

BUILDING ON A SOLID FOUNDATION:

— A GUIDE TO —

GRADUATE SCHOOL
FOR STUDENTS AT
MINORITY SERVING
INSTITUTIONS

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ABOUT MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS

Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) emerged, in part, in response to a history of inequity at majority institutions that significantly diminished minority people's access to higher education. An integral part of American higher education, MSIs—specifically Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs); Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs); and Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)—have carved out a unique niche in the nation: serving the needs of low-income students of color who are underrepresented in colleges and universities.

These institutions boast diverse faculties and staffs, provide environments that significantly enhance student learning and cultivate leadership skills, offer same-race role models, provide challenging programs of study for students, address deficiencies resulting from poor preparation in primary and secondary school, and prepare students to succeed in the workforce and in graduate and professional education. Because MSIs enroll a substantial share of minority students, many of whom might not otherwise attend college, the continuous development and success of these institutions are critical for realizing our nation's higher education and workforce goals as well as for the greater benefit of American society.

MSIs play two vital roles for the nation's economy. First, they elevate the workforce prospects of disadvantaged populations. And second, they increase the number of minorities and disadvantaged people in graduate and professional schools and the careers that require post-baccalaureate education and training, thereby addressing the longstanding underrepresentation of these populations.

OVERVIEW

This guide provides aspirational MSI undergraduate students with meaningful insights about the process of applying to, attending and succeeding in graduate school. It is meant to help MSI undergraduate students decide if graduate school is in their future. Though this guide will not walk you through every step of the graduate school experience, it will lay a foundation for aspiring MSI students interested in attending graduate school.

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Deciding to Apply to a Master's Degree Program

While master's degrees are becoming increasingly necessary to enter or advance one's career, the decision to pursue a master's degree should ultimately be up to you. After all, earning a graduate degree is a major commitment of time, money, and other precious resources—a decision you should not take lightly. Before deciding, take some time to consider your options.

There are several reasons why students enter master's degree programs, which include:

- Starting a new career in a professional field
- Preparing for further study at the doctoral level
- Improving relative standing in a competitive field
- Changing careers

Behind this decision is the understanding that a master's degree can expand your knowledge, skills, professional connections, and even recognition in a specific field. The sections below outline some of the major benefits and costs of pursuing a master's degree.

BENEFITS OF A MASTER'S DEGREE

Ultimately, a master's degree should assist you in achieving your career goals in order for it to be a sound investment. This section of the guidebook explores how a master's degree can assist in your personal, intellectual, and professional development.

Personal Development. A master's degree program can help shape your personal goals. It can offer you the time and necessary resources to think deeply about—or completely rethink—your aspirations and commitments, both inside and outside of the classroom. Immersion in an academic-professional community can expand your perspectives through the influence of your classmates, many that bring years of valuable professional experience and can serve as mentors. Graduate school can also be an opportunity for you to become part of a long-lasting network of engaged and successful alumni from your new institution. The effort put forth to complete your studies can serve as a memorable life experience.

Intellectual Development. As “lifelong learners,” some people have a strong desire to add to their knowledge reservoir and challenge themselves academically. For these individuals, a master's degree can certainly offer the opportunity to develop the mind in a structured way that delivers great personal satisfaction. These returns of a master's-level education, however, are not exclusive to lifelong learners. The intellectual stimulation and the overall cognitive development yielded by advanced education cannot go understated. After all, just as extended years of exercise can improve one's physical condition, additional years spent in school can yield a more intellectually engaged person. A master's degree program presents an opportunity to refine your academic interests and hone your research abilities in a rigorous setting. For this particular reason, a master's degree can also make you a stronger candidate for doctoral study. Ultimately, your academic work at the master's level requires collaboration with faculty and close interdisciplinary engagement among peers.

Professional Development. A master's degree may sometimes be the only choice for those interested in entering or changing careers. In some career sectors (such as public affairs and social services), a master's degree is replacing a bachelor's as the minimum requirement for employment. For example, with a bachelor's degree in the 1980s, one could secure an entry-level position as an admissions counselor or student services coordinator. By the mid-2000s, applicants for these same entry-level positions were not even considered unless a master's degree was held. While holding a graduate degree alone is not a guarantor of success, it does open many doors for employment. Similarly, for students interested in making a career change, a master's degree is a great opportunity to earn an expedited education in a field that may only recently have piqued their interest. Since master's degree programs combine discipline-specific coursework with skills such as critical thinking, analytic ability, and time management, these programs can facilitate a career change.

Regardless of where you are in your professional career, a master's degree can also assist you in your career advancement. In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, a master's degree can set you apart from other job candidates. After all, earning a master's degree can be evidence of determination, intellectual ability, and persistence in handling challenging environments—all of which are highly sought after qualities. When it comes to financial benefits, a master's degree also often commands more money than a bachelor's degree alone. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, workers between the ages of 21 and 64 with a

According to the New America Foundation, the average college graduate borrowed \$57,600 for a graduate degree in 2012.

