The Leadership Alliance

Tips on Preparing for and Applying to Graduate School

A Guide for the Social Sciences and Humanities Disciplines
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Introduction

For those with a passion for learning and a desire to generate new knowledge or new ways of looking at things, graduate study provides the skills and expertise that prepare you for a productive career as well as professional and personal fulfillment. While applying to graduate school can be complicated and time-consuming, you should think of it as the beginning of a great educational adventure to your future.

Like any adventure, you will be faced with many choices and challenges. There is a wealth of information available to read on applying to graduate school. You will (and should) get advice and opinions from faculty, administrators and many others. Part of your task will be deciding what advice best meets your own individual circumstances, needs, and goals.

This brochure has been created to provide an overview of the graduate school application process for those interested in doctoral degree programs in the humanities or social sciences. In the pages that follow, we will briefly discuss with you how to prepare for graduate school, what you should be looking for in a graduate program, what graduate programs are looking for, how to prepare and submit an application, how to prepare for and present yourself at an interview and, finally, how to finance your graduate education.
I. How to Prepare for Graduate School

A. College Preparation

**In General:**
- Learn good study habits
- Get good mentors early on
- Establish good relationships with your advisors
- Establish relationships with faculty who can write strong letters of recommendation
- Take advantage of undergraduate research opportunities to learn more about your field
- Talk to your professors about their career and graduate experiences
- Find out what kinds of courses will best prepare you for graduate programs in your field
- Get involved in your campus community
- Volunteer and do community service

**Freshman & Sophomore Years:**
- Take a broad spectrum of introductory courses. This will serve as a launching pad to help determine what you are interested in.
- Take courses that help develop skills in reading comprehension, writing and public speaking.
- Get involved in research at your home institution and learn about faculty research in your discipline.
- Seek out advisement and career counseling. Establish a good relationship with your school's graduate school advisor or pre-professional career advisor—help them get to know you.
- Become visible and active within your major department. Attend events sponsored by the department, social gatherings, and talks by guest speakers. Your professors will see you around the department and will know that you are a dedicated, committed student.
- Find out about student clubs and organizations in your major. Find ways to connect with alumni, particularly those with advanced degrees in your field of interest.

**Junior Year:**
- Be thoroughly aware of the required course sequence for your major and map it out tentatively with an advisor.
- Take advanced level courses appropriate to your field of interest, especially those which are research and techniques oriented.
- Expand your research experiences:
  - Apply for programs such as: Mellon Mays, McNair, etc.
  - Do an independent study
  - Attend meetings, workshops, symposia, presentations on research in your discipline
- Participate in Summer Research Program(s)
  - Get an inside look at what an academic or research career can offer
  - Acquire/enhance research skills as well as critical thinking and writing skills
  - If possible, participate in a research experience at a place you would like to go to graduate school, it is one of the best ways to prepare and make contacts
- Network
- Begin preparation for GRE. Take preparation courses (Kaplan, Princeton Review, etc.), review copies of old exams, and take timed practice tests (for the GRE prepare for the computer version). Some summer programs offer GRE prep.
- For PhD applicants, take GRE. This exam is computerized and you can take it almost any time; the fall of your senior year is most common. There are two parts to this exam: a general test, which consists of verbal, quantitative and analytical writing sections and is required by all schools; and, subject tests in specific areas, which is not required by all schools. Order your undergraduate transcripts and test scores at least six weeks before each graduate program application deadline. Begin to learn about financial aid opportunities for graduate students.
- Identify potential faculty, administrators, and relevant professionals for recommendations in your discipline; develop relationships with them and assure they know your work, interests, experience.
Senior Year:

- Submit your applications early
- Be realistic in your choice of programs; you should apply to a range of schools, from safe bets to those that might be a stretch for you.
- Consider applying to the Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers prep program (http://www.andover.edu/SummerSessionOutreach/IFROTeachers/Pages/Programs.aspx).
- PhD applications are available usually by the beginning of August with mid-December deadlines.
- Once sent and before deadline, call each school to verify that all your materials have been received.
- If possible, visit the schools, programs or departments that interest you.
- Compose your statement of purpose and get feedback from others before finalizing. See Section II-D on Statement of Purpose.
- Ask for letters of recommendation, and follow-up to assure that the letters have been sent as required (online or post). See Section II-C on Letters of Recommendation.

