

GRADUATE SCHOOL PREPARATION, THE SEARCH & APPLICATION PROCESS:
SOME GUIDELINES AND HELPFUL HINTS

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- 1) *Tasks that need to be addressed:*
- Search and Research Process
 - GRE (Graduate Record Exam)
 - Mentor/Support Network
 - Personal Statement
 - Funding

Decide what your time frame will be based on all of the above

- 2) *Search and Research Process:(one-two years before application)*

- Begin with a visit to www.petersons.com to get an idea of the breadth and scope of graduate programs available and speak to faculty and professionals in your field of study about their suggestions. Start an academic diary of school addresses and websites, program directors, faculty members and number of applicants/enrolled students. Identify in the range of twenty (20) programs in which you have some interest – keep in mind that some schools that never entered your mind as possibilities may turn out to be the one! You may want to keep a column for identifying your reasons for rejecting a program to help you later in the process.
- The most successful strategy will be in choosing the right program for you and finding as many of them as possible will increase your chances proportionately. An improved selection process should enable you to choose from significantly more admissions offers and better financial aid packages. Some factors to consider while doing your research (also consider - if these factors are important to you - ranking them for yourself):

Reputation, Competition, Geographic location, Social Life, Number of Students, Urban/Rural Campus, Research Interests, Academic Resources, Curriculum Choices, Recommendation, Job Placement, Accreditation, Well-Known/ Well Published Faculty, Funding Opportunities and Cost of Workload, Housing, Cost of Living.

- You should devote some time early on in your process to consider whether you want to attend graduate school part-time or full- time. This may depend on a number of personal variables and what your objectives are, but you should discuss this with the people in your network. Additionally, you will want to consider the statistics on number of part-time versus full-time graduate students in the programs you are considering.
- Attend graduate and professional school fairs on your campus or schools near by. This gives you the opportunity to talk to representatives of the schools you have been researching and ask specific questions about funding, fee waivers, housing, etc.

NOTE:

For Masters Students – The issue of whether an institution offers a doctoral program may enhance resources, faculty and provide a broader base of students and alumni. Flip-side, determine what prevailing attitude toward MA's is... i.e., short-end of preference for doctoral students. For doctoral students, keep in mind that major focus of doctoral programs is publishing... average length of time to complete a dissertation, funding availability after finishing comprehensives and the like...

3) *Tackling the GRE's* – The first decision is deciding when you are going to take it.

- Some programs ask for both the general GRE and the subject test for their area.
- Familiarize yourself with the basic structure of the exam and remember that different programs look differently at the score breakdown, and the most important...many funding opportunities use the GRE as a method of allocating resources!
- Assess your starting point by taking a practice exam
- Strategy options: self-study and review, faculty aid, study groups and review courses, GRE Prep CD-Rom
- **Recommendation:** Take the GRE the summer before your senior year and no later than October of senior year. Application deadlines can be as early as December for some schools. You can register for the GRE exam at www.gre.org.

4) *Putting together your "package"*.

A) Mentor/Support Network and Recommendations

- It is important to assess who you need and the variety of your network, (i.e. tenured professors and/or administrators in your field, someone whose research area is related to yours, someone whose job you aspire to, etc...)
- Role of mentors/support persons – you guide their role in the process by clearly indicating what you need from them; i.e., what programs and institutions they think are valuable and match your goals, various pathways to attaining your goals, who they think you need to have in your network, etc...
- Typically, one or more of the people in your network and/or your mentors will write your recommendation. It is important to be consistent in communicating with them about your goals and needs...the more familiar they are with these the better the recommendation they can write. (*Note:* it is important to get your request in for a recommendation early, as it takes a significant amount of time and often yours is not the only recommendation they are writing, and they are all usually needed around the same time.)

Note: For those coming from the workforce, you may need to “re-connect” with many of these people or connect with some new people...therefore, this process should be backed up on your time line as it may take longer to position yourself.

B) Personal Statement:

- This is probably the most important part of your application packet and you should consult (at minimum) with all of the people in your support network to get their input and feedback. Additionally, this task will be very time consuming and will require dedication and focus.
- This is your opportunity to let the admissions committee know who you are and what you are about and why they should want you in their program; particularly, what your contribution to their program will be. Additionally, this is where you can distinguish yourself from other applicants.
- You will revise this particular work somewhere in the range of 7 to 10 times before you have the finished product, and it should be read and edited by faculty and administrators.
- Various issues to think about addressing in your personal statement:

- What your interests are and what are your motivations for graduate school (what you want to do and why), why this particular program would be essential to meeting that goal, what your experience has been thus far (this should not be too detailed as you should attach your resume or curriculum vitae with your application), some of your basic philosophies and ideas regarding your field of study, and what your contribution to the field will be.

