Guide to Graduate School Applications

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I. Preparing to Apply

1. **What makes you a good candidate for grad school?** Programs are looking for:
   a. Demonstrated capacity to carry out some kind of **research** (thesis, labwork, etc)
   b. Self-sufficient worker who can work in teams if necessary. Research and lab teams are crucial to much of the work, though not all.
   c. Technical skills: lab methods, languages, etc.
   d. Know your strengths and weaknesses. Be prepared to spin your weaknesses into strengths during interviews.
   e. Good Fit: Often looking for a "good fit" in the program. Don't be afraid to show your personality (while remembering to treat people as colleagues in a professional setting). Who knows, maybe a shared hobby could help you stand out! Getting along with current students can also help. Current students occasionally get to vote on prospective students with the goal of creating a cooperative and engaged community.
   f. Maturity and focus: Programs and faculty members are looking for someone who can be autonomous, professional, and is ready to undertake graduate level research.
2. **GRE and other requirements**: Check in advance for [GRE](#) or other requirements that might take prep and time and money. GRE is becoming less commonly required. Check each school carefully and well in advance.
3. **Start saving money**: Applications are expensive and run from about $80-150 each for the application alone. If accepted, official transcripts may cost money.
4. **Should you apply to UCSD?** Typically, it is not recommended to apply to the same program where you did your BA for graduate school.
5. **Finding programs and advisors**:
   a. *Make a list of research interests* and start searching on Google Scholar for recent work (use the year limit tool) on the topic to find potential advisors. Read their work, especially the most recent or most heavily cited
      i. Use google scholar to easily see the number of citations for an academic publication
   b. *Google authors* whose work that you like to see <u>where</u> they work and what their position is
      i. Professors, Assistant Professors, or Associate Professors (these are typically tenure-track or tenured professors) **can** be graduate student advisors
      ii. Adjunct faculty, lecturers, visiting professors, and postdoctorate researchers typically **cannot** be graduate student advisors
      iii. Some people are researchers but don't work in programs that have graduate students.

      c. *Networking*: Reach out to UCSD faculty, graduate student TA's/instructors, or those working in the field you want to be in (academia or not) to get school recommendations, program pairings, or ideas about alternative avenues. People often know each other and may be able to connect you. They may also have great insight into what schools should be on your radar (based on your research interests or goals, career goals, etc.) even if they do not have a specific advisor in mind at a specific institution. More on networking below.

      d. *Reach out to potential advisors*: let them know of your interest and ask if they are accepting students–make sure to also ensure that the program is accepting students when you want to apply

           i. "Cold calling" (or "cold emails") is totally normal in academia and typical of this stage of the career to start growing your network. Sample email [here](#). The more of these you do, the easier it gets.

      e. *Reach out to current or past students* of the potential advisor or program in general to get a sense of the culture, fit, funding status, general happiness or discontentedness among the students.

           i. Students: ask the advisor for a contact. Expect them to say they need to check with the student first for privacy reasons. Follow up if they do not.

           ii. Sometimes there is a student listed as the graduate student representative and they may be responsive to questions via email.

           iii. Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) is usually listed online and this is also a good person to contact that is often less directly impactful on your application and can answer questions about funding or the program with more nuance. It's the best when this is a staff member and not a professor!

6. **Networking/Mentorship**: Networking is helpful for discussing potential mentorship, potential program pairings, building relationships with people who can write letters of recommendation and/or introduce you to a broader network of people. Build connections with faculty and mentors. You need letter writers, so build relationships with these allies *as early as possible*. These people will be able to help introduce you to a broader network of potential advisors and others.

      a. Find a mentor and ask them to be a formal mentor.

           i. This can exist outside of the AMPP program.

           ii. If you find a researcher that can't take graduate students but you love their work and click with them, ask them if they will consider being a mentor to you as you apply and hopefully start your early career graduate work.

               1. Usually the answer will be yes.

               2. This person can connect you with more opportunities down the road and could even serve on your thesis/dissertation committee as an external member.