B. What Students Should be Looking For in a Graduate Program

- Academic Considerations
  - Do you feel comfortable with the program's structure and organization?
  - Who are the best professors and emerging leaders in your field?
  - What graduate programs have the best reputation in your field?
  - Are there professors who are doing research in areas that interest you? Is there flexibility within the program to change directions? Are there sufficient faculty choices?
  - Are there adequate university resources (e.g., library, computer facilities, specialized equipment, etc.)?
  - Are there adequate university support systems (e.g., advisors, tutoring-services, graduate student organizations, professional development opportunities, diversity programs, etc.)?

- Financial Considerations
  - What can you afford?
  - Determine total costs involved, including housing, food, personal expenses, etc.
  - Identify available types of financial aid (e.g., loans, fellowships, research and teaching assistantships, etc.)

  See Section IV on Financial Considerations.

- Other Considerations
  - Geographic location of the school
  - Campus environment
  - Diversity of students
  - Program's record of time to degree (national average = 6 years)
  - Program's record on placement of graduates

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C. What Graduate Schools Are Looking For in Applicants
Admissions committees look for promising students who will become important researchers and leaders in the field. Academic performance and motivation are key to success in graduate school.
- Strong undergraduate academic performance as indicated by:
  - Strength of course load
  - GPA
  - GRE scores
  - Letters of recommendation
- Evidence of eagerness to learn and high motivation. Ideal candidates:
  - Can clearly express themselves both orally and in writing.
  - Can integrate information.
  - Have superior preparation in the discipline for which the student is applying.
  - Demonstrate knowledge about and interest in the program.

D. Sources of Information about Which Schools You Could and Should Apply to
- Word of mouth
  - Your professors
  - Graduate students on your campus
  - Friends, former classmates and alumni who are already in graduate school
- Published Sources
  - Peterson’s web site and other guides to graduate education
  - Individual school web sites
  - Professional society web sites (e.g., American Anthropological Association, American Sociological Association, National Association for African American Studies, etc.)
  - National Research Council Assessment of Research Doctoral Programs
  - Magazines that rate graduate programs (US News and World Report, etc.)
- Websites that offer rankings and general information about graduate schools
  - BrainTrack.com
  - PhDs.org (link to rankings)
  - GradSchools.com
  - http://diverseeducation.com/
  (Diverse Issues in Higher Education website)
  - See Appendix 1 for additional resources.
II. PREPARING APPLICATIONS

In general, the parts of your application “package” include:

A. Application
B. Transcript
C. Letters of recommendation (and/committee letter)
D. Statement of Purpose or Essay

THIS IS A HOLISTIC PROCESS; EACH SEGMENT IS IMPORTANT!

A. The Application

- The application represents you and your level of interest and seriousness.
  - It can take up to four months to complete all documents needed for an application.
    - If you want to submit your application in December, begin working on it in September.
  - Budget for application fees, which tend to range from $30 to $50 per application
  - Talk to the admissions office and ask if they offer an application fee waiver for eligible students
    (based upon financial need).
- Read the directions completely and answer all the questions fully; call the institution if an instruction is unclear to you.
- Send in all applications well before the deadline, especially if you are applying for early admission or a graduate assistantship. Many programs begin reviewing applications earlier than the stated deadline.
- Proofread your completed application.
- Make a copy of completed applications, or print a copy of an online application
- If applying to multiple schools, create a log (electronic or journal) to record the name of each school and program you are applying to, required documents for submission, and the deadline for submission. This log will also be helpful for tracking the progress of those writing recommendations for you. See Appendix 2 for an example of a tracking sheet.
- If the application is online, keep track of passwords used for each account.
- After you send applications in, keep track of their progress.
  - Are you getting notifications of completeness?
  - Are you getting invited for interviews at the expected time?
  - Keep records of everyone you speak to including the dates and times.

