

1. FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU ARE INTERESTED IN

Sometimes, narrowing our field of interest is the hardest thing we can do! But it's nothing that time in the library reading journals can't solve. Don't try to get terribly specific yet (e.g. the effect of *Bromus inermis* on soil microbial biomass in the Wind River Mountains) unless you already have a project, funding, and an advisor. Read the literature broadly, then follow the topics that interest you the most, and see what they have in common. "Plant ecology" is probably too broad, "plant population ecology" is getting closer, and "the interaction between plant population ecology and soil dynamics" is pretty close. Be careful not to focus so tightly that you will constrain your options, nor so broadly that you will have trouble with identifying potential advisors or university programs.

Our advice is to not constrain yourself to ecosystem types or geography at this point. There are lots of great places to work.

As an additional idea, sometimes volunteering for a research program can really help you figure out what is most interesting to you. You could start with the library search, then offer your free services to someone you think would be interesting to work with. This is a GREAT way to move ahead to stage 2....

2. FIND THE POTENTIAL ADVISORS THAT YOU MIGHT LIKE TO WORK WITH

Your advisor is probably the most important aspect of your graduate education. This is the person who will challenge you and guide you, and determine the culture and environment of the lab group that you'll be immersed in. There are several ways to find advisors, some of which include serendipity.

How to find an advisor: The best advice (though not necessarily in our best interests here at CSU!) is not to limit your search to a single university or geographic area. Begin with---the library! Search out the articles that interest you the most, and do a lot of citation tracking. Follow the references that are cited until you find individuals who are active and publishing in the things you are most interested in.

Add a little web research to this. Where are these individuals, and what do they seem to be working on now? Who were their past students, and what are those students doing now? Where are they in their career?

When you feel that you have a handful of individuals whose work you are very familiar with, and with whom you think you would like to work, contact them, either by letter, phone, or maybe email. Realize that we are all getting a lot of email, and that we skim it these days. Be very clear that you are focusing on this particular individual as a potential advisor, and that you know a lot about her/his research, and initiate a discussion about whether she/he is taking students. If you get the opportunity, interview! Personal chemistry and the culture of the lab group of students matters every bit as much as working with a leader in the field.

How not to find an advisor: It is not a good idea to send out broadcast messages to all faculty in a program, or otherwise search generally for people without having spent time in the library and online. It demonstrates that you are not focused and have not done your homework. As faculty, we are most interested in the students who have researched enough to know our work and know what they are interested in.

3. FIND OUT IF THEY ARE INTERESTED IN WORKING WITH YOU AND IF THEY HAVE SUPPORT FOR YOU

In general, it is not worth applying until you know that someone might be interested in being your advisor. It is generally not worth it to be in a program taking courses if you don't have an advisor, and in GDPE, we will not accept students unless an advisor has agreed to take them on. It is probably best to figure out if your potential advisors have some interest in you before you apply. Put the work in up front...it's worth it!

That said, occasionally you can take a good class or two to help you learn a bit more about ecology and what you are interested in, as well as impressing a faculty member. You may want to take a few classes at an institution before you apply as a formal graduate student.

4. LEARN ABOUT THE COURSES AVAILABLE AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE PROGRAM YOUR POTENTIAL ADVISOR IS IN

Most graduate programs have fairly detailed web pages now, including nearly all the information you need. In some cases, you may need to call the program office and ask for written materials to be sent to you. You might have specific questions that you need to have answered by the program's coordinator. Make sure you have read all the available material first, so that you can demonstrate that you have done all the research you can.

5. APPLY!

If you are applying to GDPE, start with the CSU Graduate Application! It is not necessary to meet with the Director unless you have specific questions. **Again, be sure you have read the Handbook.**