C) Funding:

- When researching various programs, aid and funding should be important factors in your consideration process, and you should investigate what each program/institution offers at this level.
- Various funding resources include: institutional funding (internship/assistantships, fellowships) and outside funding resources (many of which are particular to students of color, women and returning students.)
- This area should be explored very early in your process, as it takes time to become familiar with the various resources and what each requires in order to be considered.
- It is recommended that you begin your inquiry by visiting the websites listed in this handout to start becoming familiar with the availability of resources and the process of applying for them.
- No one should enter graduate school without some funding resources... there are numerous funding opportunities available for everyone and, optimally, you want to aim for a “full-ride”.
- Be mindful of the FAFSA form when preparing to apply to graduate school and for aid. This form is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid and is used to process any and all aid. Processing of the FAFSA generates your Student Aid Report (SAR), which each institution uses to determine your aid package. The form cannot be mailed before January 01, but you should complete and mail it in as soon after that date. FAFSA forms should be mailed to you from the institution(s) to which you are applying but can be obtained from any financial officer or are available through the internet at www.fafsa.ed.gov

D) Housekeeping: Various “others” to address in your process:

- Be aware of deadlines and know what they mean. Application deadline means all materials must have been received by that date and individual departments may have deadlines earlier than required by the graduate school. Financial deadlines may also be different.

- *Transcripts:* Part of your application process will involve requesting transcripts of your academic record from the institution(s) you have attended. This means that you must have ALL fiscal matters in order with each institution in order for them to process this request. This should be early on your time line to prevent having an incomplete application packet.
- Answer all questions on application, particularly ethnicity questions.
- Do not disregard application fees. Most schools will not consider your application complete without the fee (unless it has been waived.) Ask about procedures for fee waivers.
- *Credit History/Report:* If you are unaware of what your credit history or report looks like, you should request a copy of your credit report from one of the various credit report agencies. If there are some issues on your credit report to be addressed, you should address these issues as early as possible, because it will take a significant amount of time, persistence and processing. The area of credit is particularly important because negative credit can have an impact on whether you received loan eligibility (particularly those that defer interest and sometimes on receiving other sources of aid.

Web Sites for Graduate School Preparation

- 1) Financial Resources:
www.fastweb.com A comprehensive financial aid search through the web. You can also set up a personal profile and have relevant financial aid information sent to you via your email.

www.finaid.org A comprehensive independent and objective guide to student financial aid, organized by subjects such as sources of aid and special interests (i.e., financial opportunities for graduate students of color.)

www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/fsa/index.html At this site you can get assistance in completing the FAFSA form (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)
- 2) Multipurpose Sites:
www.number2.com This page links you to GRE discussion groups, guides to the complete GRE, on-line sample GRE and GRE companion.

www.review.com/graduate This site connects you to the Princeton Review website for the graduate school and is invaluable. Also provides links to other websites that address every aspect of the process of getting to graduate school.
- 3) Personal Statements:
www.accepted.com Called “Writing Central”, this has much of the information one needs to write personal statements for graduate, business, medical and law school.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Foundation Center of New York City - Publishes several reference books on foundation support for graduate study. It also has a computerized data bank called Grant Guides that for a fee will produce a listing of grant possibilities in a variety of fields. The Foundation Center is located at 79 Fifth Avenue; call 212-620-4230 or access <http://foundationcenter.org> .

Federal Student Aid Information Center – Will help you complete the federal student financial aid application, tell you whether a school participates in the federal student aid programs and that school's default rate; explain federal student aid eligibility requirements and explain the process of determining financial need and awarding aid, and send federal student aid publications to you. 1-800-4-FED-AID (1800-433-3243). For information regarding the processing of your student aid application and/or obtaining a copy of your Student Aid Report (SAR), 1-319-728-7603 (NOTE: this is **NOT** a toll free number)

The Ford Foundation – Provides pre-doctoral and dissertation fellowships for students of color. The program is designed to increase the presence of underrepresented populations among the nation's college and university faculty members. Awards range from \$1,000-\$18,000 depending on level of study. Contact the Ford Foundation Pre-doctoral and Dissertation Fellowships for Minorities, Fellowship Office, National Research Council, Washington, DC at 1-202-334-2874 or <http://www7.nationalacademies.org/fellowships/index.html> .

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation – Provides Mellon dissertation fellowships for graduate study in the humanities. Contact the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, Princeton, NJ at 1-649-452-7007 or <http://www.woodrow.org/index.php> .

The Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers (IRT) – Identifies talented students of color in their junior year of college and encourages them to pursue advanced degrees and careers in teaching. The IRT offers a summer program to prepare students for the GRE and the rigors of graduate school. Participants receive a stipend, travel expenses for those living outside the New England area, and room and board. The Institute also provides extensive help throughout the graduate school application process. Contact the Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers, 1-978-749-4116 or www.andover.edu/irt . Deadline is April 01.