B. Transcripts

- Be aware that graduate programs usually require official transcripts from EVERY institution that you have attended.
- Make sure your grades are recorded accurately, and that you report your grades and GPA correctly in your application.
- Locate the office at your institution that generates official transcripts (usually the registrar’s office or office of enrollment.) Find out how long it takes for standard delivery of transcripts to requested institutions and plan accordingly.
- Budget for ordering unofficial transcripts. Most institutions charge around $5 per unofficial transcript. Expedited transcripts can cost considerably more.
- If your recent GPA, or your GPA in your intended field of study, is considerably higher than your overall GPA, emphasize that fact in the application. Ask your recommenders if they would consider highlighting this.

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C. Letters of Recommendation

- Check and follow the directions for submission of your letters; make sure you know the deadline for submitting letters of recommendation.
- Find out if someone will write a strong letter for you by scheduling a meeting with a potential recommender. Ideally you will have been developing relationships with faculty in anticipation of this need.
- It takes time to write a strong letter—give your recommenders plenty of time.
- Aim to get a group of letters which will complement each other and provide a relevant picture of who you are NOW.
- When possible, choose letter writers who know more than one aspect of you. For example, choose one research advisor who could write about how effectively you interact with other people and another who can address your willingness to take initiative.
- Provide recommenders with your statement of purpose and resume; the more information you can provide to your recommender, the better prepared they will be to write your letter.
- If you are asking a recommender to write a letter for more than one graduate program, supply them with a list of schools, the contact information for the school to be included in the letter, and the name of the specific program you are applying to at that school. See example in Appendix 3.
- Provide your recommender with the deadline to submit letters and whether the letter needs to be a hard copy submitted on letterhead or an electronic copy.
- Give your recommenders plenty of time to write the letter.
- Help your recommenders help you by planning ahead.
  - Let faculty get to know you in class and during office hours.
  - Make an appointment to discuss graduate school application plans and any concerns you may have.
D. The Statement of Purpose: Some Things to Think About

- It is expensive for schools to invest in educating graduate students. Your goal is to help admissions committees decide why they should invest in you. Let the reader get to know you; tell your own story.
- Your Statement of Purpose is your first impression! It should express what you want the graduate program to know about you and why you are an ideal candidate for their program.
- Show that your decision to pursue a particular career is an informed decision. How has your interest in that career developed over time? What kind of training will help you reach that career goal? Explain why you are interested in the school that you are applying to.
- Customize your statement to the institution to which you are applying (e.g., reference faculty, program strengths).
- Ask others (close family and friends) what they see as your top personal qualities or achievements. This can help you begin to sketch out your statement.
- Describe reasonable, well-informed goals, and why they are of interest to you, rather than pie-in-the-sky idealism.
- Discuss your potential contributions to the program; demonstrate your points by providing concrete examples.
- If you have weaknesses, such as grades or low GRE scores, address these weaknesses while also emphasizing strengths in your statement. Adversity is not an acceptable excuse for mediocre credentials, but it may be given some consideration.
- Your statement represents you and your level of interest and commitment. It should be written in your own words, neat, typed, accurate, and grammatically correct. Check spelling and punctuation.
- Show that you understand the content of your previous research projects or your area of research interest.
- Avoid clichés and jargon, and quotes, such as “Life is like a baseball game, sometimes it throws you curveballs.” Avoid political or religious statements in your statement of purpose, unless tied to the program you are applying to.
- Members of admissions committees often read dozens of applications, if not more. Write in a way that helps the reader. Keep your statement relevant, well-organized, and concise. For example, an introductory sentence in each paragraph is useful. Avoid “gimmicks”; they may get the readers’ attention, but often in a negative way.
- Writing a good statement takes time—give yourself enough time to think about what you want to say, to write several drafts, and to read them critically. How does the statement sound when you read it out loud to yourself?
- Ask someone who is experienced at reading statements to review yours and discuss it with you.
- Proofread your statement
- Reread your statement before your interviews and be prepared for questions or comments about what you wrote.
III. THE INTERVIEW

A. How to Prepare
- An interview is a conversation with a purpose. Be ready to participate.
- Review your application before the interview.
- Prepare to clarify your experience and research interests and discuss topics in your discipline.
  - Be knowledgeable about the content of your previous research experiences, but avoid making
    prepared speeches.
  - Read about developments in the news in your field of interest.
  - Anticipate questions you might be asked and think about points you would like to make if asked
    those questions.
- Participate in mock interviews.
- Prepare questions.
- Have positive expectations about the interview...you have already made the first cut, and the
  school wants to know more about you.

