

Scatterbrains: Have no fear of grad school

Seth Baum

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Exactly one year ago, I was frantically searching for a grad school program that could accommodate my eclectic interests. In this era of academic specialization within rigid departmental boundaries, such programs are few and far between, but they are out there. If you're in a similar search now as I was then, read on - this article is for you.

Not only is broad, integrative research satisfying (for some of us, at least), it is important. Excessive academic specialization leaves our knowledge fragmented with gaps at the boundaries between disciplines and a systematic lack of understanding how the pieces fit together. While many departments increasingly support research exploring the boundaries, a precious few enable synthesis of content from across the academy. This leaves us looking at some of the trees and none of the forest. The programs discussed here help correct this.

A shining example of an integrative program transcending common academic boundaries is geography, the field that I am now a proud member of. Regrettably, geography departments are uncommon in the United States. They study everything spatial, from human phenomena such as economies and gender relations to environmental phenomena such as ecology and climate science, as well as human-environment interactions involving natural hazards and natural resources.

Finally, geography departments also develop helpful tools such as geographic information systems and remote sensing. What sold me on geography was a conversation with a professor I had during a campus visit. He studies connections between global environmental change and local communities. In our conversation, he said he uses whatever research methods and bodies of knowledge are needed to address his problems. This stood in stark contrast to other programs I saw that were more aligned to specific methods and content.

Though geography's a great option, there are others. I looked at programs in ecological economics (not to be confused with the more restrictive environmental economics), environmental studies, science, technology and society (STS), engineering and public policy (EPP) and public health, all of which support integrative research spanning the natural and social sciences. STS and EPP often, but not always, cater to students with natural science and engineering backgrounds transitioning toward social sciences.

Last, but not least, are the interdisciplinary degree programs. These are programs not connected to any particular department. They may offer the most freedom to define your own research project. However, they require a great deal more independence, often

including a detailed research proposal as part of the initial application. They may also leave academia-bound graduates without a natural department to apply for faculty positions, although there are likely ways to work around this.

So, if you're interested in combining broad interests in a single graduate program, there are options. Please note that the above list of programs is likely not comprehensive, so you may find even better options in your search.

A quick search tip: Do your homework researching programs online, but don't hesitate to contact anyone for advice. I spent many helpful hours online reading program and faculty descriptions but only ended up connecting with geography after corresponding with a professor in a different department and making a campus visit. Also, these personal correspondences are often looked at favorably during the application process, since the faculty then knows you and knows how good of a match you are.

Hopefully, this has been a helpful tour through the unfortunately-small world of broad graduate programs. If you have any questions about geography or about graduate school in general, feel free to shoot me an e-mail at sethbaum@urgrad.rochester.edu.

Baum graduated from UR in 2003.