

Applying for a PhD program

Start the process nearly a year and a half from when you want to enter the PhD program (e.g., if you want to start in Fall 2015, start in Spring 2014).

May/June:

- Start researching programs
- Take a practice GRE exam and sign up for a GRE prep course (if needed)
- Register for GRE exam

July:

- Read more about the schools that interest you (websites)
- Meet with/talk with undergrad and MA professors about your plan

August:

- Take the GRE (register again if your scores need work)
- Start writing your statement of purpose/essay

September:

- Register for any GRE subject tests (if needed)
- Finalize your list of schools; Choose 1-2 potential faculty mentors at each school and learn about their research
- Contact your recommenders and request letters
- Keep drafting your statement

October:

- Request your transcripts
- Send your recommenders your CV, essay, etc.
- Contact faculty, students at prospective schools and visit if possible

November:

- Have a few smart people read over your statement
- Take the GRE subject test (if needed)

December:

- Complete and submit all applications
- Check that your recommendations were submitted

January:

- Fill out the FAFSA
- Look into private grants, loans, fellowships

February/March:

- Relax and wait

April:

- Get your acceptances (and rejections—it is reality) and make a decision
- Finalize financial aid/grants

PARTS OF THE APPLICATION

- **Transcript**
- **GRE**
- **Letters of recommendation**
- **Essay/Statement of Purpose**

Which is most important?

Although some people will tell you that the letters of recommendation and essay are the most important parts of your application, this assumes that you make the first cut by having good enough grades and GRE scores to meet the standards of the department. But although you can study for the GRE and probably improve your scores, your transcript is what it is at the time you apply for graduate school. You have much more control over your essay and the recommendations.

Essay

Your essay must explain the following:

- why you want to get a PhD (e.g., to become a professor, to become a researcher),
- what you want to study (e.g., immigrant social networks, health care organizational structures, or a more specific question if you have one)
- why you want to study it (e.g., you took a class which piqued your interest, you wrote your thesis on XYZ, you worked with a community organization and noticed this issue),
- how you plan to study it (e.g., most interested in qualitative/quantitative methods, what skills and abilities and knowledge you already have and what you need to work more on)
- why the Sociology department at University ABC is the best place for you to do this (e.g., the faculty—name names!—work on this topic and you would like to work with them on this; the XYZ research center, the geographic location is good for studying this particular group/community, etc.)

You want to make sure that your essay is scholarly, yet concise and readable, that it makes it clear that you have the knowledge and skills to be a good doctoral student, and that it lays out a watertight case about why you are a great fit for this program and vice versa.

Recommendation Letters

Although you obviously can't write recommendation letters for yourself, you can help to control their content. Here are some guidelines:

- You should only ask professors or professional supervisors or collaborators (from research-related jobs or internships) to write letters for you; they need to be able to comment on your skills and abilities as a student, researcher, analyst, etc.
- Only ask people who know you well and who seem positive about writing for you to write. If someone seems reluctant, it may mean that he/she feels that he/she cannot write you a very good letter, either because he/she

doesn't know you and your work well or because he/she doesn't think you are very good. Find someone else.

- Provide your letter writers with a list (or spreadsheet) of the schools and deadlines for letters, as well as supplementary materials such as your CV/resume, statement of purpose (even a draft), etc. to help with writing the letter. Remind the letter writers about your grade from their course(s) or anything that you did to stand out. Remember that we professors are asked to write hundreds of these letters over our lifetimes!

Learning about Programs

It is highly recommended that, if possible, you visit your top schools to meet faculty and/or students both before and after acceptance. This is going to be a 5 year (or more) chunk of your life and you want them to get to know you, but you also want to find out if this is where you really want to be. If it is not possible to visit in person, email faculty members and request a phone call. Be prepared with specific questions (not things that you can find the answers to on their website). Ask your undergrad and MA faculty members to help you network.

Finances and Aid

Finally, apply for as many grants and fellowships as possible and make sure that you understand the finances of grad school at the different places. It may be cheaper (and may have a better job market payoff in the long run) to attend a more prestigious program, because they may have more resources to pay graduate student stipends, etc. Larger universities with established research may also have more opportunities for good-paying part-time research jobs.