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## SPEAKERS

Kaelyn Sanders, Ashley Appleby, Jenn Tostlebe, Jose Sanchez



Jenn Tostlebe 00:14

Hi, everyone! Welcome back to The Crim Academy. My name is Jenn. I'm one of the co-hosts. We are criminally academic here. Today we are speaking or I'm speaking with my fellow graduate students, Ashley Appleby and Kaeyln Sanders. This episode is one of the first to come of our graduate school series [Grad Life]. And this one is all about the process of deciding to go to grad school and entering graduate school. So I'll get started with some introductions for our guests for today.



Jenn Tostlebe 00:45

First off, we have Ashley Appleby. Ashley Appleby, is a fourth year PhD student at Rutgers University's School of Criminal Justice. She has a BA in criminal justice and psychology from Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, and a master's in criminal justice from Rutgers. As a certified instructor with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program and the NJ-Step Program, she is deeply invested in prison education. She also does research surrounding the conditions of confinement, reentry, and juvenile justice. She is currently working on her dissertation prospectus on juvenile justice while working as a research assistant at Vera Institute of Justice, but in her spare time, she is usually at the gym or outside – running, walking, or just enjoying the fall weather. Welcome, Ashley. We're excited to have you.



Ashley Appleby 01:34

Thank you. I'm excited to be here.



Jenn Tostlebe 01:36

And then we have Kaelyn Sanders. Kaelyn Sanders is a first-year doctoral student at Michigan State University in the School of Criminal Justice and a National Science Foundation graduate research fellow. She graduated from The Ohio State University in May 2020 with a bachelor's in criminology and sociology. Kaelyn's research interests are women who are incarcerated as well as school shootings and mass shootings. She currently works as a research assistant on a project examining how communication between probation and parole agents can be more effective and assists with constructing the U.S. School Shooting Database. Outside of school, Kaelyn loves to travel, cook, and spend time with family and friends. Thank you so much for joining us, Kaelyn. Excited to have you.



Kaelyn Sanders 02:20

Thank you. I'm excited to be here.



Jenn Tostlebe 02:22

Alright, so just a brief overview of what we're going to be talking about this episode. We're first going to start with some really broad questions for Ashley and kaylin, on why they decided to go to graduate school, then start to get into the application process that they've both gone through. And then lastly, how they decided on a program to start their PhD journey. So we'll first start with this broad question of what influenced you to decide to go to graduate school, and whoever wants to go first.



Kaelyn Sanders 02:55

I can start. So in undergrad, I always knew that I wanted to pursue graduate school at least up to like a master's degree. I didn't decide that I wanted to do my PhD until I got introduced to what research was and kind of what the job options were when you have a PhD. So I started working on a research project with some graduate students at my undergrad university. And I really loved that. It was a qualitative project. So I was like transcribing and doing a little bit of coding. And I enjoyed that and through that one of the graduate students I was working with actually helped me apply to a summer research program. And that was my first kind of introduction to Michigan State's program. And

there I worked with my now advisor, I have two advisors, with one of my advisors over that summer before I started graduate school, on a project on school shooting. So that kind of really influenced me to see that I wanted to take it a step further and get my PhD because I like to research and I like the job options that people with PhDs have.

A

Ashley Appleby 04:00

So my experience was a little different. So my influence was strictly my undergraduate advisor. So I did not know I wanted to go into graduate school. In fact, I actually didn't even know that I wanted to go into college and do undergrad. So when I started undergrad, I was an undeclared major with a GPA that sat right below a 3.0. And eventually, I started taking criminal justice classes around the end of my sophomore year with this professor, Professor Steve McQuinn. And it was the first time I started enjoying class content, enjoying studying, and actually doing well in a class. So after that, he sat down with me one day when I was picking my class schedule for one of my semesters and he said, Hey, so you should get your PhD. And I said, you're absolutely wild. You're nuts. I can't do that. My parents didn't go to college. I don't even know what a PhD is. But I listened to him for some reason. So he was why I went to graduate school. I did not know I liked research. I did not know I wanted a doctoral degree. But I clearly have come to, to like it. And here I am.



Jenn Tostlebe 05:09

Yeah, very different experiences. Mine's like kind of in the middle of those, like, I never really thought about grad school when I was an undergrad, I wanted to go to law school, and then ended up hating working in this law office that I worked in. And so I just randomly applied to a master's program. I think, a week before the application was due, and got accepted. And then now I'm in a Ph. D. program because I liked it in my master's. So kind of a mix between the two of you. It's really interesting, all of the different journeys. Alright, so then your answers have kind of already alluded to this. So just a quick recap. When did you end up deciding to go to grad school? Like, was there a specific moment, like I've heard some people talk about or what?

K

Kaelyn Sanders 06:01

Mine was kind of after that summer internship that I had, and I had always been interested in the topic of school shootings, but I didn't know anything about research going on with that, or kind of like, what the academic study of school shooting was, or what was going on in that realm. So once I got to work with Dr. Steve Chermak, from

Michigan State, and I worked on his project with him over the summer, I was like, wow, like, I can do research on a topic I'm really interested in, but it can also influence you know, policy or different, you know, just make change in the world. And that's kind of a big thing for me is that I want to do applied research. And I felt that when I worked with him over the summer, I saw that that was actually something that was attainable. And the only way to actually do that was through a PhD essentially.