It is crucial for you to look at the costs of the various graduate programs that interest you and determine which combination of financial aid packages will make attendance possible. Remember, funding structures are very different in graduate school when compared to undergraduate programs. While some graduate programs also offer some scholarships and fellowships (research or teaching assistance, for example), institutional, state and federal types of financial aid are minimal. If, as an undergraduate, you qualified for need-based Pell Grants, you may be disappointed to learn that these grants are not available at the graduate level. In other words, you may need to take on debt to pursue your degree. Federal loans available to graduate students generally include unsubsidized Stafford and Graduate PLUS loans. Some students may qualify for Perkins loans, depending on their financial need, but those funds are scarce. Graduate students also have to pay higher interest rates than undergraduates. Since graduate students are not eligible for subsidized loans, those higher interest rates start accruing on day one. This is important to keep in mind if you plan to take out loans, as you will need to consider the interest rates.

master's degree or higher earn an average annual salary of \$55,242 as opposed to those with a bachelor's degree whose average annual salary is \$42,877—a difference of nearly 30 percent. Over the course of one's lifetime, a person with a master's degree typically earns \$400,000 more than someone who only holds a bachelor's degree. Similarly, among individuals 25 years of age and older, those with a master's degree face lower rates of unemployment than their counterparts with bachelor's and associate's degrees. On average, completing a master's degree can make a positive impact on your financial circumstances.

COSTS OF A MASTER'S DEGREE

The Question of When

Before you learn about the financial costs of pursuing a master's degree, it is important to consider whether or not right now is the best time for you to do so. One of the questions most often debated in higher education is: *When* is the best time to pursue a master's degree? Is it better to do so right after you complete your bachelor's degree? Or should you wait a few years and gain work experience first?

Some of the reasons why you may want to pursue your master's degree immediately after earning your bachelor's degree include:

- Some occupations require an advanced degree
- You are accustomed to being a student
- It may be more convenient to stay in school
- You have fewer obligations that impede your continuing education

On the other hand, you may want to work for a few years before pursuing a master's degree for the following reasons:

- Some master's programs require work experience
- You can improve your chances for acceptance
- You can gain solid financial footing before investing in a master's degree
- You can obtain a better understanding of your career goals by working for a few years
- In certain instances, employers might pay some or all of your graduate school expenses

The Question of How Much

Much like undergraduate education, the cost of a master's degree can greatly vary depending on the institution, the specialty, and the length of the program. For example, if you are looking at a public university, in-state tuition is lower than paying out-of-state tuition or attending a private university. Other costs to consider when deciding to go to graduate school include books, supplies, transportation, and expenses essential to quality of life—such as housing, health insurance, and social activities.

Finding the Right Fit: Other Considerations

After having examined the general benefits and costs associated with pursuing a master's degree, you should take some time to explore *other* factors before officially selecting a particular program. Below we list a few of the things we find most important when it comes to finding the right program fit.

Academic Focus, Faculty, and Reputation. Master’s programs tend to focus within a specific discipline. Research each program you are considering to avoid applying to a program that does not match your personal or career interests. Moreover, it is crucial for you to know about the faculty with which you will be working. Find out whether they are respected in your field. You may want to look at the number of their scholarly publications, their national or regional acclaim, and their previous professional experiences. Lastly, consider how your program options rank. While rankings are an important measure of quality, they are not the *only* one that matters. Other factors that influence quality include: work-life balance, diversity of students and faculty, ambiance of the university, social and networking opportunities, student-faculty ratio, and financial considerations—to name a few.

Career Services. Given that one of your main goals for pursuing a master’s degree likely revolves around career advancement, you should examine existing professional development programs and job placement assistance that are offered to students. You may also want to research where program’s graduates are working along with their salaries. Keep in mind, these figures might be difficult to ascertain, but most colleges and universities have career services centers that are devoted to helping you prepare for life after the program.

Culture and Diversity. All colleges and universities have an institutional culture—the norms, values and beliefs that influence “how things are done.” Take the time to research and identify programs with cultures that fit your style and comfort level so that you can excel academically. For example, would you prefer a competitive or nurturing learning environment? How important is it for the program to have diverse faculty and students? Stronger programs tend to be more diverse. Diversity, in this context, does not solely refer to race, class or gender. Rather, diversity is a much more inclusive term that also refers to religion, nationality, ideas and languages. Increased diversity often leads to broader, nuanced and more empathetic worldviews. You should examine the mission, values, and philosophy of your program, its faculty and student composition, and its opportunities for learning.

Facilities, Resources, and Size. Make sure the programs you are considering have the types of facilities and resources you need to succeed academically. This might sound obvious, but confirm that you are able to access and take advantage of the amenities advertised by the university. For example, find out whether programs that stress “state-of-the-art” facilities actually have state-of-the-art buildings and tools. Also, consider library resources (such as number of periodicals and volumes in your field) and just about any other resources that support the programs you are considering, including endowments and foundations that support student research and publications. Lastly, remember that the size of the program matters. Much like your undergraduate institution, you need to find a size that feels right for you. To do this, examine faculty-student ratios and total student enrollment population. After all, the size of the graduate program can influence your experience in the classroom, how much or little faculty interaction you can anticipate, and how much attention you might receive during your studies.

Location and Surrounding Community. Location can be an extremely important factor in your decision. Depending on the master’s degree you are pursuing, you might have to live in a specific geographic area for several years. As such, you should enjoy the surrounding areas of the programs you are considering. Ask yourself: do I prefer living in an urban, rural, or a suburban setting? Additionally, with the exception of top-tier programs, the value of a master’s degree can sometimes be strongest in the region where the school is located. This means that if you want to eventually live on the East Coast, it may make more sense to attend a school in that region.

Residency Requirements. If you are looking at master’s programs at public universities, you may want to examine admission requirements and costs for in-state residents compared to all other applicants. If you have decided on a specific public university but do not currently live in that state, you may want to consider relocating to that state and establishing residency there before applying. Keep in mind, however, that establishing residency takes years. Check with the university to ascertain how to establish residency.



Applying to Master's Degree Programs

If you are reading this guide, then you are already one step ahead of most people interested in pursuing a master's degree. You have learned about some of the benefits and costs associated with a master's degree, as well as other factors you should consider when selecting a program. This section of our guidebook will walk you through the application process itself and how you should prepare for it.

