

# MORE THAN YOU'D EVER WANT TO KNOW ABOUT GETTING INTO AND GOING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Dear student:

The following is a lot to digest, but hopefully it will guide you in making informed and effective decisions about graduate school. After you have read these pages feel free to come discuss any remaining questions with one of us or other Sociology Department faculty members.

## I. M.A. vs Ph.D. – what’s the difference?

a. What is your goal? What types of careers grad degrees can prepare you for:

**Both M.A. and Ph.D. programs** are varied in their orientation and encompass many topics (they can be in public health, social work, sociology, education, communications, law, geography, public administration, history, sexuality studies, and many others). Ultimately, Ph.D. programs prepare people for academic careers and M.A. programs prepare people for non-academic careers.

**M.A. programs** train graduates to pursue jobs such as:

- working in a social service agency, private organization, or public institution that focuses on the field of study
- research such as the Census Bureau or a survey research firm
- teaching at community colleges (and sometimes a 4 year university)
  - note: it is extremely rare to become a permanent (tenured faculty) at a 4-year university with only an M.A. and more and more uncommon to be hired in a permanent position at a community college with only an M.A. because so many people with Ph.D.’s are competing for those jobs

**Ph.D. programs** train people to be:

- university professors, professional researchers, program directors or consultants, and policy makers

*What if you aren’t sure:* If you’re considering a Ph.D. but do not feel prepared for or ready to commit to a Ph.D. program, that’s ok! Getting an M.A. can prepare you for Ph.D. work and can be an opportunity to strengthen your grades and recommendations. Be advised that many Ph.D. programs do not transfer ma work from other schools they typically expect you to start from scratch in their own programs, but some do allow you to transfer some classes and even your M.A. thesis.

b. How long does it take to get an M.A. or Ph.D.?

**M.A. programs** typically take 1-2 years full-time (or longer if you go part-time).

**Ph.D. programs** are supposedly four to six years, but the national average in the social sciences and humanities is 7 years. Many Ph.D. candidates have part or full-time jobs that require part of their time but most PHD programs will require a fairly full-time commitment for at least the first year or two.

- Some Ph.D. programs allow you to earn an M.A. on the way to the Ph.D. The focus is Ph.D., though, so you don’t apply to Ph.D. programs if all you want is an M.A. (or you do not make it clear that this is your goal when you apply).

## **II. Who is eligible for graduate school?**

- a. Anyone with an undergraduate degree is eligible, including people who have been out of school for some time. Many programs may prefer applicants with a degree in the same discipline (such as a Sociology major or minor for a Sociology Master's program). For example, Prof. Hossfeld never took a single undergraduate course in Sociology but still got accepted into a Sociology Ph.D. program. If you do not have an academic background in the field, a demonstrated interest in the subjects and or related experience or training is highly advantageous.
- b. Most grad programs look for candidates who have strong academic records in general but also look for:
  - evidence of strong writing skills
  - motivation and ability to work independently
  - maturity and stability (note that older students and people who have taken time off are frequently considered excellent candidates)
  - academic promise
  - interesting applied experiences
  - contribution to diversity
  - good letters of recommendation
  - demonstrated research skills and experience
  - sometimes, but less and less frequently, strong GRE (Graduate Record Examination) scores
- c. Individual departments prioritize these qualifications differently. Note that Ph.D. programs, in particular, can be quite competitive – only a small fraction of applicants are accepted at most programs. Therefore, it is advisable to apply to several schools and to research and prepare your application carefully.

## **III. What will you actually do in graduate school?**

This varies between programs, but generally:

### **M.A. programs:**

- Take classes including:
  - core courses in the field
  - theory courses
  - research methods
  - electives in an area you emphasize in
- Write a thesis (between about 30-100 pages) focused on your own original research or analysis
- Possibly take written or oral exams about the field of study

**PH.D. programs** (this list includes A LOT, but remember these occur over several years):

- Take courses that are similar to those described above in M.A. programs
- Sometimes completing an M.A. thesis, usually completed by year two
- Take “Qualifying Exams” in your third or fourth year:
  - In-depth study of 2-3 subfields in the topic (like in Sociology this could be urban studies, intersectionality, immigration, labor, race, or others), writing up papers that resemble extensive literature reviews of the fields, and taking an oral exam in front of a committee of professors where you defend your knowledge of the areas
  - The reading lists and process are conducted in consultation with faculty advisors and sometimes in the context of a class – most of the work is done independently
- Write a dissertation:
  - This is a study based on your original research, which ends up being the length of a book when written up (both Prof. Hossfeld’s and Reck’s were over 400 pages)
  - Each student defines an original problem or topic and then theorizes about it, constructs a research design, collects and analyzes data and writes it up in an undoubtedly brilliant and definitive way. And then often defends it in front of a committee of their professors.
  - These can take anywhere from 2 to one thousand years to complete. Prof. Hossfeld and Reck spent around 6-7 years doing theirs