               3. This is especially useful if their work is rare methodologically or otherwise.

7. **Important things to consider:**

a. "Meetings" beforehand are actually informal interviews whether you set them up or the school/advisor does. However, these set you apart during the application process.
   i. Prepare questions for these 'meetings' (Example: what are you doing now for research? Where are they heading?)
   ii. Figure out how you can work your way into their work. This is where your knowledge of their research comes in handy.
   iii. Link questions to their work.
   iv. Make small talk and be yourself
   v. Ask about the environment of the program
   vi. Stick to what you know: context and general "I'm interested in this ____" comments.
b. Consider adjacent fields, interdisciplinary programs, and international programs
c. Weigh your priorities. There are great programs in places where you may not want to live. When considering a longer program, not wanting to live where a particular program is located is a perfectly valid reason to not apply there. Your wellbeing, safety, and happiness are important.
d. *International Applications:* If you are considering applying internationally to programs outside of the U.S., it is important to do research into the distinctive application cultures of the countries you are interested in. For example, some countries tend to value certain documents and elements of the application more than others. The funding structure, processes of contacting advisors, etc. may differ depending on countries.

II. Applying

- *Request examples of documents from friends you may have in graduate programs or graduate students within your own current department. If you get along with a current student in a prospective program, ask if they would be willing to share their statement of purpose. You can also request examples from current coordinators of the AMPP program from the 2025 event.*

1. **Letters of Recommendation**
   a. See above for networking importance!
   b. Make sure the people know you well and can speak to your performance and ability to write/research
      i. Ideally with specific examples
      ii. If they don't have specific details about you, give them some!
   c. Provide each writer with: CV, work from any classes you took with them (best with their comments and grade on it), personal statements for the schools, and a deadline for the letters (an excel with all the dates, schools, advisors is a great tool for the application process for you and professors)
   d. Give them a LOT of lead time to write and send reminders.
   e. Letter writers should ideally be: professor, instructor, lab PI, internship supervisor, fieldwork supervisor, etc.

f. Letter writers should be avoided if: grad students, mentors, personal relationships, supervisors from non-related work, etc.
2. **[Statement of Purpose (SOP)](#):** A written essay where you describe your academic and professional goals. You'll outline your research background, career goals, how a specific program aligns with these goals, and why you are a good fit. You'll explain how your relevant experience (research, writing, projects, etc.) has prepared you to do research in a particular field. Purpose of SOP: Persuade the committee that you are prepared to undertake graduate-level research.
    a. Optional format for SOP:
        i. Origin point: How did you come to be interested in your topic or the field?
        ii. Prior research experience: What have you done? You want to highlight your ability to do research, aka the skills that you bring.
        iii. Dissertation plans. What do you want to do during your PhD?
            1. Your research topic or plans may–and likely *will*–change. Stating your research intentions is the foot in the door. Don't misrepresent your research plans, but lay out the research topic that you want to explore.
        iv. Why this university? Which 2-3 faculty do you want to work with?
        v. Conclusion: Career goals, short and long term
    b. Think about organizing it in sections: (1) what have you done and what skills have your activities taught you; (2) what do you hope to do during graduate school and with who; and (3) what are your career aspirations
    c. *Revise, revise, revise!* Get as many eyes as possible to review your SOP. If you are nervous, start with a friend/family member/[Writing Hub](#) before going to a mentor or faculty member or vice versa.
    d. Make sure that you demonstrate your statements using specific **examples**. Your SOP needs to balance creative writing skills and academic tone in order to strike a balance that has a strong rhetorical argument for why you should be selected
    e. Personalize statements for each program you apply to and set aside time to do it
    f. If you know someone currently in a program you want to attend, ask to see their SOP.
3. **Personal Statement** (sometimes called a diversity statement): A personal narrative where you discuss your background/life experiences and how these have shaped your decision to apply to graduate school.
    a. What makes you YOU!
    b. If optional, **do it**. Gives you chance to say more about yourself and research Often will ask how you overcame challenges to pursue research or maybe how you are committed to fostering diversity in higher education.
        i. This can be related to your personal background or history.
        ii. This can be your commitment to teach/tutor/mentor/create safe spaces
    c. Consider: What is your WHY for grad school and how does it relate to your research interests or the program you chose?