CREATING A TIMELINE

Most master's degree programs have similar requirements and deadlines, which makes the application process more manageable. Most programs across disciplines will require you to:

- Send copies of your official undergraduate transcripts
- Send your official test scores
- Obtain letters of recommendation
- Submit one or a few essays

Remember, it is important that you supply the materials that each program requests. A good practice is to collect all of this information and put it into one document. With this document in hand, you can begin to create a timeline to keep yourself accountable. Below is a sample timeline you can use.

Personal deadline: Jan 1, 2016

- + Program 1 deadline: Jan 5, 2016
- + Program 2 deadline: Jan 10, 2016
- + Program 3 deadline: Jan 15, 2016

Application requirements:

- + Take (and retake) GRE/MCAT/LSAT/GMAT test (if required) – May-Nov 2015
- + Complete online application forms – Sep-Nov 2015
- + Request letters of recommendation – Sep-Nov 2015
 - + Set earlier deadline: Dec 15, 2015
- + Send official test scores (if required) – Personal deadline: Dec 1, 2015
- + Send official transcripts (if required) – Personal deadline: Dec 1, 2015
- + Write essay(s) – Sep-Dec 2015
 - + Deadline for first draft: Nov 1, 2015
 - + Deadline for second draft: Nov 15, 2015
 - + Deadline for final draft: Dec 1, 2015

OBTAINING TRANSCRIPTS AND TEST SCORES

We recommend that you set a personal deadline well before your application is due to send your official transcripts and test scores. It is a good idea to take the required test as early as possible in your application process. This gives you enough time to retake the test if you do not think your scores are competitive enough. Also, keep in mind that some schools will publish the last possible day for you to take the required test.

SECURING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Similar to obtaining required test scores, it is important to solicit letters of recommendation *early* in the application process. Early contact with letter writers gives them enough time to work on your letter. Under no circumstances should you approach someone late in the process. This will only reflect negatively upon you. Give your recommenders materials that will help them write a strong letter; materials might include: a copy of your resume and a draft of your statement of purpose. It is your job to help craft a letter that speaks to a particular aspect of your application, intellectual strengths, and overall candidacy. Do not be hesitant to ask your letter writers what kind of recommendation they will provide. In our experience, potential recommenders are very honest about the kind of letter they will submit. If someone cannot positively confirm that they are “in your corner,” you need to find someone else. Do not assume that every letter of recommendation will be good—you must confirm. You cannot afford to have a lukewarm or negative letter.

Lastly, to make sure that all materials are submitted on time, provide the letter writer with an early application deadline. It is no secret that your letter writers have busy lives and, sometimes, unintentionally forget or confuse deadlines. It might also be necessary to send a brief reminder to ensure that your materials do not get lost in the shuffle.

WRITING YOUR ESSAY(S)

Most programs will require a statement of purpose and short essays. Your statement of purpose should speak directly to your interest in the field, how previous intellectual or professional experiences have prepared you for master’s level work, your ability to take on the rigors of graduate school, and potential contributions to the program and field. To capture all of these things, telling personal stories can set you apart. Be specific and dynamic while using vivid language and, if possible, field-specific lingo. Describe your qualifications honestly, talk about the work that you have done, and do not keep the successes you have accomplished to yourself. Enjoy the writing process. Edit, edit, edit, and then edit some more.



The Master's Program Experience

The vast majority of master's programs are one to two years in duration. This means that students do not have an extended amount of time and must maximize their energies to ensure that they reap the full benefits of the program. These benefits include access to knowledgeable faculty, resourceful classmates, career services, networking opportunities, and talented doctoral students. All of these people can help you make the most of your time.

Faculty. Your master's program is as much about gaining theoretical and practical knowledge as it is about networking. Take advantage of this access. Some programs will assign you a faculty advisor. This person will more than likely have research areas that closely align with your professional, intellectual or practical interests. Other programs have a faculty or administrator who serves as an advisor to your entire cohort. The latter experience creates a situation that demands some personal initiative in order to connect with tenured faculty. In either situation, you should try to make connections with faculty member in your department. If your department is small, you should aim to meet at least once with the entire faculty. Reach out by way of email to introduce yourself and express interest in finding a time to meet. Remember, faculty have very busy schedules and receive numerous emails. Be succinct and polite when requesting a meeting. If a faculty member is not responsive to your email, check to see if they have office hours where you can stop by during that time to schedule an appointment. Again, faculty members are very busy. A scheduled appointment guarantees that you have their time and attention.

When you meet with faculty members, have a list of questions that you want to discuss. Though you may not fully cover the questions it will help you guide the conversation. If there is a faculty member who is an expert in an area in which you are particularly interested, you should make it a priority to meet with them. It is important to connect with faculty and try to forge relationships. Faculty can aid in the attainment of internships and letters of recommendations for jobs, scholarships, and graduate school. Cultivating relationships can help refine your future plans. Although students come into master's programs with tentative ideas about what they would like to do after their training, exposure to various topics and experiences may present you with different insights. Faculty can help you navigate these options and give guidance on how to decide which opportunities will be best for you and your desired goals. If you are interested in doctoral programs, faculty can also help you identify programs that may interest you. Faculty can serve as mentors as well as knowledgeable resources to help you on your path during and after your master's program.

Cohorts. Master's cohorts can feel like family. You move through courses together and work on projects together. Though everyone in your cohort may not be heading in the same direction, try to get to know everyone in one way or another. Whether you realize it or not, everyone in the room will land somewhere. This is the time to develop strong relationships. Everyone won't be your best friend, but everyone will be your colleague. Start building these relationships; they are important. Invest the time and energy in getting to know them and their interests.