#### **IV. How do you choose a school or program?**

a. Know where to go to get the degree you want:

Not all schools offer both M.A. and Ph.D. programs. In California, for instance, UC campuses offer Ph.D. programs and some, but not all, CSU’s offer M.A.’s. Few CSU’s have Ph.D. programs (SFSU has only two Ph.D.’s, both in the college of education).

b. Know which departments offer you what you want:

Graduate programs – even within a single discipline, like social work – can vary immensely in their area of specialization, theoretical orientation, and approaches to education. After deciding on a field – say public health, sociology, or social work – you want to figure out what program “fits” and how you want to study that field. It’s important to carefully research which departments have program emphases, classes, and faculty interests that complement your learning goals.

- For example, if you are interested in studying public health concerns affecting people who have experienced incarceration, then you would

analyze how different programs' classes, faculty research expertise, and mission seem to integrate this community and topic.

- Contact and read about as many programs as possible. You might also find out where scholars whose writings you know and admire were trained, or if they teach now, and check out those places.

c. Make sure you're a good fit for the departments you apply for:

This is somewhat similar to the point above. Just as you want to see if the department fits with you, departments want you to fit with them as well.

Departments typically look for applicants who specific research interests and perspectives complement those of their own faculty and program. Many an excellent candidate has been told – sorry, your areas just don't match ours. If there is no one in a department with expertise in your interests who could mentor you and teach you what you need to know, then this is not an ideal program for you.

- For example, the UCSF sociology graduate program focuses exclusively on medical sociology, so someone who wants to focus on Latin American social change shouldn't bother to apply.
- Or, if you're interested in prison abolition work and the department has a conservative and pro-incarceration stance, you would probably feel unsupported.

d. Consider the importance of community:

It's important to choose a school where you will have a sense of community and peer support. Some schools are in locations where the local community is fairly homogeneous. Take your personal needs into consideration before moving somewhere for several years. Also having a supportive cohort (i.e., peer group) of graduate students is often the key factor in making or breaking your graduate school experience.

- Investigate what type of students have been accepted into – as well as finished – the programs you're considering.
- You might ask your own undergraduate faculty and your friends at other campuses what they know about different programs.

e. Consider taking time off between college and graduate school:

Taking time after finishing your B.A. can also be an excellent choice, especially if you've gone straight through high school and college. Getting more work experience (especially exploring the fields you're interested in studying in grad school) can help clarify what you want to do as well as strengthening your application.

f. Other considerations:

If you are interested in teaching, we highly recommend choosing a program that offers graduate students the opportunity to try teaching courses: while graduate students (especially in Ph.D. programs) do work as teaching assistants or course instructors, some programs do not even guarantee graduate students this possibility. Since a program that actually formally trains students how to teach is rare (except maybe in education!), student teaching is one of the few opportunities to learn how.

**V. What advance preparation can be helpful if you're thinking of applying for grad school?**

a. Form relationships with faculty:

Develop a strong academic relationship with faculty members at your undergraduate institutions. As part of your applications you will need to solicit at least two and sometimes three letters of recommendations from individuals who can speak to your academic ability and promise.

b. Develop strong writing skills and a writing sample:

Strong writing skills are a prerequisite of almost any graduate program. Some programs (especially Ph.D.) ask you to submit a writing and research sample. Take at least one course where you have the opportunity to produce a strong polished research paper on a topic related to one of the academic areas you wish to pursue and graduate school. Make sure the paper is edited well and looks as professional as possible.

- If you have the opportunity, publish any papers or articles you have written, including in student publications. You will not be passed over if you have not been published, but it is look on very favorably as long as the pieces are well-written.

c. Develop experience:

Participate in a range of experiences that demonstrate your interest in sociological issues and your ability to work independently, such as: community organizations, internships, peer advising, independent studies, and TAships.

## VI. What are the steps before applying to grad school?

- a. Know the time frame:  
Most graduate programs accept students only for the Fall semester. Typically applications are due between November and February of the academic year before you wish to begin.
- b. Decide on your focus:  
Around two semesters before applications are due, identify what areas you are interested in studying (such as social work, education, public health, etc.) and think through what you'd like to focus on in the field (housing policy, inclusive education, health care access, etc.). These will help you choose a program and make you a stronger candidate – you should present a focused plan in your application. You won't be required to stick to these interests once accepted, but applicants who do not appear to be directed are often not prioritized.
- c. Determine how geographically mobile you are:  
Identify what institutions in your preferred regions have graduate programs in your desired fields.
- d. Identify schools:  
Research programs that cover your interests and have faculty members that specialize in or at least include your areas of Interest.
- e. Contact schools for information about their programs:  
The best source for information is usually the website or department itself. Departments often put together online resources and brochures about their specific offerings and requirements, which can be more helpful than a general course catalog. It is entirely appropriate to ask for financial aid information and if GRE test scores are required. Department websites typically list faculty, describe their specific interests, and have links to their publication titles.
- f. Contact faculty and students:  
If feasible, contact faculty and current or recent graduate students at campuses you're considering. Email the department office and ask which faculty and students might be interested in talking to prospective graduate students. Then call or look them up.
  - o Graduate study involves a strong mentorship system. During the course of your graduate work (especially for a Ph.D.), you will need to connect and work closely with one or more faculty members who share or at least support your research interests. It's in faculty members' interest to see that their programs accept students who they will want to work with. It is in your interest to know if in fact you want to work closely with these individuals were several years.

