



# **International Scholarship Forum (ISF)**

## **Consideration for Graduate Studies in the US**

### **Dr (in view) Farayola Praise Oladele**

## **Introduction**

I remember I joined this Platform in 2017. I had just completed my NYSC and was starting the hustle. It's hard to believe I will be starting my Second Year of PhD next Month. I want to thank ISF for their help in my success story. I remembered a scholar here reviewed my Statement of Purpose and another prepped me for Visa Interview. Thanks to admins for the Privilege and Opportunity to share.

Note that, no question is too stupid or shallow. As a matter of fact, asking questions (No matter how dumb they may sound) will save you a lot of money, issues and regrets in your pursuits for Graduate Study in the US. I can never forget my first experience at JFK (International Airport in New York) the day I landed. It's a very big and confusing airport with 6 terminals. I went about asking people how to get to the other terminals and they told me to take the free Air Train on the highest floor. My friend didn't, and had to pay \$100 to taxi drivers to take him there. I still laugh at him till today.

In summary, please always ask questions. I will drop my LinkedIn account and personal mail after the lecture so you can reach me if you need to clarify anything later on. Having said that. Let's get right straight to Business.

I am a man of many words (I write for leisure) but will try to be brief cos I know a lot of people don't like to read. For ease of comprehension, I have grouped the lecture into the following seven (7) parts:

- Why US
- Funding Opportunities int the US
- Requirements
- Why GRE and TOEFL?
- Timeline Overview
- Funding Offer Review
- Other things to note

## **Part 1: Why US?**

I don't need to write a long epistle to prove to you that US is one of the best places to consider for Graduate school. If you look at the top 10 highest ranked Universities in the world today, more than five (5) of them are in the United States. With over 5000 colleges and universities, you have a lot of options irrespective of your field and passion. The standard of leaving is superb and the education system is awesome. They have lots of International diversity and make international students feel at home. The US has fifty (50) states filled with wonderful natural and artificial wonders, you can never run out of places to visit and have fun. Summary is that you would without doubt certainly enjoy your graduate study if you choose to come to the US.



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## **Part 2. Funding Opportunities in the US**

Now, this is the part that most people do not like because US does not "really" do all these Scholarships way of studying we are used to in Nigeria. US graduate study is all about funding. The question is Who is funding you?

I will break the sources down into three (3) - These are the only sources I have known so far

- Research Assistantship
- Teaching Assistantship
- Fellowship

Occasionally there may be Administrative Assistantship, but they rarely give this to Internationals during their first year. You might be eligible after a year or two. Therefore, I won't be talking about this opportunity.

### **Research Assistantship**

This is the way it works.

Companies, Government, Organizations etc. want and need to do research. Professors bid for these opportunities and they are given grants (money) to carry out the research. However, since they can't do it by themselves, they use students (PhD and sometimes MSc.) to do this research. As a student, you are paid stipends to do the research and you also have other benefits – tuition waiver, medical insurance, housing etc. So, it's like schooling and working together. Note that only Academic Staffs like Professors or Assistant/Associate Professors can give these.

### **Teaching Assistantship**

Here in the US, you can be paid to assist the Professors in the Laboratory or with grading and teaching. You also get benefits, like tuition waiver, medical insurance etc. You are being paid to work while schooling. Note, the department as well as Professors can give this to students.

### **Fellowship**

This is similar to the idea of scholarship we have in Nigeria. A body, company or organization could decide to sponsor students who are economically disadvantage or exceptional in their field. Depending on the Fellowship, you could be asked to maintain a minimum grade during your study, while some do not require to meet this condition. They are very scarce and competitive to get. These companies may also have their criteria for selection you would have to meet.

So far, these are the sources of funding I have seen. Except in situations where the parents or uncle have enough money to cover the cost of schooling in the US or you get a scholarship in Nigeria that can be applied in any School in the US.



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## Part 3 Requirements

Now this is the part most people I have interacted with have issues. The requirement is as simple as a high score in GRE and TOEFL.

