

Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles

Choosing the right graduate program for you, and finding potential grad advisors

Key differences between a Master's and a PhD

| Master's | PhD |
|---|--|
| Typically 1.5 – 3 years | Typically 5 – 7 years |
| Not often funded, but funding opportunities may be available depending on program or advisor | Often funded, either through Teaching, Research, or Graduate Assistantships, or fellowship. |
| Tuition not often waived | Tuition typically waived |
| May or may not have coursework, depending on the program. Some programs are more course-based while others are more research-based. | May or may not have coursework, depending on the program. Additionally, if a PhD student already has a Master's degree, they may not be required to take as many courses (but this is also program dependent). |
| Often culminates in a capstone project or a thesis. This work may require a formal presentation. | Culminates in a dissertation and a dissertation defense |
| | Preliminary and/or comprehensive / qualifying exams along the ways as checkpoints |

These are generalized differences between Master's and PhD programs, but programs can vary considerably depending on discipline, department, university, country, and more.

Important considerations when choosing between a Master's and a PhD

1. Think about your timeline with respect to other goals you may have in your life and how much time you are willing to spend on attaining a higher degree.
2. Seriously consider the availability (and amount) of funding a given program can offer you.
3. Will a Master's degree enable you to achieve your career goals or do you need a more advanced degree? If you are considering pursuing a PhD, take some time to thoughtfully consider the reasons you want to do so.



4. If you are considering pursuing a PhD, do you want to complete a Master's first or do you want to dive straight into a PhD program?
 - a. If you do not know if you enjoy research yet, a Master's program can be a great way to find out. It is not recommended to begin a PhD program if you are unsure if you enjoy research.
 - b. If you need more relevant coursework or more research experience to be a competitive PhD applicant, a Master's program is a great steppingstone to a PhD (*also see bridge programs, below*).
5. If you would be an international graduate student, see if the schools you are interested in have an international student's office or an office where you can get information on visas for graduate students.
 - a. Consider talking to current international graduate students at the programs/schools that you are interested in to get more insight into how a given school/program supports its international graduate students.

Don't want to do a Master's, but want more experience before a PhD?

1. **Postbaccalaureate programs** take place after you complete your undergraduate degree and are meant to provide individuals with more experience prior to beginning a more advanced degree.
2. Some **bridge programs** are intended to provide individuals with additional research experience and mentorship during undergrad or soon after the completion of their undergraduate degree to directly prepare them for applying to PhD programs.

Identifying Potential Graduate Advisors

1. Find **research papers** that interest you and look at the authors (and their affiliations) of those papers.
 - a. Identify which of the authors (if any) run research groups that take graduate students. This is important because paper authors can be undergraduate students, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers, but there will typically be at least one person on the paper who runs their own research group.
 - b. If it is an older paper, author affiliations may have changed since publication and so you may need look the people up on Google Scholar or Research Gate to identify their current affiliation.
2. If you have the opportunity to attend **conferences or professional/society meetings**, read through the talk and poster abstracts to identify possible advisors or lab groups.
 - a. If you are specifically interested in herpetology, look into conferences/meetings hosted by the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (SSAR), the Joint Meeting on Ichthyology and Herpetology (JMIH), Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC), and the World Congress of Herpetology (WCH).



- b. The benefit of identifying possible advisors at conferences/meetings is that they (or people they work with) will likely be present at those meetings and you can try to talk with them face-to-face.
3. If you interested in completing your Master's or PhD at a specific university/school, or you are trying to restrict yourself geographically for personal (or other) reasons (e.g., to stay close to family), look at **university departmental websites** and scan through the research interests of professors in relevant departments.
 - a. On many university departmental websites, there will be keywords or a description of research interests for each faculty member. Use these to identify which professor(s) may be a good fit for you given your research interests.
 - b. Additionally, see if the professor(s) whose research you find interesting have lab websites where you can read further about their research. Additionally, see if there is any information provided on their lab websites on whether they are accepting new students, the work of their current graduate students, etc.
4. Make an [ECOLOG](#) account to look for possible postings from faculty who are looking to recruit Master's or PhD students. They often post because they have funding available and are trying to have a student assist with a specific research project.
5. For students specifically interested in herpetology research, keep an eye on this [herp lab recruiting spreadsheet](#), maintained by SSAR.
 - a. This spreadsheet is updated every year and includes both Master's and PhD positions, funding information, research area keywords, the link to lab websites, and more.
6. Social media / word-of-mouth / networking
 - a. Twitter and other social media platforms are not a surefire way to find labs that are recruiting graduate students, but periodically faculty will share on social media that they are looking for applicants to their lab group. Try searching something like "PhD position" in the Twitter search bar and see what comes up!
 - b. If you really enjoy the research of your undergraduate mentor(s), talk to them about whether they have any collaborators who may be looking for graduate students.
 - c. If you interned anywhere or participated in any summer research programs, do your best to maintain those connections. When the time comes, consider reaching out to your network to inquire as to whether or not they are accepting graduate students or know of any lab groups that are.

