

To: Potential Graduate Students

From: Dr. Sam Atkinson, Chair 

Subject: Finding a Major Professor

Thank you for your interest in earning a graduate degree from UNT's outstanding Department of Biological Sciences. The decision to pursue a graduate degree in a scientific field is both exciting and intimidating. It is exciting because science is an exceptionally interesting and rewarding career path to follow. We hear every day about new discoveries that reveal fascinating new insights about how our world works. However, wondering if you will be accepted into a program can be quite intimidating: are my previous courses what they are looking for; are my grades good enough; are my standardized test scores comparable to previously accepted students; what did my letters of recommendation say; do my experiences qualify me to work in anyone's lab? That last question, about working in someone's lab, goes to the heart of one of the more "individualized" things you must do to be accepted into our graduate program - finding a major professor. Your major professor will be the faculty member with whom you will work with most closely – he or she will help you select appropriate courses, help you select your graduate committee, and most importantly will direct your thesis or dissertation research. This is the faculty member that you will see almost every day until you graduate, the person that will help you navigate all the requirements for successfully completing a graduate degree, and who will generally guide you into the next step of your professional career. Your major professor is an extremely important person in your graduate school life.

Because agreeing to be someone's major professor is an extremely large commitment from a faculty member, you need to have a careful strategy to find that person. The strategy starts by asking yourself "what area of research am I interested in and that I am capable of undertaking". The reason this question is so important to answer before beginning your graduate program, and that we force you to make at the time of your application, is that you must be ready to start doing research from day one, or you will quickly fall behind and you will miss all targets for graduating in a timely fashion. Once you have carefully considered and answered the "research area" question you can begin looking at our faculty to see who is working in that field of research. When you identify one or more faculty members conducting research in the area you have identified for yourself, you should be ready to "sell" yourself to them. Contact each of them directly. Ideally the contact would be in person, but that may not be feasible. If you can't meet them in person, contacting them on the phone would be the next best option. Email (or other written) communication is last in line, because it is much better to explore a potential major professor/student collaboration in a verbal discussion, than is a back and forth non-verbal communication that happens via email.

Use the opportunity to let a potential major professor know your interests. Where did you complete your other degree(s), and specifically what the degree is in (e.g. B.A. in Biochemistry, B.S. in Ecology, M.S. in Physiology, etc.). Were you a good student? What interests you about this specific scientist and their lab? What inspired you to go into this field of research? How committed are you to graduate school? Have you already published any research results? What technical skills do you already possess that could be put to use in this lab right away? In other words, why should Dr. X agree to be your major professor?

Once you find the faculty member who agrees to be your major professor, request written confirmation (email or letter) and include a copy with your application to our program. This part of your application may be the single most important part of your application – the admissions committee places extreme importance on our faculty members' decisions to say "I agree to be your major professor".

Best of luck and may your graduate school experience be the most amazing thing you've ever done!