This is also the time to get to know persons who have differing perspectives and backgrounds. This can be both a challenging and rewarding experience. Additionally, there may be moments where people may make you question whether or not you belong in the program. Do not worry—you do. You were admitted just like everyone else. You deserve to be there as much as anyone else. Rather than let these feelings cause you to question yourself, participate more and find peers and faculty who support you. These support systems will play an important role in your journey through the program. However, do not shy away from connecting with peers who may be different than you. Master's programs are a great time to be exposed to thoughts, perspectives, backgrounds, and philosophies that you may have never considered. This will not only strengthen your work but it will undoubtedly grow and expand you as a person. Sometimes you will be surprised to discover your closest colleagues and friends.

Coursework. Master's programs are often very field-specific. If you are in a higher education program, for example, most of your coursework will be centered on topics relevant to higher education. This is unlike many undergraduate programs where your time is divided between electives and major-related courses. This can be exciting for some students because you will only be taking courses in the subjects you are passionate about. However, this can also be challenging because there are no "filler" courses. In other words, every course matters. This can seem overwhelming. However, when selecting courses, you should ask many questions, such as: what is the teaching style of the professor, what is the workload for the course, what topics will be covered?

Remember, these courses are preparing you to be a highly skilled practitioner and well-versed scholar. This is not the time to shy away from courses that may challenge you. You should always be asking yourself: how will the content of a particular course prepare me for life after graduation? If you are interested in a topic such as college choice processes and you have a notable faculty member in that area teaching a course, you should highly consider taking the course. The course content will prove invaluable.

Master's level courses are often discussion-based endeavors that entail extensive reading and writing. Prepare to read multiple articles and books in a short period of time. This can take adjustment, but with time management and reading strategies, the task is doable. Graduate class sizes are often much smaller than undergraduate courses, so being able to hide and not contribute in discussions is out of the question. The way to ensure you are getting the most out of your coursework is to fully engage the readings and participate in class discussions. Independent study opportunities are also great to learn more about a particular area of interest. This one-on-one time working closely with a faculty member not only expands your knowledge and skills as a scholar, but can also be the foundation of a meaningful relationship. Take a look at all of the courses your program has to offer. If you can enroll in a course outside of your department, take the opportunity. This can provide you with another perspective to your area of interest. Take a look at all of the courses. Most of all, take courses that will enrich and prepare you for your future. Fully engage and take full advantage of opportunities as they emerge.

Transitioning to a Career After Completing a Master's Program

Job Search Process. When you are coming to the end of your time as a master's student, it will be time to start applying for jobs. This can be an exciting yet stressful time in your life. The first thing you want to do is talk to people in your field to get a finer sense of what jobs are suitable and available. When selecting jobs, be flexible and reasonable. Depending on the field, your degree may qualify you for higher paying jobs, and it may not. Some fields value work experience as much as an advanced degree. This is information you will want to research prior to applying for jobs. Speaking with faculty can also provide you with connections in your field. Also, stay abreast of popular periodicals, websites, and publications within your field. Often these are places where you will find job postings and employment opportunities.

Resources. The most important component of the job search process is your preparation. Make sure you have a strong resume. Learn the different types of resumes that you can compose. Have faculty and administrators you trust look at them and provide feedback. Also, ask faculty and administrators for interview and presentation advice. If your institution has a career services center, take advantage of any workshops or resources the center may have available. Make sure to set up an appointment with a career services counselor, if they are available, to prepare for the application and interview processes. You want to be as prepared as possible for the job search process so that you can be successful.

Future Employment. As you are preparing for the job search process, you may be wondering, "What exactly can I do with my degree?" "What am I qualified to do?" "What jobs are available for people like me?" There are various career paths one can take. A master's degree may provide countless opportunities—do not feel limited. If transitioning to doctoral program, see doctoral section.



Deciding to Attend a Doctoral Program

WHY A DOCTORAL PROGRAM?

The first question you should be asking yourself is very simple: Why do you want to enter a doctoral program? Be honest. Do you really need a PhD for the type of work you want to do? Or do you just *want* a PhD? There is a big difference. Entering a doctoral program requires a tremendous investment of your time and energy—think years of coursework and thousands of hours of reading and writing. Long weekends and little sleep will quickly become the new normal. For some, earning a PhD merely provides the means to achieve a professional goal. This is true for some positions. In fact, a PhD might be required just to apply. For others, however, doctoral studies are perceived as a “calling.” A PhD is not a calling. A calling will not get you out of bed after three hours of sleep during your fourth year in the program. To be clear, the entire doctoral experience is structured around acquiring, developing and applying the skills necessary to conduct original research. That’s all it is. The skills you learn and the experiences you have will ultimately define the scholar you become.

All doctoral programs are a marathon. It takes, on average, six years to complete—from the first day of coursework to the final dissertation defense. That’s a long time. Are you really committed to setting aside and investing your energies into such a difficult journey? The journey is intensely rewarding and frustrating. At no other time in your life will you have the opportunity to study what truly interests you and get paid for it. You will be surrounded by some of the most insightful, brilliant, and interesting people in the world. Your professors are international experts in their particular areas of research. The people around you want you to succeed. However, you will be working long hours—fourteen hours a day is not uncommon. Almost every waking minute will be devoted to reading, writing, or preparing for an upcoming event such as a conference presentation. You will find out very quickly how much or little you actually know about a particular subject. The stipend you will receive is only meant to cover the cost of tuition and living expenses—which is often at or below the poverty line for a single adult. There is no such thing as a true holiday vacation. That time will be devoted to working on things that you were not able to complete during the semester. Ambiguity and stress will become your best friends. Getting through a doctoral program is tough.

