



Heterodox Graduate Student Resource: Tips for Finding a Program and Navigating Graduate School

Created by Samantha Hedges

Choosing and navigating a graduate program that supports open inquiry and viewpoint diversity is not always clear-cut. HxA asked 142 higher education faculty, staff, administrators, and current and former graduate students for advice. Here's what they said! The advice is for prospective and current graduate students.

How can I know if a university or program values open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement?

"You can't always get reliable information from departmental websites; talking to people is often much better!"

Ask questions and observe

- Ask challenging questions during the application process about university and departmental culture, institutional purpose and mission, and workplace environment. And speak with faculty you might want to work with in advance of applying to the institution.
- Get in touch with graduate students and ask them about their experiences — this will be more revealing than anything said officially and may prove more fruitful than reaching out to faculty.
- Be direct in your questions. For example: What is the student body's tolerance of ideologically diverse ideas? How do professors foster open dialogue across the intellectual spectrum?
- Visit universities of interest to gauge the atmosphere as best as possible. Are there signs on campus and in classrooms that there is a culture of easy, open conversation, or are fear and tension the more salient emotions?

Research program requirements and outputs

- Read the diversity statement on the school's or program's website for mention of viewpoint or intellectual diversity.
- Research what courses are offered and request course syllabi. Does the program offer a wide range of options with differing underlying assumptions?
- Investigate what type of orientation or training are required. Are they politically or ideologically motivated?
- Look at the university website and program outputs, like newsletters, to see if they talk about politics or make political statements through the lens of an ideology or if they take a balanced approach.
- Research how the institution handles protests and whether they protect viewpoint diversity at events.
[The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) (FIRE) tracks campus speech policies and trends.



How can I know if program faculty value open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement?

"The faculty of your specific area are more important than the university itself."

Check out faculty CVs

- Read the biographies and CVs of all faculty in your program of interest. If everyone is producing the same sort of work, there is likely not much intellectual diversity. If there is a range of opinions and research interests, there is probably more.
- Know the controversial topics in your field of study, and see what faculty have to say about them — do they show academic rigor and provide a balanced view? Theoretical frameworks can also give an indication of their worldview.
- Pay special attention to book acknowledgments, organizational affiliations, book publishers, where they have given talks, and where they are cited and by whom, as well as whom they cite.
- Read their publications carefully. Key points and criticisms that faculty make about their own work often gives an idea of how open-minded an academic is. Someone who is well balanced considers their own perspective and its limitations from multiple lenses.
- Pay attention to patterns that indicate ideologically or politically motivated research, especially if it serves to confirm already-dominant views, and how they assess the works of others.

Peruse social media and websites

- Read faculty's public-facing scholarly work and mainstream publications, such as op-eds, to get a sense for their research and how they describe their findings. Are they humble and balanced?
- Scan faculty's social media interactions for uncharitable posts about other people or groups, as well as how frequently they use ad hominem attacks to denigrate others' opinions.

Talk to faculty

- Once you are enrolled, invest in building relationships with program faculty — go to office hours, speak to them about their research, attend events, etc. Over time, through personal relationships, you can start to figure out whether faculty value open inquiry.
- Talk to faculty about principles of scholarship to determine where they draw the line between academic freedom and sensitivity to others.



Pay attention to the actions of faculty

- Don't judge faculty by how they directly answer your questions on the subject — judge them by how they act and speak when controversial topics are raised.
- Pay attention to whether faculty passionately react to students who become excited about a political position or make moral claims during classroom discussion. If they listen intently and engage thoughtfully, but do not encourage or flame those students' passion, they are likely more open to balanced discussion. If a professor is open to good faith discussion of a range of ideas in the classroom, he or she is probably open to that across all their work.
- Listen carefully when faculty are lecturing. Are they asking questions, or are they leading students to the conclusions they want them to have?
- Notice to which letters and petitions faculty are willing to sign their name.

I want to research a heterodox topic. How do I go about doing so?

"Beware of simply researching it because of the 'forbidden fruit' factor. Some topics are taboo for good reason and need to be handled extremely tactfully, and with care. Exploring them should ideally yield benefit — they should not be researched merely for the sake of stoking controversy. The aim should be to up-regulate good signal, not add to the noise around an issue."

Choose supportive mentors

- Develop thick skin and be prepared to outwork everyone. Your best defense will be the confidence of defending your positions and the academic success that will come of it.
- Stick close to the evidence and keep emotions out of it. Be prepared with data and research and stay away from sharing personal experiences.
- Be prepared to examine evidence and arguments seriously and rigorously from as many sides of the issue as possible, not only the ones you find appealing. Be aware that understanding those whom you disagree with can take a great deal of effort if the aim is to treat their arguments with the utmost respect and keep your own biases in check.
- Understand why your topic is controversial and observe public figures who talk frankly about controversial topics without controversiality becoming their defining characteristic.
- Know which academic journals are rigorous and open to the topics you wish to explore. Specifically, look for journals that publish well-written, rigorous, top-tier academic pieces, which offer a "discourse," "opinion," "generative inquiry," or "perspectives" section.



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Understand your audience

- Learn the underlying assumptions of faculty and the subject matter they research. This knowledge will help you introduce divergent perspectives in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of faculty you wish to engage or have on your committee.
- Understand how your communication of the topic will be heard. You can effectively communicate heterodox positions by simply doing your best to communicate why your topic is important and the implications of findings.
- Avoid getting defensive, listen and try to understand all sides, and connect your reasoning to your audience's beliefs. Seek to find common ground.

What if I am enrolled at an institution or in a program that does not value heterodoxy?

"Be firm in your principles and virtuous in your character, and you will attract like-minded students and faculty alike."

Understand your audience

- Speak to students and faculty outside the classroom. Often, during one-to-one interactions, individuals are more likely to express their views openly, and you will be more likely to find connection points during these conversations, even with those who don't fully embrace your heterodox views.
- Join or start an interdisciplinary group on campus. This type of group might offer you a network of students with similar interests beyond your program and point you in the direction of mentors outside of your discipline.
- Look for community outside of your institution. Boundaries are healthy, and creating community elsewhere can provide opportunities to meet people and do things that you enjoy beyond your intellectual interests.

Say what you believe

- Be ready to respectfully voice your ideas or point out evidence that conflicts with the ideas of others. Self-censorship feels bad, but tread carefully, choose your battles wisely, and always remain professional and calm.
- Advocate for yourself and defend the value of viewpoint diversity. Remember that if you allow yourself to be silenced, you are making it harder for those who come after you, and perpetuating groupthink doesn't help any of us.
- Being open and honest is contagious, and better dialogue will come from such an approach. If you express views that challenge an orthodoxy, others will feel inspired to do the same.
- Don't be compelled to say things you don't believe. Being forced into a position that requires you to say, write, or sign things that you don't believe to be true is not emotionally or intellectually sustainable.



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Get involved with Heterodox Academy

- [Help promote heterodoxy.](#) Follow this road map and share it with friends and colleagues.
- [Become a member.](#) Stand up for what you believe and receive member perks.
- [Join an HxCommunity.](#) Interact with other heterodox thinkers in your discipline or region.
- [Check out our list of members.](#) Find heterodox faculty to connect with at your institution or institutions of interest.