How to Get Into Graduate School

This document was written and put together by Courtney Gerver. All links were live as of 3/17/2021 and will be updated annually.

My ambitions to attend graduate school emerged during my freshman year in undergrad when I discovered I could make a career out of research. As a first-generation college student at a small liberal arts college with no graduate program in my field, I had no idea what I had to do to reach my newly minted career goal. I didn't even know any graduate students I could ask about their experiences. This page is the resource I wish I had as a freshman. The following document is intended to serve as a non-exhaustive resource list and information dump for undergraduates who intend to go to graduate school to earn a Ph.D. in a social science/STEM topic. Specifically, it will detail opportunities for students from non-research-focused colleges and universities to gain research experience at larger universities and institutions with some specifically for members of underrepresented communities and disadvantaged individuals. There are also links to grants students can earn to conduct research at their home institution, links detailing the graduate school application process, and links to assist with each part of the graduate school application process

(how to find positions, personal statement, CV, GRE). It will conclude with general information I wish I had known before entering grad school.

As a quick aside, one has to be sure of what they generally want to study before you apply to graduate school. Your application will be stronger when there is passion behind your interest, and 4-6 years is too long to simply "put up with" a topic of minor or no interest. Take the time to figure out what you want. You will not be "behind" if you don't enter graduate school right after graduation (the average Ph.D. student is 33 years old). In fact, many scholars highly recommend pursuing relevant full-time research assistantships, lab manager positions, post-baccalaureate positions, or internships for a few years before applying. While this document will not contain information on those positions, they are excellent ways gain additional experience, figure out what you definitely want to study, and make a bit of money before earning a graduate student stipend.

CONTACT

Please email me at courtneygerver@gmail.com if you spot any links that need updating or if you know of additional information or opportunities that should be added to this list.

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External Research, Internship, and Co-Op Opportunities

Most STEM Ph.D. programs require relevant research experience for admission. While students can offer to volunteer with faculty members or undertake research for credit, that is not always a financially feasible option. The following links detail paid research opportunities for undergraduates. It is recommended getting research experience starting at least by the summer of your junior year.

For All Undergraduates:
National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates
• Research opportunities across a variety of disciplines

American Psychological Association Undergraduate Research Opportunities & Internships
• Huge amount of summer research opportunities/internships in the life sciences

Society for Personality and Social Psychology Research Opportunities for Undergraduates
• Multiple opportunities; varying deadlines between January-March

Institute for Broadening Participation
• Multiple opportunities ranging between high school students–college faculty

The University of Texas at San Antonio RISE Program List
• Huge amount of summer research opportunities/co-op/internships in the life sciences

UC Berkeley List—Undergraduate Research Programs
• Huge amount of summer research opportunities in the life sciences

Duke University Job Board
• Click on the "Summer" tab for summer research assistantships across the country.

Opportunities for Members from Underrepresented Communities:
American Psychological Association Fellowships and Programs
• Opportunities specific to trainees interested in areas related to behavioral health for underserved populations

University of Georgia Research List
• Extensive opportunity list for minorities, financially disadvantaged, disabled, and others

Harvard University List—Underrepresented minority fellowships
• Extensive list across multiple disciplines.

Big Ten Academic Alliance Summer Research Opportunities Program List
• Program is aimed at increasing the number of underrepresented students who pursue research careers

UC Berkeley List—STEM Programs for Undocumented Students
• Broad STEM programs included

Undergraduate Research Grants

Experimental research is heavily reliant on external funding. If you want to work with a faculty member but they don't have funding, you can apply for a grant to fund your science.