The purpose of this section is to help you make sense of the doctoral process and decide whether you would like to pursue a PhD. This guide will help address questions and unmask the ambiguity that many potential applicants may have.

YOU ARE A COLLEAGUE, NOT A STUDENT

The biggest mistake that most graduate students make is believing that they are a student. Get this out of your head! You are a colleague, not a student. Repeat this phrase ten times. Engrain it into your memory. Colleagues devote their precious time and energy to the refinement of their professional craft. Colleagues go to conferences, regularly interact with other professionals, and constantly network. Colleagues are the people you call upon to write letters of recommendation on your behalf. Colleagues are the people you will be working with for the rest of your professional life. Colleagues show up on time, ask insightful questions, and are prepared.

As a potential doctoral student, more is expected of and from you. There are basic things that should be a given at this point in your academic trajectory. Those items are as follows:

1 Always Show Up On Time. It sounds very patronizing, but we cannot stress the importance of showing up on time. If you tell someone that you are going to be somewhere at a particular time, be there. Do what you have to do to be on time. Buy a planner or set an alarm clock. Not showing up on time signals two things to others. First, you do not respect their time. Time is a scarce resource. It should be protected and provided accordingly. If someone takes time out of their busy day to meet with you (trust us, they are much busier than you are), show up on time. Nothing squashes potential opportunity faster than showing up late or missing a meeting. Second, tardiness signals to others that you are unprepared for a doctoral program. If you can’t show up on time for a meeting, how well (or poorly) are you going to handle the rigors of trying to publish, apply for grants, finish coursework, prepare for conferences, network, take comprehensive exams, and complete a dissertation? Show up on time.

2 Gratitude is Powerful. The academic community is a small community, where everyone is familiar with each other in some way. How you carry yourself and interact with others is important. There are two things that you must always remember to say: “please” and “thank you.” Using these two phrases, particularly if you are asking someone for a favor, can place you in someone’s good grace. That someone may open doors or help with a project or proposal. Gratitude is powerful.

3 Being in a Doctoral Program is a Privilege. Not everyone is in a doctoral program. Don't forget that. It is competitive to get in and difficult to complete. Approximately 1% of the entire U.S. population has a doctoral degree. Roughly 50% of those who enter your program will eventually defend their dissertation. You are in a doctoral program because you are talented and have worked very hard to get to this point. However, being talented and actually doing the work required of a doctoral program are two separate things. Being talented simply means that you have gained access to the opportunity to complete a doctoral program. That's it. Talent means you have potential. The selection committee recognizes your potential and, consequently, has extended an offer of admission. That's why you're here. However, the amount of work you have will consume most of your waking hours. Remember, the intellectual work you are doing is a privilege. You do not have to worry about meeting the basic necessities of living. That is taken care of through fellowships or grants. Your job is to read and write. It is a privilege.

4 Make the Most of Opportunities. You have no idea which person or opportunity will jump start your career. A doctoral program offers you the opportunity to work with renowned experts on a variety of projects. Make the most of every opportunity to learn, work, and interact. These opportunities will help give you a better idea of the type of work you would like to do in the future. Your professors and colleagues are interested in mentoring, training, and interacting with you. That is why they are there. They want to help. Don't be shy about asking for their opinion or advice. As a student, you do not know how or in what ways other people can assist you. Make the most of every opportunity.

5 Don't be Afraid to Ask Questions. Asking questions is the only way that you will learn. If you have a particular question about an article, a book you read, or project, speak up. Always ask questions. Questions are the lifeblood of the research and professional formation process. You should be asking questions every step of the way. As a young scholar, the questions you ask will define how you decide to conduct your research. Is your project qualitative or quantitative in nature? What epistemological assumptions are embedded within your research approach? Do you have enough data to "answer" the question you are posing? Having the ability to ask a well-articulated question is one of the primary ways that you will be able to navigate the doctoral experience. The questions you ask will inform the answers you find.

6 Admit What You Don't Know. This seems simple enough. Admit what you don't know. It's okay to not know everything. In fact, you can't possibly know everything. If you did, you wouldn't need a PhD. You would already know what you're asking and going to find. Admitting what you don't know is *not* a sign of weakness. It is a sign of maturity, strength, and confidence. Colleagues will respect this. Admitting what you don't know in the form of a well-articulated question is a powerful mechanism to start a meaningful conversation. "I don't know much about the Guarani people of southern Bolivia, can you tell me more about your research with them?" This type of question extends an invitation to the listener that allows them to tell you more about their research interests and allows you the opportunity to productively interact and learn. Admitting what you don't know is meaningful.

7 You Are Not an Imposter. You are in a doctoral program for a reason. You are smart, talented, and work hard. Imposter syndrome is just the *perception* that you are somehow not "good enough." This is deficit thinking. Get this out of your head. There is no space for it. Instead, you should be focusing on where your professional trajectory is headed. The materials you are engaging are difficult. Your assumptions will be questioned. The doctoral experience will transform how you see and have come to understand the world. You are good enough to be in a doctoral program. You are strong enough to thrive in a doctoral program. Repeat this statement: I am not an imposter.

8 Push Yourself Beyond Your Comfort Zone. It is very easy to be complacent. Graduate school is hard and daily routines make life easier. Don't let your routine make you complacent. You should be pushing your intellect beyond its current limit. Life beyond your comfort zone is where learning happens. For example, attending on-campus seminars and interacting with graduate students and faculty from other departments is important. Approaching your particular research interest from the perspective of another will help transform you into an interdisciplinary scholar. Don't become isolated. You are more likely to learn from an insightful conversation over the nuances of a particular idea than actually reading about the idea in its original form. Peer interaction and cross-disciplinary collaboration will push your limits to a new level.