B. What to Wear
- Wear comfortable clothes that give you confidence; but always look professional.
- Dress to be respectful of the situation.
- What you wear should not distract from what you say.
- If you need to buy suitable interview clothes, do so far enough ahead of time so you are
  comfortable wearing them by the time you have your interview.
- If you travel, keep your interview clothes in carry-on luggage.

C. What to Do
- Practice your handshake.
- Make good eye contact.
- Stand when you are being introduced.
- Avoid "couch potato" postures.
- Avoid the use of slang or excessive use of distracting phrases (e.g. “like,” “you know,” etc.).
- Refrain from distracting the interviewer (e.g. chewing gum, scratching yourself, tugging on
  jewelry, etc.).
- Refrain from ending your sentences with an upward inflection, such that your statement sounds
  like a question.

D. Logistics Confirmation
- Confirm time, date, building and office particulars with admissions staff.
- Make travel arrangements well ahead of time.
- Keep track of expenses for reimbursement or tax records.

E. Some General Words of Advice
- Always remember that there are many applicants for every place in most programs.
- Do not be a “high maintenance” applicant.
- It is your responsibility to be sure all documents arrives on or, better yet, before the deadlines.
- Remember, everyone you speak to or meet during the application/admissions process, whether
  that be a secretary or professor, can impact your acceptance...treat everyone with respect.
- Send thank you email to your interviewer within a week after the interview
IV. Financial Considerations

Good planning involves making sure you are aware of all the costs involved in attending graduate school, including tuition, housing, living, as well as opportunity costs.

A. Planning for Application Expenses

Applying to graduate school is quite literally an investment in your future and is going to cost some money. Planning ahead of time to save some money for this process and having a budget for it will be helpful. Here are some of the expenses that you should anticipate.

- Cost of taking GRE tests as well as a test review course. See if scholarships are available—check institutional websites for special programs or discounts.
- Books and software related to application and testing process.
- Application filing fees (check to see if you meet the criteria for a fee waiver). Fee waiver deadlines are often before the application deadline. Keep a clear listing of all deadlines.
- ID photos for your applications (if needed).
- Photocopying, mailing, and documentation of mailing expenses. The latter may be helpful when filing taxes.
- Travel, lodging, and meal expenses for visits to schools of interest. Some schools may cover some of these expenses, especially for graduate program applicants. Contact institutions directly to be certain.
- After you are accepted, there will then be the costs for: phone calls, letters, trips, and (finally!) moving and housing startup expenses. Most institutions do not cover moving expenses.

B. Financing your Graduate Education

- Carefully review the financial aid section of institutional websites. Most of the information you need will be contained on the websites.
- Unless you are in a position to cover all expenses related to financing your education, including tuition, fees, and living expenses for 12 months a year for at least 5 years, you should always apply for financial aid unless otherwise directed.
- Observe all deadlines and complete all forms for aid. Missing deadlines may mean the difference between attending or not attending a particular institution. There is great variation in financial aid deadlines from one institution to another; make a calendar!
- Compete for appropriate national fellowships. Check to see if the institutions you are interested in have institution-specific fellowships. Also, as a start, a useful link for various funding opportunities is the GrantForward service: http://grantforward.com/search
- For PhD programs many institutions cover tuition, basic living expenses, and nominal health coverage, typically for up to 5 years. Also, you do not have to have a Master’s degree to get into many PhD programs. Be sure to review your department/program requirements carefully!