The National Academies – Annually awards hundreds of fellowships of up to \$14,000 to students in the sciences, social sciences, mathematics and engineering. Contact the Fellowship Office, National Research Council, Washington, DC at 1-202-334-2872 or <http://www7.nationalacademies.org/fellowships/index.html> .

FINANCIAL SUPPORT INFORMATION

Types of Financial Support

A good financial package includes support in the form of a fellowship (stipend plus fess), a teaching assistantship (teaching experience) and research position (learning to conduct research while being supported financially.) Support should cover educational and living expenses, including fees or fee remission (reduced fees.) A teaching assistantship provides experience which allows the student to make an informed decision as to whether he/she should pursue teaching as a career. If the student decides to teach at a college or university, the TA experience will increase his\her marketability. A research position allows the student to learn research techniques while working on his\her professor's project and preparing for their own research project. Students often present their work at a national meeting, allowing networking with others in the field and possibly opening up job opportunities for the future.

Fellowships

For graduate students, most financial support is based on merit (academic scholarship) rather than financial need. When financial need is included as criteria for eligibility, it is based on student income rather than parents' income. Most support for graduate students is handled through the department nomination process. This means that the department considers all applicants for fellowships and submits nominations for fellowship support for its most suitable candidates to the Graduate Dean. The Graduate Division and the academic unit determine the type of support which will be provided. These fellowships may be either multi-year or single year awards. Students who receive a multi-year award will probably receive a fellowship plus departmental support which includes a teaching assistantship and/or graduate student researcher position.

Diversity Fellowships

Most universities remain committed to diversifying its graduate student population and often have a number of centrally-administered programs to provide financial support for students from a wide spectrum of geographic locations and from a broad range of social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Graduate Schools may have fellowships which encourage minorities and women to apply to our graduate programs. These programs are funded and are normally used solely as funding sources for highly qualified graduate students who have already been admitted to a graduate program based on their academic standing, coursework taken in preparation for graduate school, research experience, letter of recommendation and GRE scores.

FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION DEADLINE

To receive full consideration for fellowships, students should take the GRE no later than mid October so that the scores (along with all other supporting documentation) are received in the department office by the application deadline date. Please be aware the financial aid and non-financial aid seeking applications may have different deadline dates.

Supplementation of Fellowship

Summer employment may be included in the award package. This usually means that the student is hired by the academic department full-time for twelve weeks. Since full-time employment is not thought to be compatible with graduate study, it is not permitted during the academic year. During the academic year, if employment is thought to be manageable and necessary, it may be permitted to supplement fellowships. However, in most cases, employment supplementation is not permitted. Supplementation may be contingent upon the prior approval by the Graduate Dean.

External Funding Opportunities

Most colleges and universities encourage students to increase their opportunities for financial support by applying for external (non-university) funding. Institutions never have enough support for all deserving students. Funding sources include the National Science Foundation, the Ford Foundation Minority Fellowship Program, Howard Hughes Pre-Doctoral Fellowships in Biology, the National Physical Science Consortium. Deadlines for these external fellowship programs vary, but generally occur in the fall term. Be sure to visit their respective websites to ensure that you do not miss their deadlines

Stafford Loans

Federal Stafford Loans (subsidized or unsubsidized) are available to eligible US citizens and permanent residents to cover the annual cost of education; calculated by the difference between the fellowship, student contribution and financial support. Only domestic students are eligible for Stafford Loans.

Tax Information

For those who are successful in receiving fellowships, taxes are not taken from the award. Therefore, each student is responsible for ensuring that income taxes are set aside in the event that taxes are owed. All fellowship holders are required to complete a Federal Assistance for Students Aid (FAFSA) for annually. The form can be completed online at www.fafsa.ed.gov. Stipends will not be disbursed until this form is submitted.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

I. PURPOSE:

- A. Introduce yourself
- B. Demonstrate your eligibility and preparedness for Graduate Study
- C. Evidence of analytical proficiency

II. AUDIENCE

This is where you express your views about your specific research interests.

III. DESIGN/FORMAT

A. Past Academic work

- 1. Institution(s)
- 2. Specific courses
 - a. Skills developed

B. Graduate Work

- 1. Institution
 - a. Specific program of study you wish to pursue
 - b. Professors (*whose research interests you*)
 - c. Possible project(s)
 - d. Resources you have identified as support for your research: *Elective classes of interest; research centers in the university*

C. Goals and Objectives:

This section of your statement should be very specific, linking your past work to your desire to obtain the advance degree. How will you build upon your skills? What are your expectations? Note here your weaknesses as well as your strengths.

D. Closing:

Be sure to identify specific skills you will bring to the program.