Opportunity Costs of Attending. A doctoral program is an all-encompassing experience. Most of your waking hours will be devoted to it. Before deciding whether or not to apply, ask yourself: Are all of the years of delayed financial gain worth the pursuit? Is there anything else that you want to be doing? Be very clear about the potential implications of these questions. If you are in school, you are not making a full-time equivalent salary.

Funding. There are three means by which doctoral experiences are funded: grants, fellowships and assistantships. Each source of funding typically covers the cost of tuition, room and board, books, and health insurance. To be clear, grants are sources of funds that *do not* have to be re-paid. In order to receive a grant, you must submit an application to an organization or the program requesting funds. Much like applying to college, most grant applications normally consist of an essay, application form, letters of recommendation, and, in some instances, a face-to-face interview. Fellowships, much like grants, are sources of monies that *do not* have to be re-paid. Fellowships are traditionally offered to incoming students by individual schools or programs. It is important to note that not all incoming students receive a fellowship.

Doctoral programs should be free. Do not to take out loans to pay for a doctoral program. Even if you have been offered admission, it is not worth taking out loans. The financial impact of doing so will be felt for a long time.

Whom do you want to study with? One of the most important questions you have to consider when applying to a doctoral program is whom do you want to study with. Is there a particular scholar that can guide your research? Why, in your opinion, does this scholar speak to the research questions you are interested in pursuing? Prior to completing your doctoral application, you should reach out to that person to see if they would be willing to serve as your advisor. If they are willing to serve as your advisor, you should mention this person by name in your application.

Demystifying the Doctoral Application and Selection Process

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS

The application typically consists of Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, a personal statement, transcripts from all institutions attended, and letters of reference. All components of the application are important. As you prepare your application, you should be asking yourself the following questions: Whom do I want to write my letters of recommendation? How will these letters speak to my ability to do doctoral work? Have I taken the GRE? Do my GRE scores meet minimum requirements? How much feedback has my personal statement received? How do I plan to gather the appropriate application materials? Do the institutions have differing application submission processes? If so, how will that affect me?

There are two overarching considerations that should guide how you approach the application process. First, the application process is very time consuming. You must painstakingly prepare materials that, when submitted, will be evaluated by many people within and beyond the department. This takes time. Even if your application is submitted in October, it will not be until February that you will be notified of a decision. Patience is a virtue. Second, the application itself is meant to serve as a holistic picture of your scholarly abilities, personal experiences, and potential “fit” within the department. To be sure, there is a certain amount of subjectivity built into the process. Good grades, a high GRE score or a phenomenal personal statement does not guarantee admission. Remember, you, as an applicant, must tailor your materials in such a way that makes you an attractive candidate. From the perspective of the admissions committee, for a variety of reasons, there are only so many spots that can be offered. Do not take an offer of acceptance or letter of rejection personally. Candidates are often admitted, deferred or rejected for reasons they will never know. A decision—regardless of outcome—is not a reflection of you as a person.

Take Care of Your Grades and Test Scores. Nothing will disqualify your application faster than not having solid grades and test scores. Though there are many factors that go into the decision-making process, your grades and test scores will be the first thing that the admissions committee evaluates. From their perspective, grades and test scores offer some indication of your strengths and weaknesses as a scholar. For example, if you are applying to an Anthropology or Sociology program, they will place emphasis on your grades in social science related courses at prior institutions. Therefore, a C in Chemistry, for example, might not be held against you. Grades serve as the objective basis from which all applicants are evaluated against one another. Even though you might be a brilliant scholar in the making, a poor GRE score or failure in a discipline related course could prevent you from gaining admission. Take care of your grades.

In terms of preparing your application, you should request either a paper or electronic copy of your undergraduate or, if applicable, master's level transcript. The form of the transcript will depend on how your application is to be submitted—paper or electronically. It can take up to two weeks for a transcript request to be fulfilled. Depending on your undergraduate or graduate institution, the request may entail a modest cost. Additionally, GRE scores are valid for five years. If more than five years have passed, take the exam again. Once you have completed the exam, send your score to the particular institution that you are applying to.

Deciding Which Program to Attend. Deciding which program to attend is important and often littered with difficult questions. Whom do I want to work with? What are my personal and professional motivations and what role might they play in my doctoral experience? How much financial support will I receive? These questions—among many others—should be at the forefront of your decision-making process. This section offers practical advice that will help you make sense of and weigh the various considerations that go into deciding which doctoral program to attend.

Select a program that matches your goals, abilities and interests. Keep in mind that some of the most renowned programs in the country might be at universities with lesser-known reputations, while more prestigious colleges may have weaker departments. In other words, there might be a mismatch between a prestigious university and a renowned program. Know the difference! As an applicant, factor in your own criteria (such as geographic location) while also considering additional features, such as:

Faculty: What is the faculty-student ratio? How diverse are faculty viewpoints within the discipline? Do faculty research topics interest you? How open are faculty to collaborating with students? Are there diverse faculty members, administrators, and staff associated with the program?

Facilities: What opportunities are there to collaborate across the department, college or university? What kind of academic support programs are in place (e.g., faculty advisors and peer advisors)? Are there opportunities for experiential learning (through internships and assistantships, for example)? Is on-campus housing available to graduate students? What kinds of social outlets are available to students?

Students: What is the composition of the graduate class? What are the retention, attrition and graduation rates? How competitive are graduate students for external or internal funding? Are students exposed to professional associations and/or given the opportunity to become active members? Are students required or encouraged to attend and present their research at professional conferences?