But before I go into analysis of these two, let me ask you a question.

If you are the HOD in a school in the US and you receive applications from all over the world. What criteria will you use to accept or reject students? Note, if you use their individual school results, it won't be fair because a first class in one University may be equivalent to 3rd class in another university and you can't accept all due to limited space.

The idea is to have them write a general exam no matter your background (just like Jamb). That exam is the GRE. It tests your reasoning and analytical abilities. Irrespective of your field, a high GRE score is a signal to any school in the US that you will cope well in their institution. They know that our education system in Nigeria is under the tree but they are willing to give many people a chance. All they just need is a show that you have sound cognitive ability and you won't crash when they want to update you. Your GRE score does that.

The US system trusts the GRE so much that if you score 335/340 in the exam, top schools will be begging you to come to their institution. Anyone that has taken the exam knows that it does not lie. Even if you train yourself after several attempts to score high, it's a proof that your brain can be trained to excel well in research or other academic activities. With a person's GRE score, you can understand their brain capacity and strength and that's what the professors, departments and organizations look out for when considering candidates for Research Assistantship, Teaching Assistantship and Fellowships.

Now let's move to TOEFL – Test of English as Foreign Language tests your ability to communicate effectively in English (**Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking**). You can see that the two exams test different things. Like I said, all countries of the world apply to the US for study. A high score in TOEFL is indicative of one's ability to cope in an English-speaking country like the US without difficulties in the course of studies.

Having explained these two exams. Let me analyze where these tests play a vital role in your acceptance.

### Research Assistantship.

I have not seen anyone get a Research Assistantship position without writing the GRE. (There may be, but they are few. I know there are many other scholars in the US here who can reference if they have seen. I'm in engineering, perhaps it's happening in other fields that I do not know of).



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#### What do professors look out for in picking students to join their research team?

First the professor wants to know if you acute reasoning ability – The GRE helps to measure this ability. Hence, it's very important you have a great score. Also, professors look out for students' background knowledge and the necessary skills in their research domain. TOEFL is not very important here but needed. There are some Chinese students with high reasoning ability but communicate poorly in English. Depending on the professors, they may overlook that and accept them because they are still assets despite their poor English and most times they are in the Laboratory.

#### Teaching Assistantship.

If the department is giving you this, TOEFL is very important because they want to be sure you can communicate well with the students. Most schools still require you take additional English exams on arrival to further prove that your communication skills in English is sound. Here GRE may not be strictly important but also needed. If a professor is giving you this, both GRE and TOEFL are important. Sometimes, Professors also give this if they don't have money from research but want to assist students as regards funding.

#### Fellowship

Depending on the Fellowship and their criteria - If the company says they want to improve diversity and help poor Africans to study in developed countries, they may not be stringent on GRE and TOEFL

## Part 4. Why GRE and TOEFL

I always encourage everyone I meet to write the two because of the following reasons:

- **Access to Funding opportunities**

When you are applying to most schools you are not sure which source of funding you will get. What usually happens is that after receiving applications, they sit and analyze the funding they have and based on that, select applications that will be funded. Professors do the same. They sieve the applications, pick out applications that spark interest and communicate back interest to fund. Therefore, having both increases your chances of accessing funding.

- **Visa application**

With Trump's administration, obtaining a Visa now is not as easy as before. You need all you can to prove to them that you are a genuine student and not a Nigerian running to another country. Sometimes, they ask for the two exams at the embassy. And having them is a big plus.



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- **Validity (Reusability)**

Once written, GRE is valid for 5 years and TOEFL for two years. You can reuse them over and over if the scores are good.

- **Preparedness**

You get to know if you are prepared for Graduate school or not. If your score is very low in GRE and TOEFL. It's an indication you will have some struggle when you get here.

Please drop the idea and mentality that it's not fair to write TOEFL as we schooled in English. Nigerian English is different from American English and TOEFL score will prove that you are prepared for graduate school.

