested in? Some departments are known for their focus on specific categories of analysis like race or gender. Other departments are known for their strengths in different styles of historical inquiry—like comparative history. Take some time to browse the Web sites of the departments you're interested in. See what courses they offer, what their graduate program entails, and who makes up the faculty. Look at faculty publications, awards, and research interests. Is there depth as well as breadth in faculty positions and scholarship? Do the illustrious names that draw your interest to an institution actually teach there on a regular basis? And do they have a reputation for being generous with their time?
- What kind of campus community are you interested in and what does the school offer? Is there a good-sized graduate student community? Is there infrastructure at the school that enables communities to form and thrive? Are you going to live on campus in graduate student housing? Off campus with friends? At home? Are most students commuting to campus? Where is the bookstore? Are there some good coffee shops around? Does the library provide study spaces or offices for graduate students? These are just some of the questions you might want to consider as you're making a decision.
- What is the climate of the department? As you're browsing department Web sites, see if you can get a sense of student interests and research topics. Are there writing or studying groups? Do students compete with each other for funding? Are students participating in conferences or publishing articles? Are they graduating in 5-7 years? Are they getting tenure-track jobs when they finish? When you visit schools, be sure to ask specific questions about student life and the campus/department climate.

- How do faculty and students in the department interact? Are there department picnics and casual get-togethers? Are there more formal symposiums or brown-bag lectures? Is there a concerted effort to build community in the department?
- Are there enough faculty members who share your interest in the department? In other words, if your advisor decided to retire in Hawaii, would there be professors with whom you could continue your work?

Once you have gathered as much information as possible about the departments and schools you're interested in, start searching for a prospective advisor. Who do you want to work with? This is perhaps the most important decision. In fact, the best advice I ever received was "choose the scholar, not the school."

Ultimately, you're looking for a mentor and a coach—someone with whom you can build a scholarly and professional relationship that will last over time. As you consider prospective advisors, think about their reputation in the field and among other historians. Are they well known? Do they maintain long-term relationships with their students? Some questions you might want to ask them include: Are they taking on new students (in other words, are they about to retire)? What is their record in terms of job placement for their advisees? What is their style of leadership and mentorship? How do they see their role as an advisor?

Next, think about what *you* need and want from an advisor. Do you want a hands-on advisor or someone who is more detached? Do you need regular reinforcement or are you better left alone? Because I knew I would be so far away from home, I hoped to find an advisor who was warm, nurturing, and accessible. I wanted someone who would hold me accountable, set deadlines, and teach me the rules of the trade, but with a smile and a reassuring pat on the back. I asked friends, former students, and professors to recommend advisors whom they thought I would get along with and then I matched them to the programs I was interested in. When I visited those schools, I spent significant time with potential advisors, asked them a lot of questions, and tried to see if we were a good "fit."

In the end, after you've done all your research and made lists for each school, you have to trust your instincts—or, as my mother put it, "follow your dreams."

When I dreamt that Nancy Hewitt and her amazing bicycle saved me, I suddenly recognized the most important step in choosing a graduate program: find a place where people care about you and where you want to go and will do everything they can to help you get there.

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