Employment: Are there resources that assist graduating students with finding a job? What kind of jobs do graduates obtain?

How Do I Apply? Plan ahead! The application process is long and will require a tremendous amount of preparation, coordination and patience. There are four main elements of a typical doctoral program application.

Personal Statement. Your personal statement is your opportunity to articulate how your experiences, interests, goals and enthusiasm speak to your proposed graduate research. Highlight your academic preparation and professional experiences, why you want an advanced degree and how it will influence your career path, and why you have selected this particular program and institution. This is the best opportunity you will have to speak about yourself. Make sure your essay is clear, concise, and answers any outlined questions. Lastly, remember not to restate your resume. Instead, highlight your interests and emphasize how your skills, knowledge, and training can contribute to the department and greater academic community.

Grade Point Average. Your grade point average is an important measure of comparison against other candidates. If you had a particular concern that influenced your grades, you may need to make a brief reference in your statement. If so, explain concisely—do not, under any circumstances, be defensive.

Letters of Reference. In most applications, you will need between two and five references. Letter writers are people (such as professors or employers) who can write about your skills, abilities, and interests. Be strategic in terms of who writes your letters. When asking a professor to write your letter of recommendation, offer them the following information so that all materials are properly submitted and on time: application deadlines, a transcript and resume, statement describing where you are applying and why, the grades you received in the professor's course, your contact information, instructions about how to submit the letter of recommendation, and, if necessary, a stamped and addressed envelope so that the recommender may send their letter directly to the department you are applying to. Remember, it is in your best interest to make the writing and submission process easier on them. The more information you provide, the stronger and more nuanced their letter will be.

Standardized Test Scores. Your standardized test scores are an important way to distinguish yourself from other candidates. Many programs require specific standardized tests for admissions (e.g., GRE, MCAT, LSAT). While planning your application process, identify specific test dates and how long it will take to adequately prepare for the exam.

Campus Interviews. If you are invited to a campus interview—congratulations! This is a big deal and a prime opportunity for you to elaborate upon the materials you have submitted. As a finalist for entrance into a doctoral program, campus interviews are an invaluable occasion for you to meet with faculty and students, as well as an opportunity to get a sense of the environment in which you may potentially enter. Remember, at this point in the admission process, a campus interview is as much about the faculty impressing you as it is about you impressing them. The program wants you to attend. You are there for a reason. In preparation for a campus interview, do your homework. The time you put into preparing for the interview is an investment—make it wisely.

There are five practical steps that you can take in terms of your own preparation.

Review your itinerary. If you have the names and positions of those interviewing you, invest the time to study which area of the department (or campus) each person or group of people belongs, and begin to tailor your responses to potential questions they may ask. These might include: so tell me about yourself? Describe your scholarly interests? Where do your research strengths lie (e.g., qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods)? What are your research weaknesses and how will you improve upon them? Can you explain the value of your work to an educated person? Can you tell us more about how your personal and professional experiences relate to your research?

Study the institution's mission, values and vision. Be sure that you are able to discuss how your personal values and beliefs resonate with those of the institution. Though this might seem a bit over the top, your ability to communicate how the institution fits with your career aspirations will speak directly to your interest in being a professional (remember, you are not a student!) on that campus.

Ask mentors of their interview experiences. This might seem obvious but asking mentors what to expect from the various departments or people interviewing you is essential. Everyone knows everyone in academia. Your scholarly mentor probably knows—either personally or professionally—someone working in the department you wish enter. Take advantage of their knowledge and insight. Yes, selection committees are interested in your work. That's why you were invited for a campus interview. However, they are also interested in you as a person and how well you get along with other members of the community.

Write down questions you would like to ask during your interview. Almost every interview ends with the phrase, “do you have any questions?” The answer is always yes. You should always have questions ready. Always. Not having a prepared question is analogous to saying, “I am not a serious candidate and not ready to be here.” The questions you ask signal to the interviewer how much you know of the department, how serious you are in terms of your scholarship and engaging others, and will give insight into your potential future trajectory. Spend some time thinking about what you would like to know about each person you are conversing with.

Sample questions include:

1. Can you tell me more about how competitive doctoral students are in receiving external fellowships or grants?
2. Are there campus programs available that can assist with grant applications?
3. Are students encouraged to attend professional conferences?
4. Can you tell me more about collaborating and publishing with faculty?

These are only a handful of questions. However, they signal to the listener that you serious about your doctoral studies and want to make an impact.

Remember to always be yourself. At this stage of the process, the campus interview is about “fit.” Keep in mind, there is no consensus about what it means to be a good “fit.” Everyone who has been invited for an interview is there because they have something to offer. Navigating a doctoral program takes years. From the perspective of the admissions committee, how well (or poorly) you get along with other people can be a deciding factor.

The Doctoral Experience

Congratulations! You are now in a doctoral program. Now what? The doctoral experience is a marathon and rite of passage. The first several years are devoted to learning the prevailing literatures, methodologies, and theories that comprise your field. In order for you to make a meaningful contribution to your intellectual growth and the broader scholarly community, you must know what has come before you as well as what people are currently talking about. During coursework, you will undoubtedly read and write more than you have in your entire life. The rationale behind this process is to help you learn from, engage with and apply theoretical insights and empirical revelations to your research project. Once you are able to demonstrate your mastery of this process through the successful completion of comprehensive exams, you will progress to the more demanding aspects of the doctoral experience—conducting fieldwork and writing a dissertation. This section engages three important aspects of the doctoral experience: coursework, networking, and the dissertation. To be clear, this section is not meant to serve as a comprehensive guide to the entire doctoral experience. Rather, this is meant to serve as a general overview. The particulars of the experience differ according to program, field and department.

