

## **Graduate Information**

### **Deciding Whether to Go to Graduate School**

If you are thinking of going to graduate school, you need to do a thorough self-evaluation. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why, specifically, do I want to further my formal education?
2. What do I hope, concretely, to accomplish by acquiring an advanced degree?
3. Am I forced enough on my career track to start graduate school?
4. If I am already in school, should I take some time off to get other kind of experience and get more focused on my future, or to pay off undergraduate school debts, or to travel around before committing to something else?
5. Am I thinking about graduate school because that's what my parents want, or because I don't think I can get a job, or because I am worried about paying off my undergraduate loans, or because I can't think of anything better to do?
6. If I am already working, do I really need a graduate degree to enhance my career opportunities?

Once a positive, well-informed decision has been made, then cost can be considered. Be sure to look at several factors, including:

1. How much debt have I accumulated from undergraduate school? Would it be more prudent to work for awhile to reduce that debt load or would I be risking my advancement in the field to take time off before entering graduate school? Some science fields, for example, are not enthusiastic about students taking time off unless they do something in the discipline, like work in a laboratory related to the research field.
2. How long is it going to take me to get a degree and what it is going to cost? What will the university contribute in the way of scholarships, fellowships, or assistantships?
3. Can my costs be reduced by going to a state institution?
4. Could I work for a company that would eventually pay my way through a degree program?
5. Will the government pick up the costs of school for a tradeoff of some sort, like going into the military or public health service?
6. Can I make enough money after graduation to pay off a significant number of loans? Is a loan forgiveness program for a public sector work available?
7. Will my family help with support?
8. Can I win an external fellowship?
9. Can I work part time and go to school full time, or work full time and go to school part time? (Some programs do not allow part-time matriculation.)

Finding out the answers to these questions is time-consuming but extraordinarily worthwhile. Everyone who approaches graduate school should demystify the financial prospects as thoroughly as possible.

### **Grants and Fellowships Application Hints**

## General Advice

1. **Start early.** This is true for any grant or fellowship but especially true for research and study abroad opportunities, since funds are usually not awarded until at least ten to fifteen months after the application is filed. This is particularly the case with funding that covers stipends to support room and board for a year or more either in the United States or abroad. Smaller grants usually have deadlines three to six months prior to initiation of the grant spending period. The important principle is to investigate research opportunities well in advance so that you do not miss crucial deadlines.
2. **Be sure to consult knowledgeable people on campus about funding.** Be careful to seek out everyone including faculty, other graduate students, and administrators who work regularly with funding information. Someone will have good information about where to look for outside money or can indicate who else on campus has more information.
3. **Be persistent.** Too often students give up quickly when information about grants is not easy to find or when their application is rejected. Students looking for research money, especially, should keep hunting for opportunities and keep applying. There are times. However, when reason should win out over persistence. If you are in the last stages of writing your thesis or dissertation, for example, and waiting would unnecessarily defer attainment of your degree, it is probably smarter to take out a loan to cover expenses rather than apply for a grant that may not come through for 10 months.
4. **Do not count on one application.** There are some exceptions to the rule but in general the more application you file, the better the odds are that you will win an award. Write as many as feasible.
5. **Be sure your credentials, study plan, or project fit the agency's criteria.** It is important to read the application sections on eligibility and the field focusing requirements very carefully. Permanent residents should be particularly careful; the federal government is especially inconsistent about including or excluding this group. Research projects should fit very closely to agency interests and parameters.
6. **Deadlines are sometimes flexible.** The more applications there are for a grant or fellowship, the less flexible the deadline is likely to be. A surprising number of agencies issuing research grants will bend a deadline rule if the date has not been missed by more than a week or two. When in doubt, have a faculty mentor or university administrator, call the organization to inquire about and possibly influence deadline flexibility.
7. **If you are confused, call the funding agency.** There are times when a brochure or application leaves many questions unanswered. Statements of eligibility are not always clear, and agency interests may be hazy or shifting. You do not want to waste your time and energy applying for a grant that is out of reach. Most organizations are very helpful in clarifying their aims since they prefer to receive applications that are right on target with agency interests.
8. **Feel free to send additional materials after you have submitted your application.** There is usually a time between the deadline and committee review when applications are being sorted and scored. Most organizations will add new pieces of information to an application, be sure to forward them for inclusion. Written confirmation of contact abroad, for example, can be crucial to the success of a Fulbright or Fulbright-Hays

application. Timing is everything, since the new information must arrive before review begins. If you are in doubt about that window of opportunity, call the agency.

9. **Do not be discouraged by rejection.** Students often give up after the first rejection. Instead, try to figure out what the weakness was and correct it. This is particularly true for research grants. Was your methodology unclear? Did you not follow the directions closely enough? Could your faculty support have been stronger? Would another agency be more interested in the work? Could the budget be reworked? Some-times agencies will return the proposal with an evaluation, but usually they will not. Faculty and administrators can be helpful in criticizing and suggesting solutions to problems. A lot of money awarded by the federal government is tied to the availability of funds at any given time and amounts accessible can vary widely from year to year. Resubmission in less than a year may be the simple solution to rejection. Students looking for dissertation support should consider reapplying to the same agency. As research progresses and the holes that were present in the beginning are filled, the project becomes more attractive and promising to funding organizations. One student I know succeeded in winning a nationally prominent dissertation fellowship on the third try.
10. **Try to find out the ratio of applications to awards.** This information gives a realistic picture of the probability of winning and can help you decide whether or not to apply. Let's say that you are thinking about applying for a national fellowship that pays tuition and stipend support. If there are 4,000 applications for 60 grants, it is logical to assume that only students with the highest standardized test score, grade point averages, and recommendation will be funded. If you have those credentials, then an application makes sense. Some applications fall into a gray zone where it is not so apparent statistically whether application is logical. When in doubt, apply.
11. **Follow directions scrupulously.** The biggest mistake applicants make is not to follow directions.