A

Ashley Appleby 06:50

So I don't know if there was a moment for me when I decided I think it was after going to my advisors office probably three or four different times, where he sat me down in front of him and said, Ashley, I really think you could, you should consider this. And this is a realistic goal for you. I didn't believe him for a very long time because I didn't want to take the GRE, I didn't want to apply to grad school because it just seems like a really long process and I had no idea what I was doing. But eventually he convinced me and I listened to him. And then I think it was the end of my junior year is when I officially was like, okay, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it 100%. So I bought like, three GRE books, signed up for a GRE course, started researching schools. So I would say the end of my junior year was when I was like, okay, I'm gonna put my mind to this and I could do it.



Jenn Tostlebe 07:39

Good for both of you. You both knew in undergrad, that's not my experience.



Jenn Tostlebe 07:45

Alright, so, Ashley, you mentioned the GRE. So let's start to get into the application process. I know pretty much everyone that I've talked to dreads, the GRE Kaelyn, you're shaking your head. So I'm assuming you had gone to a similar thought process as well. So on that note, did both of you, or either of you have to figure out how to apply to grad school on your own? Or did you have a mentor or family member or someone else to help kind of guide you through this process?

K

Kaelyn Sanders 08:16

So mine's kind of a mix of both. I would say that I more so had help than was doing it on my own. So I keep referencing that summer research program I did, but it was really like a huge influence and a huge help. Because part of the program, or the whole point of the program was to kind of get the students that participated to go on and pursue graduate

level education. So with that they had us you know, already writing a personal statement, getting it reviewed, and then rewriting it, and also preparing other materials like preparing our resumes and you know, different things like that. So that helped me a lot, kind of get some stuff already out of the way. Before I had to worry about trying to apply to grad school while still finishing up my undergrad at the same time. The GRE, I did most of that myself, they did have us do some GRE prep classes. But to be honest, it just really didn't help me like I have such bad anxiety from standardized testing that no matter what I do, I'm still just going to get super nervous. And all the preparation in the world is really not going to do much for me. So that part I was kind of on my own with just figuring out how I could study and try to make myself feel a little more calm about the test. And then the rest I got help from a graduate student at OSU [Ohio State University] Sadé Lindsay, who is one of the grad students I worked for, she reviewed pretty much all my essays for my applications and everything. So she was like the biggest help with the whole process.



Ashley Appleby 09:42

So this is good that we're doing this together because we have pretty different experiences and I really enjoy hearing about yours. So I'll say this all the time. I say this to my students now. I had no idea what I was doing and I kind of was just winging it and I sometimes feel like I still do that now although I probably shouldn't say that out loud. So let's see, what did I do. So first I prepared for the GRE, I took the course. And similarly though I have really bad test anxiety and just anxiety in general, so that wasn't great. I mean, all the preparation in the world, just like you said, Kaelyn, cannot help me with a standardized test. It's definitely not one of my strengths. And I acknowledge it and I know that. So for those of you who are listening to this for a tip, if that is you just accept it and be okay with it because we made it here, even though we have really bad test anxiety, and there are other things that matter more than that. So my advisor, Steve McQuinn in undergrad, he told me to apply to graduate school, and he was very supportive, but he's very hands off. So he's a very relaxed human being. And I'm a very organized and detail oriented human being. So he said, okay, just, you know, Google some schools, find some funding, and you know, you'll figure out the applications. So I literally did the GRE. I sat on Google and I just googled top PhD programs in criminal justice, read the list, and pick some schools to apply to, and I was like, alright, well, if they have funding, and if I can complete the application, and if I can afford the application, I'll do it. There was essentially no rhyme or reason at that point. So in the way beginning, when I had to figure out the process, it was kind of just, I'll guide myself, I'll figure it out. So that's kind of how it went.



Jenn Tostlebe 11:23

Yeah, very different. Again, I think I kind of had like this mixture in between them. Yeah, I

had an advisor who was pushing me to go to like certain schools and apply to certain schools, but yet, I still had to figure out the whole process by myself. I'd like a spreadsheet with all the schools I want to do apply to. Okay, both of you did, too. And like all of the dates, and all of that. And so that's like, how I went about figuring out how to apply to schools.



Jenn Tostlebe 11:52

So then, because I hear like this huge range of how many schools people apply to. All the way from one to like 40 depending on who I've been talking to. So for both of you, how many schools did you apply to? And do you think that that was the right amount, too few, or too many?



Kaelyn Sanders 12:13

I applied to seven, total. Five for PhD and two were masters. For me personally, I think that that was the right amount because it gave me enough options to where if I didn't get into a couple schools, I still had a couple more options. Or if I got into all of them, I had, you know, a good enough range of options, but it wasn't too many or too few. And another thing I would say is that I was trying to be really conscious of how much money I wanted to spend on the applications because the GRE is already like really expensive in itself. So I told myself, whatever you get on the GRE is what you get, you're not taking that again, because you're not, I'm not paying that again, for that test, because you still have to pay applications, and we know the fees differ for schools. So a big thing, just kind of like a little side tip I would recommend is like try to get as many fee waivers if you can. Normally, I don't qualify for fee waivers, but I was able to get I think for almost all the schools, I applied to a fee waiver. One thing and maybe you guys can put like links to stuff I can send a link to you for one from the big 10 is just a quick application you fill out and the schools reach out to you and they'll send you like some fee waiver. So that's like a good thing if you're applying to a lot of big 10 schools. And then some other schools will have a section on their website where you can, you know, email somebody and ask. So definitely look into that because if I didn't have those fee waivers, couple schools what I got cut from the application process,



Jenn Tostlebe 13:39

That's awesome. I actually didn't even know that that was a thing. So yeah, Kaelyn if you send me the link, I'll make sure and post it on our website.