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C. Types of Financial Support When in Graduate School

- Institutional
  - Fellowships and traineeships = payment for study
    *Source: Department and/or central Graduate School Office—usually from university or federal funds*
  - Research Assistantship (RA) = payment for work (e.g., helping a research mentor conduct her/his research; nominally 20 hours per week)
    *Source: Department or individual faculty member*
  - Teaching Assistantship (TA) = payment for work (e.g., helping teach undergraduate or graduate level courses; up to 20 hours per week)
    *Source: Department*

- Non-Institutional (External) Fellowships—usually through foundation or government resources
  - Advantages:
    - Highly valued
    - Often provides a higher stipend
    - Shows you know the game
    - Portable—you can take it with you!
    - Affords student greater flexibility in selecting an adviser
  - Examples:
    - Ford Foundation Diversity Fellowships
    - James Madison Fellowship
    - Mellon Fellowships
    - National Endowment for the Humanities
V. Networking

A. What is Networking?

• Everybody talks about networking, but what is it? One formal dictionary definition (from the American Heritage Dictionary) says it is “to interact or engage in informal communication with others for mutual assistance.”
• Networking is one of the great ways to find out more about graduate programs that interest you. Your college and summer program faculty advisors will likely be using their own networks to recommend you to graduate programs (or to other summer programs).
• Building, using, and maintaining your own personal professional network will be increasingly important as you move from your undergraduate years, through your graduate training, and throughout your career.

B. How Do You Network?

• Make sure you have a brief way of describing your interests (elevator speech)
• Seek out opportunities to meet professionals who are in your field of interest at conferences, symposia, lectures and other events, both on and off campus.
• When you meet new people, who seem interesting to you, be sure to get their names. Ask for business cards, and note on the back when you met the person, and any special information about them that you want to remember.
• Wear your name tag when others are doing so. It helps people learn your name and where you are from (often a good conversation-starter).
• Talk to people you already know about your interests, to see how they might help you with your school and/or career plans. Connections can sometimes be made in the most unexpected ways.
• Do you have friends or acquaintances located at schools or in cities or towns that interest you? Ask them for more information or names of people that you could talk to.
• When you are at a conference or other group gathering, use the occasion to connect with professionals who are in attendance, rather than spending all of your time with your friends.
• Maintain your contacts—keep in touch with your fellow students and with teachers and advisors who knew you well in the past. You never know when you may need a letter of recommendation or a reference.
• Be considerate—provide follow-up to people who have helped you and let them know that you appreciate their efforts.
VI. **Myths and Mistakes about the Graduate Admissions Process**

The graduate admissions application process can oftentimes be daunting and stressful, but it does not have to be. With careful planning, strategizing, and an awareness of common mistakes and myths, the process can prove to be quite rewarding. This section will highlight several common mistakes and myths about the graduate application process.

A. **Mistakes**

1. **Missing deadlines**
   
   Not paying careful attention to application deadlines, which typically vary across institutions, can mean the difference between getting into and not getting into your university of choice. Be sure to keep a detailed list of application deadlines as well as deadlines for applications for financial aid, scholarships, and fellowships.

2. **Not having a faculty member conduct a robust proof-read of your statement of purpose and writing samples**
   
   Many institutions do not require in-person interviews. As such, every aspect of your application package should be carefully and thoughtfully prepared including your statement of purpose and writing samples. You should make every attempt to have a faculty member (preferably two) proofread your submissions. While it is fine to have friends and family review your statement of purpose, you should make sure that a variety of perspectives on your talents and abilities are reflected in your statement of purpose.

   Make certain that you always address the specific questions being asked. It is fine to have a general statement of purpose, but be careful to fine tune it to specific applications. Again, first impressions go a long way during the application review process. You do not want to upset or annoy reviewers by having or doing any of the following:
   - Using the wrong institution name when submitting multiple applications
   - Misspelled words
   - Run on sentences
   - Grammatical errors
   - Irrelevant content

3. **Contacting faculty and university administrators without first carefully reviewing the website**
   
   Before applying to any program within an institution, be sure to carefully review information about the institution (i.e., departments, programs, faculty, resources, etc.) via brochures and the internet before contacting anyone with questions. You do not want to ask questions if the answers are easily accessible elsewhere. This could make for a poor first impression.