What is the Purpose of Coursework? The purpose of coursework is to teach you how to think, write and express yourself as a scholar. Though this might sound obvious, it can seem like you are learning another language. Words like *problematic*, *r-squared*, and *positionality* will become your new best friends. This might first become noticeable when you try to explain what you are learning in class to family members without using academic jargon. It's tough, we've tried. Taking between two and three years, coursework is a necessary component of the doctoral process. Though it can sometimes feel a bit burdensome—writing under tight deadlines, reading copious amounts of articles and trying to keep track of who said what—coursework is ultimately about learning to intellectually challenge yourself. In other words, become comfortable with being uncomfortable. Embrace it. Being uncomfortable means that you are learning and grappling with issues that scholars are debating. This process is idiosyncratic and does not look the same for everyone.

One common strategy for navigating the rigors of coursework is to cultivate meaningful personal relationships with classmates. Your classmates are a reservoir of knowledge and experiences that can, for example, translate the readings and writing assignments as well as describe how they apply to you personally. Your peers are invaluable. They are in a unique position to understand the ups and downs of coursework. Their emotional support can play a significant role in how you experience graduate school. Camaraderie or social isolation can make all the difference in the world.

Networking Matters. Networking is perhaps the most understated aspect of the doctoral experience. Remember, what you have accomplished is just as important as who you know. At this level, everyone is smart, accomplished, and has something to offer. One aspect of your job as a doctoral student is to network. What are other students learning? What projects are they working on? What fellowships are they applying for? What conferences and workshops are they attending? Can you see yourself collaborating with them? These questions should guide your thinking when it comes to networking with other graduate students. Interacting and building relationships with like-minded peers will serve as the basis of social networks that could help advance your career. Take the time to interact with and learn from students from other departments, programs and universities.

What is a Dissertation? The dissertation is an opportunity to demonstrate that you can apply the skills, knowledge and training you have acquired on an original research project. A traditional dissertation has five chapters—Introduction, Literature Review, Methods and Theory, Data Chapter, and Conclusion.

The best dissertation is a finished dissertation. This is the most important rule to remember when writing a dissertation! Your dissertation will not be a magnum opus. Very few people beyond your dissertation committee will even bother to read it, and that's okay. Dissertations are a messy business. It is the first time most doctoral candidates are putting together a manuscript length text. Through the process of writing you will discover that there are various tangential issues related to your project that you would like to address but are unable to for various reasons. If this happens, remember, the best dissertation is a finished dissertation. Resist expanding the scope of your questions and analysis. Be as focused as possible. It is very easy to overcomplicate what you are trying to say and lose sight of the core argument you are trying to make. Simplicity is your best friend.

Be consistent with writing. Consistent writing habits are what drive the everyday reality of the dissertation. Regardless of how many hours you decide to write per day, be consistent! Turn off your phone, stay off Facebook and Twitter, and block out the outside world. Your writing time is precious and an investment in your scholarship. Protect that time. Consistent writing means that you are making progress. There is no way to tell how long it will take for you to successfully complete your dissertation—there are too many variables to consider here. However, the easiest way to not finish is to compromise your relationship with writing.





Perfection does not exist. There is no such thing as perfection. Let it go. This might seem scary to some but the idea of perfection in writing is a myth. Writing is a subjective process. There are limitless possibilities in terms of how to structure an argument, frame a question or respond to a particular debate. Additionally, your understanding and insight of a particular topic, method or theory will change over time. What seems insightful now might appear obvious or naïve later. The most important thing to remember is that perfection does not exist. What you have written down is fine. Keep writing.

Expectations After Completing a Doctoral Program






POTENTIAL FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

Prior to completing your doctoral program, you should have a clear idea as to what kind of professional trajectory you would like to pursue. The demands of the professoriate are very different than those of the professional or practitioner realm. The positive aspect of receiving a doctorate is that you will have flexibility in terms of what kind of employment you would like to pursue. Remember, the skills, knowledge and training you receive are *transferable*. This means, in practical terms, that you are qualified to pursue a wide range of professional endeavors. Under no circumstances should you restrict your options. Be as flexible as possible!




As you near the completion of your doctoral experience, explore what kind of professional opportunities are available. If you are interested in the professoriate, begin to craft and tailor your application materials to prospective universities. An application typically consists of a cover letter, teaching statement, letters of reference, curriculum vitae, and scholarly writing samples. For more information pertaining to the mechanics of how to put together an application package, please refer to the following resources.

-  [Columbia University](#)
-  [University of Washington](#)
-  [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#)
-  [University of California, San Francisco](#)

Additionally, as you prepare your application materials, explore which positions may be of interest to you. Keep in mind that each position will likely require that you tailor your materials to meet the requirements of the position. The following resources are the most utilized.

-  [Chronicle of Higher Education](#)
-  [Association for the Study of Higher Education](#)
-  [Diverse Jobs](#)
-  [Inside Higher Education](#)
-  [Higher Ed Jobs](#)

If you are interested in a career outside of the professoriate, begin to craft a cover letter as well as transform your curriculum vitae into a resume. For more specific information on how to prepare your academic training for the professional marketplace, please refer to the following sources.

-  [The University of Texas at Austin](#)
-  [Columbia University](#)
-  [Northeastern University](#)

We hope that this guide has been helpful and that you are well on your way to pursuing a graduate degree. The solid foundation you earned at your Minority Serving Institution has set you on a path to success, much like those that have gone before you.



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