Ashley Appleby 13:49

Yeah, I also didn't know that was a thing; except one school that I applied to, right before I was about to click pay, it said if you're a first generation college student, click here and your application fee is \$0. It's like, oh, this is amazing. So I applied to five PhD programs in total, including that one that was \$0, which was lovely. And I'm glad Kaelyn that you brought up price because that is a real constraint in terms of applying to graduate school. So for me, I wanted to apply, I think my list was about eight or nine probably, and the night of when I was actually applying to the schools, I had to cut one out. So there were two applications. I'm not going to say school names, but two applications were \$150 and \$125. And I just could not swing two applications that were over \$100 on top of paying for three other applications. So I had to pick out of those two schools, one out of two, to apply to. And I think that for me, I think that was a good amount. I wish that I could have applied to more, of course, for the reasons of broadening my search. So just kind of seeing what else is out there because I had no idea so I think that would have been really helpful. I think would have also strengthened my skills. So my interview skills and just my interpersonal skills in going to places that I had never been before, talking and interviewing with academics, and just being around more peers to kind of understand the environment I was getting myself into. And then just broadening my network in general. I know that a lot of PhD students meet and become friends on these visits. And as corny as that sounds, I think that's kind of something I missed out on. Because I only went to one visit. And I don't regret it in any way. I think five was a decent number. I do, though, wish I could have applied to more but again, financially, it was not feasible.



Jenn Tostlebe 15:37

Yeah, I think the price comment is a great one, because I didn't even think about that going in. And so I think I had a list originally of 10 schools and I ended up applying to five, just based off of money. And I went to two open houses. One was for half a day. It was supposed to be a longer visit. But I could only go for that long. So yeah, I think I missed out on some of those socializing and networking aspects. Especially because I feel like my master's program was so drastically different than this Ph.D. program on, like the rigor of the program and the socialization factors. And so it would have been nice to have more of an experience before jumping in headfirst, as I like to say,



Jenn Tostlebe 16:23

Alright, well, thank you so much for sharing that. So let's dig into the big question, then. Why did you decide to apply to the programs that you applied to? Was it based off of location, off of status, off of the actual program, the people you wanted to work with, or

something else?

K

Kaelyn Sanders 16:42

So kind of similar to what Ashley said, I also looked up, like, top ranked criminology programs. So I started there with my search, and I was kind of basing it off of, okay, what are within the top 10 schools, and I already knew that I was going to apply to Ohio State again, but they don't have a Crim PhD. It's only sociology. So I still wanted to apply. But I really wanted to do a program that was strictly criminology rather than sociology. So I started with Ohio State, I knew I was going to apply to Michigan State just because the internship and that was kind of a big part of it is they want you to also apply there. And then I went through that list, found a couple other schools, but the main thing that helped me cut down was looking at the faculty. So I spent a lot of time with the schools that I originally started my list, that I had on my list. And I said, Okay, let me go to their faculty page, read a little bit about what kind of things are the faculty they're studying? If there wasn't anyone there, at least one or two people. And I would just cut it from the list, because that made it a lot easier to start narrowing those schools down. And then I also looked at other things like location kind of played a role, but I looked all over, except really, in the south, I didn't like have any schools down south. And then also, I looked at different centers that the school had. So like research centers. I don't know why I decided to look at that. But I think someone told me, you should maybe look into that just to see. So that was kind of a big factor. And then I just thought about a few other things, like just looking at random stuff about the school clubs they had or things that might be interesting to me there. But the main thing was the faculty.

A

Ashley Appleby 18:18

Yeah, so I think I would echo that. So number one, of course, this has been made clear from both of us, but funding is important. So whether or not... Well, two things, whether or not you can afford to apply to the school. And then I think number two in funding is whether or not you are funded from the school. So I looked at schools that were funded, because similarly for Kaelyn, so you went straight from undergrad, it was Well, hey, normally I would get a career and start a job, so I need some sort of income to kind of sustain a living. So that definitely played into it. And then second is googling the top 10. And then third was kind of making sure, like Kaelyn said, that there were professors there that did research that I could see myself doing. So my research experience was fairly limited. The Fall of my senior year of undergrad, I kind of created my own study on student perceptions of the criminal justice system with a faculty advisor. And that was really honestly to get it on my resume because I didn't have any research on my resume and I was applying to PhD programs. So I figured well, no better way to do that than to



just make it happen. Along with that though, I had two and a half internships and undergrad. So I knew kind of where I fell in criminal justice. So I had an internship with the federal government; I had an internship working with children at a children's centers, so ages four to 14, who were kicked out of school because they were a danger to themselves or others and then they were placed here after they were in the hospital and they lived there until they were able to be released back home; and then my half internship was with parole for a week and then I had to move back to New Jersey from Connecticut. So that doesn't really count. The point of this being that, all of these things really influenced what I wanted to do research in and the schools I wanted to go to and what I was looking for in a school. My real strong influence there was the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program because I took that class in undergrad my senior year. So I knew that wherever I wanted to go, I needed to be doing some sort of research on incarceration, because that's where my passions were like sitting in that classroom, with my classmates in a maximum security prison was the most incredible experience of my life. So I honestly went to the top 10 schools websites and just looked for faculty members that studied incarceration. So anything with incarceration or conditions of confinement, and then based on that, I made sure again, that there was at least two to three faculty. And that is what influenced my decision to apply.