Beinecke Scholarship
• Available to college juniors

American Psychological Association Summer Undergraduate Psychology Research Experience Grants
• Supporting undergraduates with no/very little research experience to conduct research at participating universities

American Psychological Association Psi Chi Research Grant
• Must be a Psi Chi member

Psi Chi Undergraduate Research Grants
• Similar to previous. Must be Psi Chi member

National Institute of Health Undergraduate Scholarship Program
• Geared towards students from disadvantaged backgrounds committed to biomedical, behavioral, and social science health-related research

Sigma Xi Grants in Aid of Research Program
• You do not have to be a Sigma Xi member to apply

Mellon Mays Gap Assistance Program
• Financial support for gap year(s) between undergrad and graduate school

National Institute of Health Undergraduate Institutional Awards
• Your institution must apply for these awards

General Career Development Resources

Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education
• Has undergraduate scholarship opportunities, professional development resources, and mentorship tips and training

Getting into Graduate School

The graduate school application process doesn't need to opaque. Here's generally applicable information and advice for getting in. I recommend starting the actual application process during the summer between your junior and senior year so you don't have to worry about trying to cram it all in between schoolwork, extracurricular activities, work, and the like.

General Application Information
The following links have great information on the graduate school application process. Be mindful that, for many programs, there are interviews associated with the admission process. Make sure to pay attention to those parts of the following links.
[Harvard Psychology's PhD Resources and Online Tips Page](#)
[Kate Nuss Blog](#)
[The Sokol-Hessner Lab](#)
[PrepScholar](#)
[Duke University](#)
[Terri Frasca Part 1](#)
[Terri Frasca Part 2](#)

Graduate School Application Workshop
[California State University Stanislaus](#)

Finding Ph.D. Positions
[Psychology Grad School Search](#) (non-exhaustive; check Twitter or email lab head to inquire about positions)

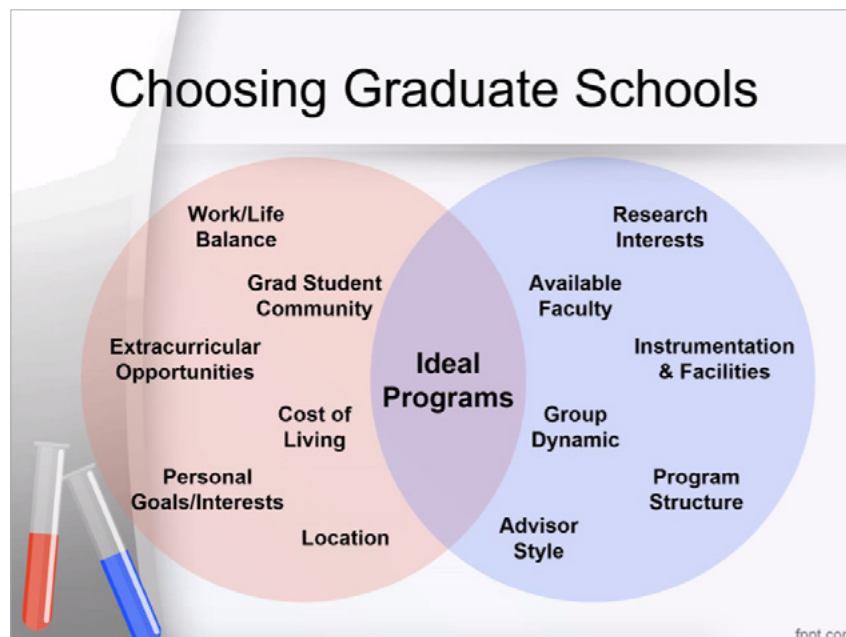*Figure credit: GWIS @ Penn State.*

Application Advice from Principal Investigators

Oftentimes, at least in the social sciences, you are admitted to a lab, not a department. I recommend paying special attention to the advice from Principal Investigators who lead the labs and admit grad students.

Aly Lab
MEMO Lab
Carter Lab
Stearns Lab

Advice for Each Component of the Graduate Application

Most applications require a personal statement, CV (stands for *curriculum vitae*, which is like an extended resume), and GRE score. They will also ask for letters of recommendation (usually 3). Make sure to give the individuals writing your letter as much time as possible; more than 1 month is preferrable. Separately, graduate school applications are often pricey ($50-$150 per school). You can reach out to the school you plan on applying to for fee wavers if you feel you need it.