Let me chip this in - if you apply to University of Ibadan for Masters, you have to write Use of English. If you fail it, that's the end even if you are an alumnus of UI. Why didn't UI say, we all schooled in English. Let's be real.

The Exams are expensive and am not sure of funding. Life is a risk and everything too. If I add All the money I spent:

- GRE
- TOEFL
- Data subscription
- Application fee
- Sevis Fee
- Visa Application fee
- Flight Ticket
- Others

It was not up to the money I was paid as stipend for a month. Of course, there is a lot to spend on here but just saying. See it as an investment that will yield returns if it works out

If you get here and don't like your school and your GRE/TOEFL is still valid, you can easily apply to other schools and change schools. I can go on and on but still come down to writing TOEFL and GRE. Usually when someone chats me up requesting for guidance, I will tell the person if its US, forget any other thing. Concentrate first on writing your GRE and TOEFL and getting good scores then we can talk.

Most US undergraduates (citizens) that intend to go for graduate school also have to write the GRE. So, it's not biased.



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## Part 5. Timeline Overview

Most school portals open and close between September to December for priority application. For instance, if you are targeting to start school August 2020, most universities will close their portal in December 2019 and January 2020, and a few February 2020. So, it's best to have those exams ready Before October/ November and then apply. After application, you wait for their decision and offer which usually comes in around May depending on the school.

If you get funded and you accept the offer, they would send you the documents in May/June. Then you start your Visa application June/July and fly out August when the new session starts.

## Part 6. Funding Review

US like a lot of documentation to avoid legal activities. You will be given an offer letter that contain details of stipends, year, coverage, conditions etc. It's hard to explain here. But if you need help understanding what's involved, you can reach out privately to me or other scholars with similar experience on the platform.

## Part 7. Other Things to Note

- Location is important in the US. If you don't like the cold, please don't pick schools toward the North. Forget the crap that we can survive anywhere. I barely survived my first winter. Of course, you will live fine. But the question is will you be able to work and reason at your best during those periods. Also, \$1700 in MINNESOTA and \$1700 in MASSACHUSETTS are not the same. It's like collecting 70k in Lagos and Ibadan. One will still be able to save. One will barely survive. Therefore, consider the cost of living.
- Read your Offer letter well and know what is covered or not. Some covers full tuition, some don't. Some part medical. etc. I recommend getting someone to analyze and tell you what's involved so you can prepare and plan accordingly. I have a friend in UTAH paying a lot of tuition. He has no savings at all and planning to transfer. But if your goal is just to run out of Nigeria. No problem checking just be coming.
- The amount on your stipend is important. **Why?** The law does not allow you to do any kind of work even freelancing. It's illegal if you are on F1 Visa. That's why u need to know and understand what they are offering. The highest I have seen from friends is \$3000 and lowest is \$1500. Note that department varies and so does schools.
- Taxes here are real and medical care is very expensive. Medical insurance alone is around \$200 per month if is not covered.



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- If the school says they Waive TOEFL and you are happy. Congratulations. But know, here in the US, you might be required to take English Exams before you start on your arrival. Despite the fact that I had good TOEFL scores. I still had to take English exams when I got to my school. I also had to take another exam for teaching where you teach a mock class and you are graded. If you fail, they compulsorily enroll you in English classes and may delay your Assistantship. They have to be sure you can converse well in English before allowing you to assist professors in teaching. But if you have TOEFL experience, it adds up and those exams are walk over.
- If someone tells you look for a way to go, (Look for fake statement of account, etc.) when you get there, you will work and be fine. I laugh in Spanish. If you see good work here as student on F1, you would probably get paid 17\$ per hour and you are not allowed by law to do more than 40 hours work per week. In a month after tax, you hustle and max at \$2000. Tuition alone in my school is more than \$20,000 in a semester. Before you put in housing (cheap one is 400\$ every month), gas, water, insurance, food etc. Summary a fake statement of account won't work
- If you plan to marry soon and bring your wife or husband on F2. They can't work. They will be dependent. If you want that opportunity, you might have to check at Canada or UK.
- Apply to at least 4 universities. You might be asked at the embassy during your Visa interview. It also proves you are a genuine student.
- I have seen people with 2:2 or 2:1 get into good schools. But they had good GRE and TOEFL scores.