4. **Hybrid statements**: Some programs may only require a personal statement. If this is the case, you'll need to weave together your personal journey with your professional and academic goals in the context of the program that you're applying to.
5. **Writing Sample**
    a. Edit and revise as much as possible to ensure this is strong
    b. Pick a research paper if possible. Other good options are a chapter of a thesis, any substantial paper you have written, etc. Consider expanding a paper you are already proud of or that is relevant to your work the most.
    c. Take it to the Writing Hub
6. **CV**
    a. This is not the same as a resume!
    b. Look at examples of those in the field or position you want to be in to see the skills you should start developing and how to lay this out
    c. This should be as carefully reviewed as every piece of writing for typos
    d. Ask a letter writer to provide feedback/take it to the Writing Hub
7. **$$$**
    a. Programs cost a lot of money to apply to, but often there are fee waivers that you can apply for
    b. Applications are expensive and typically run from about $80-150 each for the application alone.
    c. [Example of fee waiver](#)
    d. Some programs are going away from fees altogether due to the recognition of the financial blocks to higher education and concerns of equity. But change is slow in academia. Don't be afraid to ask the program directly if you can't find it on the website.

III. Upon Acceptance
1. **THANK YOUR LETTER WRITER**S (and share the news).
    a. They expect to know about your results and are rooting for you! Let them know and be sure to say thank you.
    b. Remember to call your support group and tell them! They will be so excited for you. You just accomplished something most people never even attempt or get to attempt!
2. **Ask your advisors/mentors for advice** on next steps for accepting or negotiating
3. **Brainstorm questions about your offer letter**, the department, funding…
    a. If you don't know the answers already, be sure to ask about:
        i. Benefits (health and other): make sure to check on specific meds you need and potential for mental health support.
        ii. Housing options, possible that there is subsidized housing or similar
        iii. Transportation passes?
        iv. Moving? Ask about moving support for incoming students.
        v. Partner or children? Are there benefits for them? Health, museum passes, daycare reimbursement? What about paternity/maternity leave? Other types of leave?

      vi.   Grants to apply to immediately or other opportunities

      vii.   Research funds that the department has in addition to any other funding

     viii.   Is your funding tied to TA-ships or fellowships or something else?

      ix.   Additional Expectations:

           1. Additional expectations might include department/advisor expectations to attend some (or all) professionalization, lecture, or other events. It could include coordinating lecture series or applying to external grants. These are expectations that are NOT laid out in the online curriculum for the program to receive a PhD or MA. While they are often incredible opportunities that we get to do, they can be very time consuming and wasteful of productive work or home-life energy. It is crucial to be aware of how this impacts the environment of the department you are interested in applying to. Often best to ask current/past students about this.

4. **Negotiating**:
   a. Negotiating an offer.
      i. Typically, this is not recommended simply because most schools do not have good funding. This is especially true for social sciences and humanities. Or simply because of the competitiveness of applying in the first place.
      ii. If you negotiate, it is best to have something to counter the offer. Like another offer from another school! Some programs will have an option to report a "change of circumstance" which can include a change in finances, job loss, or a competitive offer from another program.
      iii. Remember to compare apples to apples. For example, a privately endowed program will often have higher funding package abilities than a large public school.
      iv. Don't show your hand if you have a favored school. Be careful who you talk to and remember it is a small world in academia and people often know if you accepted another school or were offered an acceptance. If they know it's your top school say something like: "this remains my top program however…"
   b. Negotiating a decline.
      i. If you have another source of funding (like the NSF GRFP - see below), ask the school if the only reason they declined you was for funding and if they would be willing to accept you still if you have funding from another source. Be open and honest. Intuition about the potential advisor is important here. Think about fit. You have *power* with where you take any prestigious money! These grants reflect highly on faculty portfolios, on the program, and even on the school.
      ii. If they aren't a well funded program, you might be able to ask them why and if the fit is good. They might even have you defer a year so that they can get you a better package offer the following year. Be flexible and ask if a gap year and deferment could position you for a funding package.