4. **Requesting letters of recommendation close to the application deadline**
   
   Poorly written letters of recommendation or letters written in haste may not give reviewers a true picture of the applicant. Your letters should be exceptional. You should give recommenders at least a month’s notice. You may want to ask in the spring if the faculty member will be on sabbatical during the fall so as to avoid the unexpected absence of a key recommender. It is extremely helpful to provide your recommenders with deadlines, a copy of your resume, a statement of purpose, and a brief description of the nature of the letter you are requesting. It is fine to send “gentle reminders” as the deadline approaches if you know the recommendation has not been submitted.
B. Myths

1. Only top tier institutions with high costs for tuition properly prepare students for success.
Many successful politicians, CEOs, and other leaders of our nation received top level education from public institutions. Remember, it is not always where you go, but what you do while there. It is essential to know if the program is accredited and to be able to address why it is not, if that is the case.

2. If I do not have an external fellowship, I will be less likely to get into a graduate program.
While it looks good on an application to show that you have applied for external funding in the form of scholarships or fellowships, it is not a requirement, especially since so few are awarded. It is, however, good practice since they are highly regarded.

3. I need a Master’s degree before I can enter a PhD program.
You do not need a Master’s degree before entering into many PhD programs. There are, in fact, some programs that incorporate the two. Carefully check department or program requirements before applying. Entry into most PhD programs does, however, require a Bachelor’s degree.

4. I will not be able to go to graduate school if I have a family or if I am a single parent.
Many of today’s graduate students are adults with families. It is important to find graduate programs that are supportive. Many institutions place a high value on the “work-life” balance of students, particularly at the graduate school level. Before applying to a program, check for child care and family related resources offered through the institution.
VII. FAQs

1. When should I start thinking about graduate school?
What you do during your first two undergraduate years counts a lot and may help you determine your research interests. Focus on excelling in courses, getting research experience (and applied experience, depending on your field), and developing collaborative relationships with your professors. Students should begin thinking about graduate schools based on their research interest and the area of specialization in which they are most interested. Those seeking a PhD should select a graduate program with specific professors in mind whose research interests are compatible with their own—and then target their applications towards those programs/professors.

2. Can I apply to graduate programs in fields other than my undergraduate degree?
Yes. For example, you do not need a bachelor's degree in psychology to apply to graduate programs in psychology. This is true of all fields. However, you will have to meet any prerequisites stipulated by graduate programs. The main challenge you face is to demonstrate how your interests, experience and background prepare you for a career in your desired field.

3. Is there an ideal time to start the application process?
Applying to graduate school is a time consuming process, and attention to every detail is vital to your success. It is generally not advisable to begin the process in the same semester that your application is due. See Section II on Preparing Applications.

4. Should I submit my applications before the deadline?
Many schools have rolling admissions which means that they consider and admit candidates as they receive their applications. The general rule is the sooner the better. The submission date of your application may also affect the amount of financial aid you receive. While some schools may have deadlines as late as April 1, financial aid commitments, including fellowship, assistantship, and grant awards, are often made long before that.

5. Can I apply to a graduate program before I have met all of the program's prerequisites?
In general, graduate schools expect you to have completed all prerequisites by the application deadline. Those that make exceptions usually say so in their bulletin or on the application. But you should know that even if you are not required to complete prerequisites until after a decision has been made on your application, you will most likely be at a disadvantage compared with applicants who have already completed them.

6. Where are the best schools and graduate programs?
No one university has a monopoly on the best graduate programs. There are many excellent programs that serve a variety of needs. It depends entirely on the details of what the student is looking for. In other words, it comes down to what is best for you, given your long-term career objectives. Resource material identified in Appendix 1 can provide comprehensive information about faculty reputation, student placement, teaching and research opportunities, financial aid, and so on.

7. How many schools should I apply to?
The average number of schools students apply to varies from discipline to discipline. Be realistic in your choice of programs; you should have a range of schools from safe to stretch.
8. How can I best determine which schools are most likely to accept me?

You can research program acceptance rates and admission standards (range of test scores and GPAs) that applicants are expected to have using the resource material found in Appendix 1. The most competitive programs in some disciplines have low acceptance rates. Other programs in the field may admit a large percentage of applicants; program size will play a large role in this. Finally, talk to faculty in your field who are knowledgeable about graduate programs in your discipline.