### Question 1

Thanks for the insightful lecture

- Can one write IELTS instead of TOEFL? Is it accepted?
- Which states are towards the north (cold area)?
- Which states is cheaper in terms of expensive?
- Which universities pays highest?
- How can one search for a specific course across the different universities?

### Answer

- Yeah, Most US universities accept IELTS instead of TOEFL. But majority have preference for TOEFL because its US based exam
- Check the Map. The closer you get to the North, the worst the cold.





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- You might have to google for that. It changes yearly. But we all laugh at California. As much as there is a lot of opportunities there, it's very expensive.
- The highest stipend I have seen was 3000 from MIT. The higher the school in ranking, the better is the stipend (**Personal Hypothesis based from observations**)
- Google and US news are your best friend. Visit Schools website, the department of choice and read up their criteria. If you are not clear about anything, email the department. They usually reply within two (2) business days.

### Question 2

Can one finish a PhD in 3 years in the US?

#### Answer

You can finish in two (2) years. It depends on you. If you release ground breaking research and publish papers, no one will hold you back. But on the average, if they are able to count in your masters (You can move in courses), you should be done in 3 years. But if not and it's a direct PhD, four (4), five (5) and six (6) years is the norm for finishing a PhD in the US.

### Question 3

- What should be the minimum mark for TOEFL and GRE.
- Please tell us more Minnesota and Massachussets
- Can married people pursue PhD in the US with their wives joining them?

#### Answer

- The higher the score, the better your options. I wanted to go to CALTECH. But it's stated clearly on their website for Electrical engineering. If you have less than 324 in GRE, don't bother applying. When I saw my GRE score. I knew CALTECH was not the option and looked for a school where my GRE score will still look good. Target 330. But any score above 300 can still work it. The higher the better. For TOEFL, target 115. But I think any score above 90 is fine. Always check the department for their requirement. They will state the TOEFL score and GRE scores they recommend. It varies with school.
- Minnesota is a nice and cheap state but cold. Massachusset is Expensive. Great schools are there and the weather is more polite. Check google foe more.
- You can bring in your spouse on F2 visa. But they can't work. They will be dependent.

### Question 4

Is there an opportunity for Post Doc in US for someone with a PhD from a Nigerian university?





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#### Answer

Sure. If they see that you are an asset. They can give you a chance. But most post docs I have seen here had their PhD in the US because Post Doc positions rely heavily on recommendations in most cases.

#### Question 5

Can a GRE score of 300-305, TOEFL 85-90 get a research assistantship in Engineering/Computer Science?

#### Answer

Sure. But it won't be a top school. The school will probably be ranked 200 - 400 in the US but it's still worth a try. If the person has other things in pocket, like great undergraduate transcript, Research papers and experience. He can shoot at 100 - 200 ranked schools. (Personal opinion)

#### Question 6

First and foremost, your analysis is top notch sir. I really appreciate your contributions. May God continue to uplift you. After being rejected at the US embassy once, I have decided to pursue another course and school entirely. What possible question should I expect in that regard? How can I answer well?

#### Answer

It's a broad question. You can mail me privately and we can discuss it. I will have to look at the last visa Embassy transcript. Figure out what went wrong, so you don't make the same mistake again.

#### Question 7

- How do I get started with applications upon securing GRE and TOEFL result?
- How can I get contacts of graduate school students' representatives to obtain information about the university one is applying to?
- Does having a master's degree influences getting a straight PhD or finishing with a first-class grade in undergraduate.
- How much influence does professional working experiences have on securing MSc or PhD programs in the USA?

#### Answer

- Based on your scores, you can google schools to apply to that increases your chances of acceptance and funding. Do your intensive research, visit their websites and department pages, read up what is going on then and pick like four (4) to apply to. They have Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 Universities in the US.



