Applying to graduate school

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What is Graduate School?
Responsibilities

- Independent research project – development, data collection, analysis, writing, presentation, etc.
- Classes
- RA or TA appointment (your job)
- Reading current literature
- Conference presentations / attendance
- Grant writing
- Training and mentoring undergraduates
- Professional development – mastering new techniques and equipment

- Lab responsibilities – contributing to lab-wide projects and maintenance
- Professional and University Organizations
- Leadership and/or service roles
- Public engagement, outreach, education
- Personal and social life!
Expectations & Realities

quotes from current grad students

“You have to be very self-motivated:” There will be times where you don't know what you're doing or why you're doing something, and no one will be able to do it for you; but everyone has been in that situation.

“Graduate school is not a continuation of undergrad:” you will need to very quickly learn to be very independent in learning skills and independently conduct, analyze and write up scientific research.

“Your time in graduate school will ALWAYS be full.”

“Courses don't matter as much anymore - don't go to graduate school just because you're a good student, but because you're driven to do independent work.”
Grad program types / options

• **Thesis-based Master of Science** (M.S.) (2-3 years)
• **Course-based M.S. programs** (1-2 years)
  • Course-only (e.g. MS in Medical Physiology)
  • Internship and courses (e.g. Master’s in Public Health)
• **Professional Science Master’s** (1-2 years)
  • Technical, business, and communication training
  • Internship and collaboration with local employers
• **Doctorate of Philosophy** (PhD or Doctorate) (4-8 years)
  • There are other Doctorate programs with different timelines and requirements (e.g. Ed.D. and Psy.D.)
• **Post-Bac programs** (1 year)
Do I pay for grad school?

Depends on the program.

Sometimes **YOU** get paid!

**Course-based programs**: You pay full tuition. They sometimes help you find an internship or you can receive financial aid through fellowships/scholarships.

**Thesis-based programs**: Almost always comes with funding and pay. Mainly Ph.D programs.
Funding options

- Research Assistant (RA), Teaching Assistant (TA), Graduate Assistant (GA)
  - Tuition waiver
  - Minimal benefits (health coverage)
  - Paycheck (9 -12 months depending on the source of funding)

- Graduate Hourly positions

- Fellowships

- Employer-paid tuition
I’m interested. What’s next?
First Steps

1. What’s your goal? *(Be careful on being overqualified.)*
2. Now, what kind of program will help you achieve that goal?
3. What experiences will help you get into that program?
4. Do you need to go right away, or do you want other experiences first (work, volunteering, service, etc.)?
5. Which research area is right for you?
6. What kind of lab dynamics would work for you?
   - Hands-on/hands-off, big or small lab, field or lab based, etc.
7. Which PIs (principal investigator/faculty) do you want to work with?
When and how to reach out to potential P.I.s

To start grad school the Fall after you graduate:

- **Earliest**: Spring your Junior year (1.5 years before you start)

- **Latest**: Early Fall your Senior year

“*If you specifically are asking about grad school projects and open positions, they might not know that information more than 1.5 years out. But networking is always good to start as early as possible! ...getting to know them in person beforehand can be huge.*”

“*Professors can only have so many students at one time, but by April/May they should have an idea of how many are taking that fall or if they'll have open slots the following year.*”
How to find and reach out to potential P.I.s

Finding labs
✓ Lots of research from the ground up
✓ Ask other grad students or faculty whenever possible!

Contacting P.I.s
✓ Lots of “cold” emails
✓ If you do know one of their contacts, ask for an introduction!
✓ Conferences are a great place to meet P.I.s

“...it is a rough ride that students should mentally prepare for... prospective graduate students must know how much time goes into preparing these cold emails and they must be resilient and not take the rejection or lack of response personally.”
How do you choose?

First considerations

- Matches your interests
- Fits your professional goals
- Personality match with P.I. and lab mates
- Personality match with University
- P.I. style (hands on vs. hands off)

Just as important!!!

- Cost of living
- Location
- Transportation options
- Accessible to go to grocery store or other daily needs
- Crime rate
- Social life
- Whether grad students are happy and well supported
- Department/school dynamics
Applying to Graduate School
Applying to Graduate School – Requirements

1. Bachelor’s Degree or recognized equivalent from an accredited institution - *Transcripts*
2. Usually minimum grade-point average GPA of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale
3. Undergraduate training to do graduate work in your chosen field *(RESEARCH)*
4. English Language Proficiency Test – TOEFL
5. GRE scores – *consult schools to confirm you need to take it*
6. Letters of Recommendation - at least three
7. Personal Statement / Statement of Purpose
Is research required?

“Demonstrating research skills is key, and while classes can provide some of that, I think showing the initiative to do more outside of classes reflects well. It also puts you in touch with professors and students that can help with all of the things mentioned above. I don't know anyone who got in with just class work”

“Students without field experience or at least a solid senior project that has field-based data collection seem to have to pay for their graduate program. Without field/research experience, they will not be competitive.”

“You can definitely get into grad school straight from undergrad, but PIs are going to want to see initiative and that you got involved in projects outside of those in required classes. Internships and summer projects for labs are great to show you have that passion.”

In short: YES!

For any thesis- or dissertation-based programs
Applying to Graduate School – Preparation (Sophomore-Junior year)

- Explore your interests and GET RESEARCH/TRAINING EXPERIENCE!*

- Talk with graduate students and faculty (TAs and Professors) about your research/career interests

- Build rapport
  - To get letters of recommendation faculty have to know you
  - Office hours and conversations about your interests are a great way to build these relationships!
  - These conversations may also lead to other opportunities or suggestions for who to work with
Applying to Graduate School – *Preparation (May-July)*

- Start researching graduate schools early – most have rolling admissions but others have specific deadlines (*usually in the fall*).
- Take the GRE practice test (*if the program requires it*)
  

- Request information from schools that interest you.
- Ask graduate students, professors, and academic advisors to recommend good programs and even help you make some connections.
- Reach out to potential P.I.s and/or grad students in the program
Applying to Graduate School – Timeline (*August-December*)

- **August**: take the GRE General Test – if you are not happy with your scores, it will give you time to take it again.

- **September**: Contact your letters of recommendation providers and begin drafting your personal statement.

- **October**: request official transcripts from your undergraduate institution and follow up with letters of recommendation.

- **November**: have someone in the field or The Career Center read over your personal statement and make sure your GRE scores are being sent to schools.

- **December**: complete and submit all graduate school applications and verify your recommendations have been sent.
Resume and Personal Statement Reviews

Aurora Cruz-Torres, M.S.

By appointment only, contact me at tacruz@illinois.edu

If you need help composing your email to faculty for undergraduate research or graduate school, contact me!
Applying to Graduate School

ALWAYS CONSULT WITH THE GRADUATE SCHOOL PROGRAM OF YOUR CHOICE REGARDING REQUIREMENTS AND DEADLINES!!!!
What do you still want to know?
Questions?

- Visit The Career Center for help with personal statement and mock interviews. [https://www.careercenter.illinois.edu/](https://www.careercenter.illinois.edu/)
- Visit [MCB Advising](#) for undergraduate research opportunities and planning your classes.
- Contact me for additional information or to request this presentation: [tacruz@illinois.edu](mailto:tacruz@illinois.edu)