9. Is it important to make contacts with faculty and students at the schools in which I am interested?

Current graduate students are excellent sources of information and perspective that you will not get from guidebooks, catalogues, or even faculty. Many programs have graduate student organizations, and it is often possible to contact them by phone or e-mail either with specific questions about the program or to talk more generally. Establishing contact with faculty members at specific programs, particularly in your intended area of specialization, is a very important part of the application process. Making a favorable impression—which means being informed about the program and the professor’s research, asking specific questions, and presenting yourself as a serious, committed junior scholar—can only enhance your application. Even if the professor is not on the admissions committee, she will very likely know someone who is and may well pass along her favorable impressions. She may also be able to refer you to other faculty members in the department with whom you can speak. Another way of getting an inside perspective is to seek a summer research experience at the university you are interested in attending.

10. What is the best way to make contact with faculty at the programs to which I am applying?

Undergraduate students who participate in summer research programs often have an opportunity to meet faculty in the program to which they are interested in applying. Another effective way of contacting faculty is through an introduction by a professor in your academic department. Obviously, professors who know your work best will be more likely to make a call or send an e-mail on your behalf and you should not be shy about asking them to do so. If this is not possible, you can certainly write a letter to a particular graduate faculty member to introduce yourself and ask either for a meeting (if this is geographically feasible) or a phone conversation. Another method is to call the program and ask if it is possible to speak (preferably in person) with a program officer (the chair or deputy chair), a member of the admissions committee, or whoever is the liaison between the program and prospective students. Many programs also have a recruiting day where they host prospective students and provide an opportunity to talk with various faculty members and graduate students. Some programs will also permit prospective students to arrange to sit in on a seminar session.

11. How important is my undergraduate school’s ranking to the admissions committee’s decision?

It is often true that when considering candidates of roughly equal qualifications, the admissions committee may consider the quality or ranking of a candidate’s school, and particularly the reputation of the specific discipline at that school. This is why it is important to take a challenging course of study that includes advanced courses, directed independent study, and where applicable, research experience. Participating in nationally recognized fellowship programs, such as Mellon or McNair, can also significantly enhance an application.

12. How important are standardized admissions exams?

It varies according to discipline, school and program. Most programs tend to have baseline scores below which they will usually not consider a candidate. However, other outstanding qualities, such as a high GPA and impressive research, internship, related work experience or strong faculty recommendations may overcome modest test scores.

Continued on next page
13. How important is the statement of purpose?
The statement of purpose can be the determining factor in acceptance or rejection. In other words, it is an essential part of your application. Your statement reflects you and your level of interest and commitment. An ineffective personal essay will surely compromise your chances of being accepted. See section II-D on The Statement of Purpose.

14. Who should write my letters of recommendation?
The most meaningful and effective recommendations usually come from faculty in your field, especially senior faculty, and especially those with whom you have worked in advanced classes and/or projects. It is important to follow the directions on each application form. Some may ask that one of the recommendations be from an advisor or from faculty in a related field or, in some cases, from a non-academic source.

15. What if there are few full-time faculty in my major and I have not gotten to know any of them?
This is one of the reasons we suggest that you seek out and get to know full time faculty in your discipline or area of interest early in your academic career. Recommendations from adjunct faculty generally do not have the same influence as those from full time faculty. You should speak to the Department Chair (or the faculty advisor in your major) to ask for their assistance.

16. If I do poorly on the GRE, will a high GPA help?
Sometimes, scores on standardized admissions tests do not reflect student capabilities for a variety of reasons. If this happens, it is useful to ask one of your faculty recommendation letter writers to address the issues specifically in their letter of recommendation. If you have a high GPA, a record of doing well on challenging courses or an independent study, these factors may help mitigate the impact of a low GRE score. If there is a language barrier or English as a second language, this will be taken into account when the Admissions Committee reviews your GRE scores.

17. Are test prep courses worth the expense?
They can be useful because they emphasize practices and routines that can help you master technique or reinforce problem solving. When you feel comfortable in attacking problems, you may feel less stressed at test time and more comfortable taking the test, which can positively affect the outcome.