Ashley Appleby 18:18

Yeah, and now you're an instructor with Inside-Out now, right?



Ashley Appleby 20:50

Yeah, yeah. Which is pretty cool.



Jenn Tostlebe 20:52

Yeah. I would love to do that.



Ashley Appleby 20:55

You should. It's awesome.



Jenn Tostlebe 20:57

I've looked into it, but not very much yet. Alright, so do you think that those are the... So let's see, Kaelyn, you said, mainly the professors that were there, and what areas of

interest they had. Ashley, you said the same thing, as well as funding and the top 10 programs. Do you think that those are the best things to base the decision off of looking back now? Are you happy that those are things that you base your decision off of?

A

Ashley Appleby 21:28

So I guess I should talk first on this one, since this is now year four, apparently, I think I did fine. I think looking back, I don't think I would have changed anything. Of course, I wish I had more research experience in undergrad, so I kind of was more prepared. I think that's where I fell behind a bit in terms of kind of knowing what the academic atmosphere was like. But I think my decision if we think about strictly professors, price, top 10 schools, and funding, I think that that's, that's a pretty good thing to go off of. And just, I think, do what makes you happy, if you are happy on those visits, and you are happy with how you interact with those professors and with the mission and the goals of the school and what the school offers. That's really important, like everything we've talked about is really important. But making sure you're happy and you feel good when you're there when you see, when you receive that acceptance letter is super important.

K

Kaelyn Sanders 22:25

So I'm only in like week seven of being at my program. But I can say that so far, I do feel like I made the right decision. I know, in the beginning, you mentioned my research interests, which are two very different things. One is like school shootings and the other is about women who are incarcerated. So I'm actually able to get experience with both of those things at my program at Michigan State. So that's really helpful. And then I know I mentioned this to you, Jenn and Jose, about my grandma passing away and that experience, how horrible that has been, but my department, advisors, everyone has been so supportive, and like, making sure that I'm okay during this time and not trying to pressure me to jump straight back into, you know, schoolwork and research work. I think that just kind of reinforced my feelings of I made the right choice to be here because I feel supported in all ways thus far.



Jenn Tostlebe 23:22

That's awesome. Because yeah, that started or that happened, like right at the beginning of the program, week three or something like that. So that's great that you're getting the support that you need. That's important. Alright. Any other comments as far as like the application process goes?



Jenn Tostlebe 23:40

No? Okay, so then let's jump into how to decide on a program. So we know that both of you were accepted to multiple programs. So once you knew you had been accepted to one and then two or more programs, how did you begin your process of selecting a school? Like before even going on a visit. Was there anything that automatically rejected a school? Or were you focusing on something specific that once you knew you were accepted to more than one, you were able to start narrowing down the programs?

A

Ashley Appleby 24:14

I think for me, this happened in a funnel, which is sort of, I don't want to say convenient, but it worked for me. So I applied to five programs. I'm fully transparent and happy to say I got accepted to three, deferred into a master's program for one because they required a master's degree and then they would have accepted me into their doctoral program upon my master's degree completion, and then one rejection. So it went from five to three because once I got accepted into three, I knew I wasn't going to do the Masters, because I knew that I had another option that would have been a little little quicker, more efficient, which is, which is kind of why I ended up picking a program where I didn't need a Master's. Then I had to think about what was realistic and what was feasible, again, in terms of financial cost and if I would have to move and where I would have to go. So my three choices ended up being fairly close to home, all of them end up being fairly close to home as in where my parents live. And I went to the campus visit for only one, which ended up being Rutgers. And I actually am from, born and raised, in New Jersey. So the funnel actually kind of just placed me at Rutgers and living back at home with my parents, because it sort of just made sense. So that was my experience.

K

Kaelyn Sanders 25:38

Yeah, so mine is somewhat similar, and a little bit different. So like I said, I applied to seven programs total, if you count the two master's programs, I did get into all seven programs. So that was nice, but it did kind of make things a little more difficult, not saying I was doubting myself, but I was like, Oh, well, now I do have a lot of options. So that is really when I started focusing more on the funding and trying to think about funding in terms of cost of living in the areas because I'm from the Midwest. So I'm not used to paying a lot of money for like rent and other expenses, like I'm used to the Midwestern prices. So looking at some of the costs of living in other areas, I was like, I don't even know if I could like live on this, or different things like that. So I started out with the funding in conjunction with the location. And then also just going back to that faculty. So if a school only had a few faculty that I really wanted, like maybe one or two, I was like, this will kind of put it more

lower on my list. And that's when I started making that kind of spreadsheet of everything that I could look and see, okay, what are the schools on my list that I have, like, a lot of information written down about? That was a telltale sign to me that okay, this is gonna end up being in my top like, two, three choices. So yeah, but I didn't have anything that automatically rejected a school before the visit. I'm trying to think how many of my visits did I go on? I want to say I went on three total because one was canceled due to COVID, and the other one I missed because I was on a spring break trip, but I couldn't have went to that anyways, because the trip got, like halfway canceled because of COVID, too. So that was interesting time doing the business during COVID. But I got through most of them before COVID really started getting crazy.



Jenn Tostlebe 27:30

Yeah, COVID definitely threw a wrench in that then for you. I was thinking for some reason that it didn't impact your visits, but it did.



Kaelyn Sanders 27:40

Just one, just one. The other one, I impact that myself, because I want to go on a spring rate cruise, but COVID then ruin the cruise for me.