g. Prepare for the GRE:

If the GRE is required at any of your preferred institutions (many schools no longer require them), practice tests may be helpful. Sample tests are available commercially. GRE prep courses are available for a fee. GRE's are offered several times throughout the year, but you need to pre-register and to make sure the results will be available when your application is due. Note that there are both General GRE's (basically math and English) and specific subject GRE's, such a sociology. Find out if your schools require both.

## VII. What do I do for the actual grad school application?

Typically, you will be asked to submit the following:

1. An essay or statement of purpose about your interests, strengths, and goals
2. Transcripts from all undergraduate and graduate work
3. Curriculum vitae: i.e., a resume of academic, professional, and related experiences
4. 2-3 letters of recommendation and or analytical strengths.
5. A sample of academic from people who know your academic strengths
6. GRE scores (sometimes)

## VIII. Tips for preparing your grad school application

- a. Know your audience. Graduate students are typically selected by a committee of faculty members from the department you are applying to – not by a general admissions department, as is the case in most undergraduate programs. As crass as it sounds, packaging is important. You may want to emphasize different strengths and interests in different applications, according to what each program is looking for.
- b. Make sure your statement of purpose is focused. It's fine if you have multiple interests, but you need to define how your goals and interests align with the degree you're pursuing and the department you're applying for. The department will be looking for people who are motivated, self-directed, and organized – not just for people who are smart.
- c. Remember that the application process is competitive. Your application is probably being compared to those of top students from many campuses. Prepare your application materials carefully and professionally. Make sure your writing is carefully edited, ask your professors, friends or family to review your materials, and closely edit your submissions.

- d. Think about what to emphasize in your application. Keep in mind that most PhD programs are at institutions that emphasize research more than teaching. Unlike SFSU, where teaching has traditionally been the faculty's main mission. The faculty in PhD-granting programs will therefore typically be looking for graduate students who will also go on to make their mark as researchers and publishers. It is fine to express an interest in teaching in your application, but often acceptance committees are much more likely to accept applicants for their research and publishing potential than for their teaching potential (although teaching is considered a more important concept these days). You might want to keep this in mind and your statement of purpose if you're applying to a Ph.D.
  
- e. Be thoughtful about letters of recommendation. In soliciting letters of recommendation, keep in mind that your professors, employers, and other potential references are not required to write letters for you. Ask your references if they feel they are able to write you a strong letter of support or not. If they are not able to commit to this, get a letter from someone else if possible. Also, universities typically ask you whether or not you waive the right to see the letters. Confidential letters tend to be taken more seriously. In addition, keep in mind that faculty may very well be writing many letters for many people so give them plenty of time. Contact them at least two months before the letter is due to find out what they need from you to write. It's good to provide information to your recommenders, including a reminder of what classes you took from them, which semesters you took them in, and what grade you earned. Also share information about what your goals and interests are and what the programs you're applying to are looking for. You should also always provide specific instructions to your referees for how to submit the letters.
  
- f. Don't be late! Late and incomplete applications are often not even considered. It is your responsibility to see that transcripts, letters, and other materials are all on time.

*A note about preparing for applying for graduate school if you're taking time off from school after graduating: if you plan to take a year or two off (or more), that's fine! Before you graduate, meet with the professors you think you'd ask to write letters of recommendation for you in the future. Get support from them and talk over your plan to get advice about how to prepare for eventually applying. Ask them if they'd be willing to write for you in the future. Then email them from time to time to keep in touch and stay connected!*

## IX. Financial Support

Most programs offer a variety of financial support possibilities. It is not unusual in the UC system, for example, for most students to get full support. This means a partial tuition stipend, guaranteed employment, or a living stipend. But that is not necessarily enough to support a family on. You should inquire about the financial support that interests you, such as:

- fellowships living stipends
- tuition waivers / scholarships
- teaching assistantships
- research assistantships
- residential staff positions
- work study
- other on campus jobs
- reduced rate on campus family housing and childcare
- student loans
- private scholarships from institutions and businesses
- foundation grants

Also, some funding sources are available external to the school such as G.I. Bills and some government loans (including forgivable loans that don't have to be paid back if certain conditions are met such as agreeing to work in certain State institutions).

Good Luck, and don't forget to ask your faculty for support in thinking through the graduate school application process!