Personal Statement
UC Berkeley
Purdue University
Columbia University
Drexel University

CV
Cornell University
University of Illinois
Wordvice

GRE
Many universities are beginning to phase out the GRE as a requirement. Even fewer programs require the subject test, though some recommend it if you are trying to switch fields from your undergraduate study. Check the requirements of your specific program before you take the GRE. It will cost money to send your score to your school after you leave the testing center ($27/school).

Free GRE Preparation Resources
Prepadviser (list of free GRE prep resources)
Test-Guide.com (free GRE practice tests)

General Day-Of GRE Tips
PrepScholar
CrunchPrep

Other Information I Wish I Had Known
Before I Entered Grad School

Click here to read a useful thread on graduate school through before some of my personal commentary below:

On where to apply: In many areas, you apply directly to work in a specific lab, not to a general department like in undergraduate. School prestige doesn't matter as much as the caliber of science of the lab you are applying to. Some of the best science in the world comes out of labs in smaller, lesser-known universities. Separately, it can be tough to have a work-life balance in graduate school. Prioritize a lab that understands mental health is a priority above everything else. Reach out to the graduate students already in the lab to see what life is like before applying.

On funding: Most programs offer funding for Ph.D. students. If you get offered multiple positions, you can use the other offers to leverage for better pay. Seek out programs that pay decent wages. It is often low, but livable. Do NOT pay for graduate school in the life sciences. In some US-based programs where you are fully funded, you will not be allowed to take another paying job. You need to be mentally prepared to watch your friends with less education and easier jobs making double or more of your salary.

On day-to-day science: Science is extremely personally rewarding. But you don't get those 'aha!' moments every day. Most of your job is analyzing data and writing (publications, grants, etc.). Early in your graduate school career you will still be taking classes and will be doing more "grunt work" that is still absolutely necessary, like stimuli development, recruitment, and the like. Most of the time, nobody will tell you what to do in lab. You have to be extremely self-motivated and organized. Use reference managers like Zotero. Always remember comparison is the thief of joy. Every field moves at a different pace and impostor syndrome will rear its ugly head. Make sure you have hobbies you're devoted to at the end of the day.

On change: It is okay to change labs. It is okay to change research interests. At the end of the day, it's your life and what you want to make of it.

On time: Time management isn't just for when you're on the clock. Spend time on fulfilling activities. It may feel like you don't have time to hang out with your family or go to the doctor/gym/therapist, but make sure to make time. Take at least a day off a week. Set email boundaries from the get-go (I don't send emails after 9pm unless there's an emergency). If you say you're too busy to do anything else but work, it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

On getting advice: Generally speaking, graduate students are happy to provide advice on the application process, grad school life, how they balance their personal affairs during schooling, etc. Since we've successfully been through the application process ourselves, we want to see others succeed and avoid hurdles and frustrations. At the very least, I recommend reaching out to the grads in the labs you intend to apply for to see how their experiences in their labs have been.

On post-Ph.D. life: The academic job market is extremely competitive. You will likely need to take a post-doc (or two) before you land a tenure-track position. Many people leave academia, but not science altogether, upon graduation.

Tips That Will Help Once You Get to Grad School

- Great general advice from Dorsa Amir
- Double the amount of time you think it will take to complete a task. Better to overdeliver than overstress because not enough time was allotted.
- On being a good graduate student
- Stay as organized as possible. Name every file with something specific. Use version control websites like Github.
- Common statistical knowledge is critical to success. Here's a handy cheat sheet by Jonas Lindeløv.
- Knowing keyboard shortcuts will save you a ton of time. I recommend committing these to memory.
- Knowing how to code (lots of free MATLAB/ R/ Python courses) is key.
- Graduate students often present their work in scientific poster format at academic conferences. Here's a poster-making tool from Biorender.
- Make an academic Twitter; scientists prefer Twitter to LinkedIn.
- Apply to as many grants as possible.
- For later in your career, here's some job talk materials.