Jenn Tostlebe 27:48

Of course. Alright, so for the programs that you did go on a visit, then. So Kaelyn, three of them, and Ashley one. Did you know prior to going on the visit that you had been accepted prior to the open house? Were you already accepted to the program? Or was it like you went and had an interview type thing and then you found out you're accepted afterward.



Kaelyn Sanders 28:15

So for one of them, I already knew I was accepted. And then the other two I had to do like an interview. But I'm not sure if this is how they always are. Maybe you two have different experiences. But mine at one school, it was like two of us were, I wouldn't even call that one interview, it was just two of us were, you know, meeting with I think two professors at a time. Just talking with them and things like that. And then the other one, it was just you by yourself meeting with three different professors. But it still wasn't like an interview, it was more informal conversations.

A

Ashley Appleby 28:45

So for me, as I mentioned, my only visit was Rutgers. And no, I did not know if I was accepted or not. And it was the most terrifying experience of my life. So anecdotally, just a quick funny story. So I was driving back from Connecticut to New Jersey for this interview to go to Newark, and I was getting on the highway to start the drive. And if anyone knows the Merritt Parkway, it's terrible. There's stop signs to get on the Merritt. And it's just nobody pays attention, horrible. So I lift my foot off of the brake, do not put my foot on the gas, and I tap a car of people in front of me. So my first experience on my way to go to Rutgers to what I was absolutely terrified for, was getting in the first accident of my life, anecdotally. But that wasn't even the most terrifying or scary part. It was walking into Rutgers with all of these professors and all these people. It was every single person's top choice the year that I was at Rutgers. So four-five years ago now however long ago that was. And just being in that atmosphere and hearing people talk about all their publications and their research and their master's degrees. I just sat there eating my bagel in the corner quietly, like, Oh my god, what am I doing here, like this is not gonna work out. Because it's so scary. These campus visits are. I mean, the whole thing wasn't scary, but just the initial going there and having no idea if you're being accepted or not. And then being told, when there are essentially 20 people, they're like, Hey, we have seven or eight spots. And there's 20 of you here right now. It's like, oh, wow, this is scary.



Jenn Tostlebe 30:29

Yeah, that... so this question is in here, because like, my two visits that I went on, I knew I was accepted before going on the visit. And I didn't even know that it was possible to not know you were accepted before going on the visit until I was in the visits and people were like, did you actually know that you were accepted to your programs? Like when you went? And I was like, doesn't everyone and it just sounds terrifying to not know. And then yeah, Ashley, like you said to be hit with, like, we only have 8-10 spots maximum, and that that's half of you. Or interviews? It just sounds terrifying.

A

Ashley Appleby 31:08

Yeah, and they fed me all this good food. And I was like, Oh, this is such a tease. What if I don't get in like, you guys, just were so nice to me, and maybe I'll never see you again.

K

Kaelyn Sanders 31:18

I was gonna say too, I think one thing that made it even scarier for me, and Ashley, you might have had the same experience, is coming directly from undergrad because then

you're mixed in with people who have like, master's degrees or even sometimes, you know, people come and they've already done like, law school or stuff like that. So I was just like, uh, you know, you kind of start feeling that imposter syndrome a little bit, but it's okay.



Jenn Tostlebe 31:44

Everyone feels that, I promise. But still, yeah, I can understand that. I had a Master's going in, but I could only begin to understand what it would be like going somewhere where you weren't even accepted and being hit with the "all of these publications I have, and all of this research, and I have a law degree." But you made it and you were accepted. So yay. Alright. So during, like either the interview process or the actual visit, what questions do you think are really key to be asking? So obviously, in an interview, you're getting asked questions, but what questions do you think are important to ask the faculty or the graduate school director or program director?



Kaelyn Sanders 32:30

So I would say definitely, like, in terms of the graduate students, a big thing that I know, I asked, and a lot of other people I heard asking was about their experiences within the department, but also outside of the department. So what's the surrounding area like? How are you able to, you know, live with the stipend? How do they feel about just the department in general? And sometimes, I didn't have this experience, but I've heard from others, like, if graduate students are unhappy in their department, you can sometimes see it without even like having to ask them like, you can kind of see it based on the vibes in the room. So definitely asking about things like that. And then I would ask, you could ask graduate students or like faculty, this, but if you're have a particular identity or group, like kind of what supports are within the department for you or within the university at large. And then also just asking again, about the opportunities for research, what that kind of looks like, the timeline to degree, different expectations, like kind of the more not informal things, but the more technical aspects, like, what are the things that we have to have done by our first year? Like, when do we have to have our committee decided? All those different types of things, I think would be important to ask during the visit.



Ashley Appleby 33:46

Yeah, so I absolutely echo all of that with three other main things. So I think one main question is making sure you're talking and asking questions to the individuals who you could see yourself doing research under and asking them if they are taking advisees when you will be there because if someone, if you're applying to a specific school for two

different professors who do specific research work, and you want to be part of their research agenda, or if your research agenda is parallel to theirs, it's really important that they're even taking advisees because if not, you may not even have a chance to interact or work with them. So I think that's a super important question. The second one is making sure you're asking about research versus teaching assistantships and if you're being given a stipend, what you have to do, what the expectation is, so you know that going in. And then the third thing, so this is not something I knew at the time and I did not ask about, but make sure you're asking about practitioner relationships, if that's where you see yourself fitting, being involved in the community, interdisciplinary work, partnerships, just you have a more broad idea of what the specific department looks like and the school. So if they work across the university across schools, and kind of what is going on outside of the school or with the wider community or the wider university, because I think that's really important too.



