

Rich Pauloo: Engaging with Future Mentors Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Rich Pauloo: Engaging with Future Mentors*, provides information about how students can bolster their applications by engaging with professors with whom they may want to work. Rich has decided that UC Davis is the program that best fits his intellectual interests and career goals, and he is determined to maximize his chances of being admitted. Informing his decision is a strong desire to stay in the northern California area where he already resides. Rich makes an effort to personally visit the campus and talk with administrators, faculty and graduate students, but he also initiates contact through phone and video calls, methods of communication that a student living across the country could employ.

Graduate admissions committees have many factors to consider when they are reviewing student applications and essays. Of course, they want students who have excellent grades and good test scores, but graduate students also engage in research, work as teaching assistants, and can become co-principal investigators on grants. Faculty are interested in admitting students who have research topics that are compatible with their own and who are also amenable to mentoring. A prospective student must demonstrate their capacity for intellectual achievement, but if they can also show that they are easy to get along with, responsive to critique and will be a good work partner, then faculty will be even more inclined to view their application favorably and advocate for their admission.

Abstract

Rich Pauloo entered UC Berkeley with an undeclared major and explored a number of options before completing a BS in Integrative Biology. His college experience was enriching, as well as challenging since Rich was employed part-time during the duration of his undergraduate career. After completing his degree, Rich worked on a number of research projects in environmental science before taking a position as a

¹ This facilitator's guide accompanies the case of the same title and is to be used for class instruction and discussion. It was prepared by Sylvia Sensiper, PhD, Director of the Guardian Professions Program, Office of Graduate Studies, UC Davis. The following have provided funding for the GPP: The Stuart Foundation, the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, The California Wellness Foundation and the University of California Office of the President.

science educator with the environmental nonprofit, NatureBridge. Rich loved teaching young adults about climate change and environmental science, but after three years, he was ready for a new challenge and began to explore graduate school options in the northern California region. Rich had been teaching since he was a tutor in high school and completing a PhD would provide him with the option to become a professor, take on consulting projects or even a full-time government position. Honing in on UC Davis as his number one choice, Rich decided to increase his chances of acceptance by taking a very active role in getting to know the professors, the staff and the graduate students. He made sure he was conversant with the kind of research each professor conducted, read their articles and researched them on the web. He contacted professors, program coordinators and graduate students through email, over the phone, in video calls, and also made campus visits. Rich was fairly certain that getting to know more about the department would both help his chances of admission and also provide him with more certainty that he was going in the right direction.

Pedagogy

Making a campus visit can often increase an applicant's chance of admission, but how that visit is set-up will depend on the program. Professional programs often hold information sessions that introduce applicants to the curriculum, some of the faculty and program logistics. Applicants get a better sense of the program structure and what an admissions committee is looking for in terms of student qualifications. If there is no formal information session, applicants can usually set up something themselves by contacting program administrators and faculty. Visiting a campus to learn more about a program will often help an applicant write their essays and other application materials from a more informed perspective. In terms of PhD programs, speaking with staff can be informative about program logistics and funding opportunities. Talking with professors can be crucial because this is an opportunity to express a connection with research projects and demonstrate collegiality.

Rich lived in very close proximity to both the UC Berkeley and UC Davis campuses which made visits very easy, but much of his communication was made through email, phone calls and video calls. Rich ensured that his contact with professors was professional. He read their published papers prior to any conversation so that he had a good understanding of their research. He also reached out to them with emails that indicated a healthy respect for their time. Rich created his own opportunity by cultivating important relationships with potential professors.

Helping students understand the importance of contacting a professor or professors prior to applying for a PhD is one focus of this case. This is stated with a caveat however, as we have found that there are some programs that advise against applicants contacting professors. We believe this may be due to the applicant pool being extremely large with programs such as economics. Prospective students can check program websites to see if any cautionary advice is provided. Below are suggested teaching points depending on the student population and the particular points the instructor wishes to emphasize.

Teaching points:

1. Searching for an appropriate program
2. Preparing for a PhD program through conducting research
3. Engaging with future mentors to ensure admissions
4. Perfecting the application essays

- 1. Searching for an appropriate program:** Many students, like Rich, have geographic constraints on their selection of graduate school programs, some due to family, children, or simply not wanting to leave a network of friends. Students might also search for an appropriate program based on excellence, recommendations by professors or wanting to study with a particular mentor. Although undergraduates often choose to attend a university because of its status and reputation, prospective students researching graduate school programs need to pay attention to the relative standing of the *program* not the university or college. Many outstanding programs are a part of colleges or universities whose ranking is not as high or prestigious. In addition, ranking may not matter to some students. However, if a student wants to teach at the university level, receiving a PhD from a top research program is essential.
- 2. Preparing for a PhD program through conducting research:** Students applying for a PhD should demonstrate that they have some research experience, whether it is working as an assistant on a larger project, a project they conducted on their own for a class or as an independent research project under the supervision of a professor. Rich had a variety of lab and fieldwork experiences, all of which he details in his statement of purpose, demonstrating a knowledge of what is involved in science and its circulation. Conducting research prior to applying for a PhD helps a student understand the research process in the discipline to which they are applying (or a similar discipline), the tools or lab equipment with which they will work and the process of reporting on research. This will include describing ‘findings,’ the form of a paper for publication, and other details about how research gets disseminated. All of this knowledge and experience can be demonstrated in the statement of purpose, the essay which details a student’s knowledge, intellectual curiosity, research experience and potential career trajectory.
- 3. Engaging with future mentors to ensure admissions:** The PhD application essay that describes a student’s research interest – whether it is called a personal statement or statement of purpose – should include a description of the professor or professors with whom the student wishes to study and why they believe these professors can provide mentoring. For example, Rich was very keen on studying with Randy Dahlgren and so provided this short paragraph within his essay. “My interest in soil-water-climate interactions, like water quality and groundwater, align with many LAWR faculty, especially those in Hydrology. I am interested in Randy Dahlgren’s interdisciplinary expertise on water quality and nutrient cycling in California, and the wide range of projects at the Center for Watershed Sciences. I have also spoken with Helen Dahlke, Toby O’Geen, and Thomas Harter about their work on groundwater banking, water quality, and projects at the interface of soil science, hydrology, and climate change.” Students who are applying to multiple programs will need to search

the website of each program to which they are applying to find the professor(s) whose research interests are aligned with theirs. These professors should be included in the statement of purpose with a paragraph similar to what appears in Rich's essay.

- 4. Perfecting the application essays:** Prospective students must understand that the written materials they present with their application are important and they should be prepared to work through several drafts of each essay. Although some programs only require one essay that includes both scholarly and personal information, the UC Davis application includes a statement of purpose and a personal history statement. The intent of the statement of purpose is to describe previous research experiences and intended projects going forward, including how a future professor's own research projects would make them a good mentor. A personal history statement will provide information that helps the reviewer understand the individual applicant and their graduate student potential. Information to include could pertain to educational goals, family, culture and social experiences, as well as community service, academic challenges and how a student's own life experiences will contribute to cultural, social and intellectual diversity. Both of the essays that Rich submitted provide excellent content. His statement of purpose reviews his academic credentials, research experience and scholarly interests going forward. In his personal history statement he was able to present a more nuanced picture of his interests in the natural world, the adversity he faced growing up and the particular strengths and insights he has gained about how to lead his life.

Additional notes: Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can reveal that Rich was accepted to the UC Davis Hydrology Department. He also received a prestigious National Science Foundation fellowship which funded his tuition and provided him with a monthly stipend.