5. **Give yourself time** before you respond to the offer.
   a. Reasonable time…72 hours is business appropriate for responding to an email. April 15th is the typical acceptance deadline and you are welcome to think on the offer until that time. If you need longer to think on it, that's fine, but answer the offer and say that you are going to take time to think (and thank them for the opportunity and express your excitement).
   b. Be certain of your WHY for wanting to do grad school, your reason for continuing down the competitive and difficult path of academia. Your WHY will be the reason you move through the hardest and most challenging phases and will help you avoid burnout.
      i. Your WHY might simply be that you want to continue learning while you figure out what your next move is. If that's the case, consider an MA and be accepting of yourself if you change your mind.
      ii. Your WHY will likely be what ends up in your personal statement. It might be related to your upbringing or experiences in life. How can you relate that to your research?
   c. The odds are not in your favor for this path, and it is critical to really evaluate the choice you make. Talk to friends and family and mentors. Whatever you do, think about it and take the decision seriously.

IV. Other tips, ideas, and notes:
1. **Look into the [NSF GRFP](#)!**
   a. They have a limited eligibility time frame that you should consider applying to at the same time as your grad school apps
   b. Have a professor walk you through it and use the Writing Hub and every available resource you have to make this application the best it can be.
   c. You can find examples [here](#).
   d. It is slightly different from your statement of purpose for graduate school applications. It is a research grant proposal that should have a clear research goal but should be exploratory in nature.
   e. This can be a powerful bargaining tool if you receive it and during the application process.
2. **Only apply to fully funded PhD programs with 5+ years of funding** with the option or possibility to extend funding.
   a. The PhD job market isn't great. Because of this, you may not be able to easily pay off loans or achieve the pay grade you need/want with a PhD. Consider if this is the right path for you for the LIFESTYLE you want.
   b. MA programs are difficult to find fully funded but possible. Ask around!
   c. Check the discrepancy of cost-of-living in that town/city versus what you would be paid as a PhD student. Remember to consider the cost of the benefits too!
   d. Talk to the professors at the universities you might be interested in that don't have great funding packages to see if they have a plan for funding for you that exists outside of the standard offer from the program.
3. **Consider higher-ed alternatives to a PhD:**

a. MA programs that prep you for multiple paths. Law school. Intensive programs for languages. [Post-bacc](#) programs. Certificate programs.
   b. Ask your current faculty and mentors if they know of anyone from school or past acquaintances that went into related industry work and if they can put you in touch if you are curious about the work and preparations.
   c. MA programs are perfect prep programs for a PhD. Many PhD students enter the program with an MA.
4. **Have a plan B** if you don't get into grad school on your first try (which is completely normal).
   a. Plan for a ***gap year*** even if you apply
      i. You can practice the same networking and mentorship tactics, like cold emails, to build opportunities for yourself during your gap year. E.g. internships, volunteer lab work, etc.
      ii. Be prepared to live your life in whatever way you can during this time. Gap years are rejuvenating and can be fun!
      iii. This is an excellent opportunity to try to save some money for grad school apps or just to support yourself in the time between school.
      iv. Explore alternative career paths you may be considering but haven't tried. Sometimes the best way to know what you *do* want to do is to figure out what you don't.
   b. Attend [career center](#) events or other networking events
      i. These may exist in your community outside of your current university
   c. Go to workshops for your resume and cover letter, often offered at the career or writing centers.
   d. Figure out what skills you need on the industry job market
      i. Look at current resumes on LinkedIn
      ii. Check out job calls in your field
   e. Get headshots done for free if you can through your university - these are opportunities we lose access to after we graduate.
   f. Make a LinkedIn and start virtual networking
      i. It looks better to keep a fresh and active LinkedIn even when you aren't actively applying to jobs.