Jenn Tostlebe 35:12

I wish I had had this before going on my visit. I was like that kid in the corner that was like, I don't know what to ask anyone. So I'm just gonna sit here and hope I'm making the right decision. Yeah, all really good things to ask. Alright, so during interactions with anyone in the program, so whether emails before the actual visit, during the application process, or during your visits, were there any red flags that came up that like turned you off from the program?



Ashley Appleby 35:44

So here I have two things. So the first is email interaction. So prior to applying to schools, and prior to going on any visits, I emailed I believe two PhD students from each school and two professors from each school, and I was ghosted [ignored] well over 50%. Like I just sent this like nice little email: "Hi, I'm a prospective PhD student. And I was just wondering if you can tell me more about your program or if we could set some time to chat. I completely understand you're super busy, so if you could just shoot me an email." Like it was something super informal and kind and short. And nobody answered me, I think I got two emails back out of probably over 50. So that was really sad. Now that I understand, though, reflecting back now that I understand the whole research and teaching and working email flow, like I get so many emails now. So I understand how it got lost. But shout out to Jordan Costa. So she's a third year PhD student at Rutgers, who emailed me when I was a PhD student at Rutgers. And I answered her immediately, numerous times, because I was like, I cannot be the ghoster. Like, I got ghosted, so many times, I'm not being the ghoster. So, shout out to Jordan for emailing me and shout out to me for not ghosting. And then in terms of in-person interactions, I just think that if you're

applying to PhD programs, and if you're specifically applying to top PhD programs, you need to prepare yourself for an environment that you have never situated yourself in beforehand. Specifically, for me, I felt that it was pretty cutthroat, everyone is pretty competitive, and if you're not a competitive person, and you don't like that environment, you just kind of have to, you can make it but you just have to prepare yourself. I don't know if it's still the same, Kaelyn, or if it's different now, since it's been like a little while since I went on these visits. It was super intimidating. And if I could just give someone advice that's listening to this that is scared or nervous, if these visits do continue in the future post-COVID. I would say just be yourself. Like, don't pretend you have publications if you don't, don't pretend you haven't research agenda if you don't. I didn't even know half the big names in the field. And everyone's like, oh, I've talked to this person from this university, or I worked at... and I'm like, I don't even know who that is. So just don't pretend to be someone that you're not. And just be yourself. And it'll work out when you just got to get through the visit.

K

Kaelyn Sanders 38:14

I definitely agree with what Ashley just said about being yourself. Because again, like coming straight from undergrad being there people who had master's degrees or all these publications, and even though I had my couple experiences with research, I was listening to other people talk about what they what they did. And then I'm like, oh my like, I'm not gonna get in. Like she's basically found this whole new discovery at this point, like, I don't even know what I've done. I don't think I've done anything. So definitely don't don't compare yourself, just, you know, be yourself, you obviously are there for a reason, they wanted to meet you if you've already gotten that far. So just keep that in mind. Now, as for red flags, I did have one, but it wasn't with the school specifically, it was something in the actual area that the school was in. So I had a friend from undergrad who went to one of the schools for her PhD, a different program. And when I went there, it was my first time ever being in that state, let alone in that area. So she took me out. We went to sit down at this restaurant, and we were the only African American people there. It's a small restaurant, it was in like a lighthouse. So think of a lighthouse. That's how small it was. No one came to serve us for like 45 minutes. So I don't know what the, why that could have been. We did tell like a waitress or a waiter like hey, can you get our waitress we've sitting here for like 20 minutes, and she has to go soon because she has like a visit to do after that. And still no one came up to serve us. So I was kind of like, you know, put off from the area. Just that experience. I'm like this is my first time ever being here. First time going anywhere out here. And that happened. So that wasn't a good experience. But it didn't really affect my view of the school. but it did affect how thought about the area, which in turn kind of not made me want to live there.





Jenn Tostlebe 40:05

Yeah, makes sense and kind of ties in, Ashley, with what you were talking about as far as like the broader community being important as well.



Jose Sanchez 40:13

Hi, everybody, I'm crashing on my own party here. I don't know. I'm sure Jenn filled you in on why I am so late to this. So yeah, we just got home not that long ago. So yeah. Hi.



Ashley Appleby 40:28

Congratulations.



Kaelyn Sanders 40:29

Yeah, congrats!



Jose Sanchez 40:31

Thank you. Did you record why I'm late to this?



Jenn Tostlebe 40:34

No.



Jose Sanchez 40:35

So just for people wondering when they finally do listen to this. So my wife and I had our first baby on Sunday. And he was three weeks early and that completely derailed our plans for pretty much ever, if I'm being honest. So yeah, so that's, that's why I'm super late. But I just want to drop by, say hello, and thank you. But you know, since Jenn's been doing a great job so far, she can carry the torch to the end.



Jenn Tostlebe 41:06

Alrighty. So next question then, which kind of ties in with a question we've already talked about. What were the deciding factors for you in a doctoral program and choosing your doctoral program? So in other words, Ashley, why did you end up choosing Rutgers? And

Kaelyn, why did you end up choosing Michigan State over other programs?

