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# Talking About your Science: Grad School Interviews

— PiNBAC Workshop —

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# Purpose of Grad School Interviews

- **For the program, we get to know more about you:**
  - How do you “think like a scientist”?
  - What excites you and what is driving you to pursue a PhD in the field?
  - How will you contribute to the program and community?
  - What else is there to learn about you that maybe wasn’t highlighted in the application?
- **For you, you get to learn:**
  - Is this an environment where I can see myself thriving?
  - Will this program equip me with the training that I need to achieve my professional & personal goals?
  - Do I still like/admire the researchers I thought I might want to work with after meeting them? (Are there other exciting areas of research that I might want to pursue here that weren’t previously on my radar?)

***In general, both parties are trying to determine if you and the program are a good “fit” (meaning that you will get what you need to thrive as a scientist from the program, and the program will be enriched by your unique passions, skills, and scientific contributions)***

# PiN Interview Information (from Chris Harvey)

## Interviews

- 30-minute interviews
- Five faculty and one student, based on research interests and requests from the interviewing student
- Scientific conversation
  - We ask about your research experience and interests
  - We tell you about our current research
  - Very casual

# Prepping for Interviews: The Science

- **For your own research, make sure you understand and can describe the conceptual framework and scientific rationale.**
  - What is the biological question you are seeking to answer? **Why** is it an interesting/important question to answer?
  - What approach are you taking to study the question and **why** are you using that approach?
  - What are some technical caveats for your experimental approach? How might you work around those?
  - What have you/will you learn? Are there other interpretations to your existing data?
  - *In general, how are you thinking about your project??*

# Prepping for Interviews: The Science

- **For your interviewer's area of research:**
  - If you are meeting with a faculty member you requested, this means you're interested in that person's research and are possibly considering that person as a thesis advisor. As such, you might want to make some effort to get to know their work.
    - Go onto the lab website to read about current projects in the lab or skim some recent abstracts from the lab
    - Ask questions about the person's research during the interview
      - Approach this from a place of **curiosity and interest**, not an "I need to impress this person" place. You are interested in the work for a reason - share what that reason is! Relate your interests to your previous background and experience.
    - It is *not* necessary to read articles from the lab in preparation for your interviews (unless you want to)
  - If you are meeting with someone you didn't request, they are likely a random admissions committee member. While it can be helpful to briefly familiarize yourself with what they study, they likely won't expect to talk much about their work with you (unless you want to).

# Prepping for Interviews: Your Story

- Be prepared to talk about your own journey: what brought you here and what is motivating you for the future (scientifically, personally, and professionally)?
  - It can be helpful to review your application before interviews so you remember what you wrote in your lovely statement of purpose :-)
- It's ok to not know exactly what you want to study, or to have many ideas! Programs recognize that you can (and likely will) change your mind during your training. The important thing is to be able to articulate why you think *this program* would be a good place for your scientific training, and to be able to describe *some* general topics/questions that drive you in neuroscience.

# Prepping for Interviews: You're Interviewing Us, Too!

- Don't be afraid to ask questions of the program (during interviews and during other parts of the weekend, too) to help you determine whether the program/school will offer adequate support, training, and resources to you as you pursue your goals for yourself.
  - Extensive list of potential questions to ask during interviews [here](#) and [here](#) ("Navigating STEM Grad School Interviews as a Marginalized Trainee")



**Max Heiman**  
@maxwellheiman

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A student who is coming to interview in one of our graduate programs asked me for advice about interviews. So, here is my guidance, in case it's useful. Hopefully others will add their own.

8:37 PM · Dec 19, 2021 · Twitter Web App



**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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Replying to @maxwellheiman

First, in terms of what to expect, it should be a conversation where they find out about you and your interests and, most importantly, you learn the same about them.

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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You should not be getting quizzed about your knowledge base or worn-out questions like 'what was your biggest challenge' or 'what are your strengths and weaknesses'. It should be a chat, just as if you were meeting for any other reason and trying to get to know each other.

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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The interviews are typically half talking about your previous research and half hearing about the faculty member's work. When it's in person, it's nice to have a notepad and draw as you talk but that may be difficult to do on zoom, and I would not try to use slides.

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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When describing your research, a good structure is:

1. Say the big question. It should be something fundamental that cuts across biology. For example not "How can we cure cancer" but instead "How is cell number controlled". Try to say what about it gets you excited.

# Advice from a PiNBAC Adviser :-)



**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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2. Explain the model system you have been using to study this. Of all the possible biological settings that could be used to study the big question, why was this one picked.

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3. What specific question were you asking in this system.

4. What experiment did you do.

5. What result did you get or, if you don't have a result yet, what would be the most exciting thing to see.

6. What would this result mean in terms of the specific question you were asking

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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7. What would this result mean in terms of the big question you started with. Are there any general principles you can imagine that would go beyond your specific system?

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Most students are good at #4-5 and sometimes #3-6, but the big question is harder. If you had limited research opportunities that's fine. You can describe any area that would be interesting to you. The point is not the results but how you would think about a problem.

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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When it's time to talk about the faculty member's research, it is good to ask questions!

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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They may go into lecture mode but it is good to interrupt politely and ask either curiosity questions or clarification questions, or even repeat back what you think they just said to see if you got it (and to give you time to think about it before they go on to the next idea).

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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If you want to ask interview-y questions like 'what is your mentorship style' that's fine, but you may learn more from practical questions like 'how do you match students with projects' or 'if a student's project gets stuck how do you decide whether to go on or switch projects'.

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**Max Heiman** @maxwellheiman · Dec 19, 2021

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Most of all, enjoy the process - it is one of the few times in a career where you get to talk to so many people in different fields and learn about their approach. For me it was super exciting to meet people whose papers I had studied. Many of those conversations stuck with me!

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# Additional Resources for Grad School Interviews

- [How to Ace Your Graduate School Interview: Communicating Your Research Competently and Confidently \(Científico Latino\)](#)
- [Preparing for Graduate School Interviews \(NIH OITE, slide deck\)](#)
- [Preparing for Virtual Graduate School Interviews \(NIH OITE, video\)](#)
- [Tips for Graduate School Interviews \(SfN Neuronline\)](#)
- [10 Tips for Graduate School Virtual Interviews \(SfN Neuronline\)](#)
- [Navigating STEM Graduate School Interviews as a Marginalized Trainee \(Robin Aguilar\)](#)
- [“To ace your Ph.D. program interviews, prepare to answer—and ask—these key questions” \(Science Careers\)](#)
- [Questions you might want to ask during your PhD interviews](#)