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- It will be on the department website, links to Research pages, etc. From there you can easily get mails of graduate school students' representatives you can mail.
- I tell people. To increase your chances of funding, apply for PhD. If the schools say you can pull in credits from your masters, good and fine. It reduces your years by one or two. If they say otherwise, you don't have any choice then. I applied for a direct PhD with no masters. What most schools do is that if they consider your application for PhD and if they see that you are not fit, they may convert it and offer you a masters instead.
- It's great. If you have anything that stands you out and shows you will be an asset to them, please include it in your CV, Statement of Purpose etc. and sell yourself.

### Question 8

I need more clarification about subject GRE requested for some courses

#### Answer

I am sorry I don't know more about this. Most schools request for the GRE General. If you are specific with a particular University and it is stated clearly on their requirement that it must be a subject GRE, then you might have to write that.

### Question 9

Thank you so much for being detailed.

- Based on your experience, what should be the target scores for TOEFL and GRE if one is aiming for top schools?
- Based on your experience so far, what can you say is the average cost of living of a student in the US? I know this differs but just to have average idea and know how to chase full funding.

#### Answer

- MIT Material - I would say with a score above 325 for GRE, 115 for TOEFL. you stand a great chance. 100-200 ranked Universities – with 310 and above for GRE and 90 and above for TOEFL you stand a great chance. 200 and above ranked Universities - 300 and above for GRE, 80 and above for TOEFL you have stand a chance. The fact remains that the higher the score the better your chances. **Please all these is personal Opinion**
- In an average state – month. Rent - \$550, Water, Gas and Internet - \$120 or so, Feeding - \$250. But if you buy food stuffs and cook, it might be lower than that. But if you eat outside, an average meal is around \$14, Medical Insurance - \$200. Then side stuffs like



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transport and emergencies. All these are excluding tuition, books and university fees which depends on your school. This is just a general idea. varies on location

#### **Question 10**

Why in your personal opinion sir should married people not bother bringing their wives to join them considering the rigour of a postgraduate program?

#### **Answer**

It's easier to file for F2 for your spouse if you have graduate Assistantship. I would advise the student should go first. After a year that he or she has known many things and saved a bit, then they can then file for their spouse to join them. Going together at first can be financially demanding, and also you both are both JJC.

#### **Question 11**

Please what can you say about Visiting opportunities in US. Like planning to come and do part of the research. Thanks

#### **Answer**

Am sorry, I don't know much about that. People come here for a semester and then go back to their Universities. But it's usually on some arranged programs and agreement between the universities. With that it is easier. But if its individual basis, it's a bit tricky and harder.

#### **Question 12**

Thank u scholar Praise for this lecture you have really done a good job for me that is looking forward to US for graduate studies. But my question is that you didn't talk on the issue of SOP and recommendations from professors if there is need for all these for studying in US. Thanks

#### **Answer**

OF course, you will need a good SOP and Recommendations. I didn't talk more on that because you can always find help with that. People here can help review your SOP and Recommendations are gotten from Professors and Lecturers. I laid more emphasis on GRE and TOEFL because it's the main dish. Others are side delicacies. For example, my professor won't even bother reading your SOP if your GRE score is not high. Summary is that, they are both needed. But people can help u with them. What people can't help you with is the two exams

#### **Question 13**

Thank you for the great lecture. Please will you advise to apply directly for PhD in the US with a BSc or obtain a masters first?



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### **Answer**

You have better chances getting funded with PhD than Masters. Also, if you spend time on Masters first, you have to be sure it will be counted for your PhD, if not, you will have to start again when doing your PhD.

If you have further questions, you can mail me at [farayolapraise@gmail.com](mailto:farayolapraise@gmail.com) If there is also any information here that you feel is wrong, kindly call my attention to it. You can be sure that it is not intended and would be rectified for future referencing. I wish us all the best in your pursuits. Don't Give up. Your testimony and success story are around the corner.