A

Ashley Appleby 41:27

So I don't know if I said this, I think I did. But I knew when I was there that it was my number one choice. So for me after that visit, it was if I receive an acceptance letter, I am 100% going there. And that was because of a few things. So first off, everyone I interviewed with who did research in areas that I was interested in was taking a graduate student. So I just got super lucky. And that was really cool. Secondly, it didn't require a master's degree. So I could go there. And I didn't have to spend a couple extra years getting a master's degree and then getting a doctoral degree. Third, funding. So I mean, this is public knowledge, but Rutgers has a funding package for four years guaranteed. So that was absolutely a factor. Transparency is key. We all know, we have to live. And that's really important. And then lastly, like I did mention, I could live at home. So that was a blessing and a curse. But that was absolutely a factor too.

K

Kaelyn Sanders 42:25

Yeah. So it really came down to me, I was stuck between two programs. And I actually like a few weeks before I made my final decision, I thought I was going to choose a different program. But I had a conversation with my dad, and he was telling me you know, like, I understand why you like this school, and I understand why you like this school, but start thinking about it more in terms of like, the holistic picture of the school. So what are all the things that I was looking for. So funding, not too high cost of living, good location, obviously, faculty, all those things, and what school meets most, if not all of those requirements. So once I did that, that's kind of where I got into choosing Michigan State because I knew that one, it was close to home, close in the sense of only a four hour drive away. It also has a great cost of living still in the Midwest. So really similar to what I'm used to. I already had establish ties with a faculty member there. And I knew that from conversations with my other advisor, Dr. Mary Morash, that I was going to be able to work with her, she had a lot of opportunities for my other research interests. So all things considered, I knew that that was going to be the correct choice for me. And I, like I said, seven weeks in, still loving it. So feeling great.



Jenn Tostlebe 43:46

Kaelyn, one extra question for you. If at all, how did being a person of color impact your decision for grad school?



Kaelyn Sanders 43:55

Yeah, so it impacted my decision. I'm not going to say a whole lot. But it did impact it in the sense of making sure that I felt the program I was in was not going to diminish my identity, or that I would feel kind of like my voice was minimized because that was a big fear of mine. I kind of already went into this whole process deciding that you might be the only or one of the few black people and especially black women, in these rooms at these interviews, and all the schools I applied to were predominantly white institutions. So kind of already went into it, knowing what that was going to look like. So trying to figure out how I could be okay with that, but also be in a place where I felt supported by everyone in the department or at least having a department that was somewhat diverse. And yeah, I don't know if I really found that exactly what I was looking for with that. But I think that when I looked at things outside of university, I was able to get that element of like diversity from other things that that universities have, like, I don't know, if Rutgers or University of Colorado Boulder has an AGEP, I would assume that they do. I know they're popular, like within graduate schools. So that was like a big thing for me is a school that has some type of organization for black grad students or something where I felt that I could still have that part of my identity there with me, if that makes sense.



Jenn Tostlebe 45:25

Yeah.



Jose Sanchez 45:26

So see, you does have something like that. I know, I've been invited to it a couple of times, and I haven't really engaged with it. But so also being a person of color. So I decided to not apply to any schools in Southern California or in California in general, just because I wanted to make sure that I left if I did get in somewhere. But I didn't really think about being a person of color moving out of California. And when I got to Colorado, it sort of hit me that it wasn't as big a deal as I thought it was. Because where I was from 95% of the people looked like me. But now it's flipped. And so it kind of hit me, it was pretty shocking how much it started to matter to me once I was here. So I don't know if that happened to you. Like at all.



Kaelyn Sanders 46:18

I wouldn't say I was shocked. But a big thing for me is that I got really nervous because with COVID happening. And then also we've seen like, just with, you know, George Floyd, a lot of police brutality, things are being discussed a lot right now. And then, being in a

criminal justice program. I was like, oh, gosh, like, I know, not everybody thinks like me, or has the same opinions or whatever, as me. But I was telling some of the graduates in my department, I was really nervous, because sometimes I don't think people realize that there's a line between opinion and when something is kind of like, blatantly disrespectful to my identity, and who I am as a black woman. So that's kind of I think, the main thing that was affecting me the most. I was already going into, it knowing that I'm probably gonna be the only one or there's only gonna be a couple of us. So that part didn't bother me. But I was really scared of what I might hear and classes or rhetoric that might be talked about or pieces that we read. Because just as scholars, we know that just because someone is an expert, that doesn't mean that they are right. And that doesn't mean that the things that they say or show that are true are correct, either. So I was really scared and nervous about that. But so far, I haven't had any issues. Like we've had really great conversations and it hasn't gotten to a point where it felt triggering to me personally. So that was good.



Jenn Tostlebe 47:45

Alright. So last main question, Ashley as a fourth year and Kaelyn as a first year, seven weeks in. Is there anything that you now know that you wish you had known before you started the program?



Ashley Appleby 48:00

So two things. So first of all, time feels really slow when you're in the program and it's super draining, but it goes really fast. In all aspects. I do not believe that I'm a fourth year right now. But apparently, I am.



Jenn Tostlebe 48:15

I feel that way too.



Ashley Appleby 48:17

Yeah. And then secondly, what I wish I knew was how important self care is. And I don't know if this is like me being a product of graduate school or a product of COVID or, or both. But self care is really important. And you need to take time off. If you are feeling exhausted, that probably means you're exhausted. So make sure you do the things that make you happy. And then resume your work when you're feeling whole again, and you're ready to put your best foot forward. My first year, I worked seven days a week. And

Kaelyn, please don't do that. Because it's just so important to like maintain mental health and like well being and mental stability. It's more important than any class or any assignment or anything. So always put yourself first. Absolutely.