18. What if I had a bad semester with poor grades; will that hurt my chances of getting into a good program?
A bad semester with poor grades may not adversely affect your choices if it occurred early in your academic career. A bad semester as an upperclassmen or poor grades in your major will almost certainly be hard to overcome, unless there are legitimate extenuating circumstances, such as personal health issues or a family crisis. Your shortcomings should be addressed in your statement of purpose, not as an excuse but as how you have overcome adversity and they may also be addressed by your faculty recommendation letter. See Section II-D on Statement of Purpose.

19. What is the best way to finance my graduate school education?
Funding opportunities vary from field to field. Please see Section IV for a discussion of financial planning considerations.
1. Useful URLs for information about graduate programs
   • Gradschools.com: http://www.gradschools.com
   • Graduate Record Examination: http://www.ets.org/gre
   • Peterson's: http://www.petersons.com
   • PhDs.org: http://graduate-school.phds.org/

2. Useful URLs for accessing pre-doctoral fellowship information
   • Ford Foundation Fellowship Program: http://sites.nationalacademies.org/PGA/FordFellowships/
   • National Science Foundation: http://www.nsf.gov
   • National Hispanic Scholarship Fund: https://apply.hsf.net/applications/
   • Community of Science: http://www.cos.com
   • Woodward Wilson Foundation: http://www.woodrow.org/about/past.php
   • Social Science Research Council: http://www.ssrc.org/fellowships/
   • Andrew W. Mellon Foundation:
     http://www.mellon.org/grant_programs/programs/higher-education-and-scholarship/researchuniversities/

3. Useful URLs for financing graduate education
   • Federal Student Aid, U.S. Department of Education:
     http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/gradstudent.jsp
## Appendix 2

**Application Tracking Sheet (Example)**

### Organizing and Tracking the Application Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/Program</th>
<th>Application Deadline</th>
<th>Tests Required</th>
<th>Date of Test(s)</th>
<th>Date Transcripts Requested</th>
<th>Rec Letter Deadline</th>
<th>Date Completed Application Sent</th>
<th>Notification Completed Application Received</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Decision Letter Received</th>
<th>Reply Date</th>
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<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>

Recommendation Letter (Name/Number) __________________________________________________________

Recommendation Letter (Name/Number) __________________________________________________________

Recommendation Letter (Name/Number) __________________________________________________________

Contacts (Name/Number) __________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________
### Appendix 3

**Summary Sheet for Recommenders**

The following is a sample summary format of information you should give to individuals writing multiple letters of recommendation for you. For each person who is writing a letter of recommendation for you, this summary will outline the necessary mailing address or online link for submitting the recommendation, the deadline by which recommendations must be received by the respective program, the materials (if applicable) you are providing to facilitate their submission, and whether or not an application fee waiver form is provided for their signature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROGRAM AND ADDRESS</th>
<th>RECEIPT DEADLINE</th>
<th>PROVIDED FOR YOU</th>
<th>WAIVER FORM NEEDED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School of Arts &amp; Sciences Graduate Division University of Pennsylvania 3401 Walnut, Suite 322A Philadelphia, PA 19104-6228</td>
<td>Dec. 15</td>
<td>Online link provided by university</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Colorado Boulder Electronic via email request</td>
<td>Dec. 12</td>
<td>See following website for more information: <a href="http://www.colorado.edu/admissions/graduate/apply/preparing/requirements">http://www.colorado.edu/admissions/graduate/apply/preparing/requirements</a></td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Recruitment &amp; Admissions Howard University Graduate School 4th and College Streets, NW Washington, DC 20059</td>
<td>Jan. 15</td>
<td>Pre-addressed envelope</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Member Institutions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brooklyn College</th>
<th>Princeton University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>Spelman College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaminade University of Honolulu</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claflin University</td>
<td>Tougaloo College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>Tufts University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornell University</td>
<td>University of Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dartmouth College</td>
<td>University of Colorado Boulder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dillard University</td>
<td>University of Maryland, Baltimore County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>University of Miami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard University</td>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter College</td>
<td>University of Puerto Rico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johns Hopkins University</td>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana State University-Bozeman</td>
<td>Vanderbilt University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morehouse College</td>
<td>Washington University in St. Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan State University</td>
<td>Xavier University of Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York University</td>
<td>Yale University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>