### Proposal Writing Advice

1. **Use the funding agency's terminology.** A proposal sound like it fits a funding agency's criteria if their words (gotten either from the brochure or from the application) are appropriately replicated in the proposal. Using the same terminology is tantamount both substantively and psychologically to responding directly to application criteria or agency mission.
2. **Do not use excessive disciplinary jargon; write clearly and simply.** Many applications are reviewed by people in related field or disciplines. Excessive jargon may be unrecognizable and therefore confusing and end up costing review points. An anthropology Fulbright applicant who keeps referring to the animals she or he is proposing to study by their Latin names would be well advised to call them "monkey" once in a while to make the proposal more understandable to the non-physical anthropology reader who will surely be evaluating it.
3. **Avoid excessive verbiage.** Getting to the point in a clear, concise, and comprehensive manner will be heartily appreciated by agencies and reviewers.
4. **Put the research you describe within the context of the entire project.** If you are seeking funding to support part but not all of a project. It is important that the part be

framed within the context of the entire project so that reviewers can judge how crucial it is to the plan and better understand the overall significance of the project.

5. **Indicate the significance of why you want funding.** In the case of fellowships to support a graduate school career, a description of career goals assuring the agency that you want to do serious research or contribute to the betterment of society is important. For those requesting money for research, it is crucial to present a project that will make a contribution to the field.
6. **Work closely with a campus advisor or faculty mentor when writing the proposal.** If you are applying for a campus-administered grant or fellowship like a Fulbright, pay close attention to what the administrator says and have her or him review at least one draft of the proposal before completing the final version. If you are engaged in research, your faculty mentor is the best critic and his or her advice should be heeded. Most research projects have no chance if they lack faculty enthusiasm, and the best way to ensure that fervor is to work closely with your advisor.
7. **Be willing to redraft a proposal three or four times.** Patience and persistence will help produce an effective document.
8. **Have other people read the proposal for content, style, and typos.** The faculty or administrative advisor should read your proposal for content. If avoiding disciplinary jargon is crucial, have someone from another field evaluate the clarity of style. Have a person your really trust as stickler for detail and language structure read it for language structure and typos.
9. **Be willing to reorganize the proposal to fit different applications.** There is a propensity to want to make one proposal fit all grant applications because it is easier. This is a terrible mistake. An agency must be described in their terms and according to their standards. Reworking a project description is absolutely worth the effort.
10. **If there is a weakness in the application of any sort, address it.** Maybe a bad grade shows up on a transcript. Explain what happened; do not dwell on it but clarify the problem. Maybe you lack language skills. Explain how this weakness can be or is being remedied. Anything that might cause concern should be demystified.
11. **Never sound tentative.** Do not use phrases like “I might be interested in...”. “I think it is possible that...”, or “there is a good chance that...” These words suggest lack of confidence, confusion about direction, and indecisiveness.
12. **Be crystal clear about methodology.** Methodology is a plan of action, your approach to a problem or area of study. It is the structure that you will follow to get things done. For a fellowship applicant, it indicates how the graduate years will be structured (types of classes, specific field selection, and possible research interests). For a student who intends to do research abroad, methodology can include the steps it will take to gather information, where that information is to be found, and so on. Methodology should reflect acceptable practices in the field. Every application required an explanation of method even if the directions do not demand it in so many words.

## Getting Good References

1. **References should almost always be written by people who can attest to your academic promise or ability.** The application will usually indicate the most appropriate referees. In most cases this means faculty, although there are instances when an expert

from outside academe, like the head of a laboratory at a corporation doing field-related research is an acceptable choice. Most agencies are not interested in character references. When using faculty references try to utilize full-time people with faculty ranks ranging from assistant to full professor. Their opinions carry more weight than those of part-time faculty, post-docs, or teaching assistants. Teaching assistants, especially, lack credibility because they are in training and are viewed as short on the experience needed to be able to judge other people's academic prospects. Part-time instructors (often called adjuncts) are not usually the best option unless they are famous in the field.

2. **A reference should know the applicant and be willing to write supportively and enthusiastically.** Weak or negative references will kill a proposal's prospects. Lukewarm praise is not much good either. Be sure to ask if a referee is willing to write positively. If not, find someone else who will.
3. **Give referees plenty of advance notice.** People who write references for grant or graduate school applications are usually besieged with requests, especially in the late fall. If you can give referees two or three weeks to get a letter constructed and sent, the odds are the letter will be better.
4. **Give referees enough written information upon which to base the reference.** Be sure to supply a copy of the proposal and a resume or curriculum vitae. Undergraduates applying for Fulbright, Rhodes, and other national fellowships should be sure to make a list of every course taken with the referee, the grades in those courses, and a copy of a significant paper written for the referee. Be sure the referee understands why winning the grant is important. The more written material a referee has, the better the reference and the sooner the letter will be written.
5. Check periodically to make sure the reference has been written. Faculties especially, are notoriously absent-minded. While nudging is a delicate issue and one must be careful not to become a nuisance, it is important to remain visible so that the letter of reference does not get shoved to the back burner. Some students work through departmental administrators, who often have greater license to prod, while other leave notes. If you are away from campus, a well-timed phone call or a written note can be effective. The squeaky wheel concept works.