K

Kaelyn Sanders 49:03

I think for me, I wish I would have kind of going with that knew more about how grad students did manage like class work and then just personal life. Because a big thing for me is I like to you know, have fun, do other things. But I've kind of felt like especially with COVID and being confined to, like I'm doing everything from my house. So I do class, work, all that for my house. It's kind of hard to separate that like work life balance. So I wish I knew more about kind of how they manage things like that. And then also I think, I don't know if I wish I would have learned this from someone else or how to go about that but just realizing that a huge difference from grad school and undergrad is that grad school is focused on kind of like long term victories and achievements. Because I feel like an undergrad you're so pressured to, every summer you need to have the best internship you need to be getting the this scholarship. Every school year, you know, you need to be doing something new, like every single semester every single year. But in grad school, it's like, it's not like that at all, you know, your first year you kind of just this is your foundational, get acclimated, get ready. And then over time, when you get into the third, fourth, you know, higher level years, that's when you kind of start seeing more fruits of your labor, I guess I would say. So getting adjusted to that has been a little hard for me, because I'm so used to trying to do a lot. So I can see a lot of like, kind of products from that. But that's not how it works. So just wish I knew a little more about that.



Jenn Tostlebe 50:38

I wish that's how it worked. But yeah, definitely, I feel that as well. That it's longer term things that take a bit longer to accomplish and see the final product. And any advice, so even me, so I'm a fourth year, still dealing with this whole trying to navigate work life balance. Up until last year, I was still working seven days a week. So all the way through my third year. Anyone have suggestions for dealing with work life balance?

A

Ashley Appleby 51:10

So this isn't necessarily work life balance, I feel like this is just general life advice. It's not just for you, Jenn, I think you're great and you're probably doing a great job. This is for the world. And I tell all my undergrads too. I help a bunch of them apply to graduate school. And my one biggest piece, two I guess, like a two fold thing. So make sure you make

graduate school work for you. So it's a really hard lesson to learn, because it seems like you're in this cohort with all these people and you all do the same stuff. But that's not true. And it's really hard. Like getting acclimated to grad school is really hard. Grad school itself is really hard. And it takes a lot of time in your life, just graduate school as a whole, getting a PhD. So if there's something that you want to pursue during those however many years that takes four or five, 6, 7, 8, 10, however long it takes, make sure you do it, and you go for those opportunities, because they're not going to be handed to you, unless you're super duper lucky. So just don't be afraid to reach out. And then the second part of that is: apply for everything. So a lot of people think I'm really crazy for saying that because I over applied to everything. In terms of workshops, fellowships, scholarships, experiences, like anything. But an opportunity is an opportunity, whether it's research, job, funding, or just something you want to try, and you could see yourself doing. It never hurts to apply. Because even if the answer is yes, 10 times out of 10. You can say no, every single time. So always apply because you can always say no.



Jenn Tostlebe 52:43

Alright. Last question, then, any final words of wisdom? I know Ashley just dropped some, but any other closing thoughts or pieces of advice?



Kaelyn Sanders 52:55

So I don't have much like advice as far as getting through grad school because, you know, we keep coming back to the seven weeks. But it's really true. So I'm still learning that. But as far as making the decision as to like, if you want to go to grad school and then if you decide that where you want to go. I would just say, don't let anyone tell you where you should go and to make the best choice for you and to do what's best for you. So if that means that you're not wanting to go to one of the top 10 schools then don't. Like I'm a big person about doing what feels right for you. Because if you choose anything else, for other people, you're not going to be happy. And at the end of the day, you're the one that is going to be sitting in these classes, doing this work, spending five plus years, however long in these programs in this area. So don't let anyone else tell you what you should do based on what they think. I know I had, I talked to one of my professors from back at OSU, he was like, so you're not going to apply to Harvard. And I for a second there was really considering like, okay, maybe like I should really consider and then I was like, What? Why am I even, I would not even be thinking about Harvard if he did not just say that, like, I don't even want to go there. I have no interest. There's not even anyone there that I really want to work with. So you know, just choose for yourself, like, make your own decision,



Jenn Tostlebe 54:14

Ashley, anything else to add?



Ashley Appleby 54:15

No, that's really important. I'm all about like self care and doing what's best for you. So I just echo that. 100%.



Jenn Tostlebe 54:22

Cool.



Jose Sanchez 54:22

Alright. Well, thank you both for joining us. Mostly, Jenn. We really appreciate it.



Jenn Tostlebe 54:28

Yeah, thank you.



Jose Sanchez 54:29

I really wish I could have been here for the whole thing, but I'll give it a listen, post editing. Anything you guys would like to plug? Any papers or projects that are coming out in the near future that you'd like people to know about?



Ashley Appleby 54:42

I'll be on the job market in a year. But that's really it.



Jose Sanchez 54:47

And where can people find you both? Twitter, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, email, that sort of thing.



Kaelyn Sanders 54:56

So my Twitter is just Kaelyn. K-A-E-L-Y-N underscore Sanders. LinkedIn is just my first

name, last name. And then I don't think there's anywhere else that I can be found.



Ashley Appleby 55:10

So I had to look up my Twitter. My Twitter is underscore Ashley Appleby, and my email is Ashley dot appleby@rutgers.edu. I also have a website, which is ashleyappleby.com. And my LinkedIn is Ashley Appleby. So thanks, guys.



Jenn Tostlebe 55:30

Thank you so much.



Kaelyn Sanders 55:31

Thank you guys.