Applying to Graduate &
Professional Schools
(adapted from a presentation by Dr. Katja Guenter)

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Overview

1. What to consider before applying to graduate school
2. How to negotiate the admissions process
3. MA vs. PhD Sociology programs
What to consider before applying to graduate school
A Survey of over 282,000 freshmen at 450 colleges and universities found that *more* than 75% of college first years expect to earn a degree *beyond* the bachelor’s degree (UCLA, 2002)

The Master’s degree is becoming the “expected” degree for most professions.

In many professions, the Master’s degree is already identified as the *entry-level*. 
What To Consider?

• What do you want to do?
• What are you good at?
• Where do you want to work?
• Who do you want to work with?
• How much time do you have?
• How much money do you have?
Is Graduate or Professional School for You?

- Spend some time reflecting on who you are and what you want in life?
  - Happiness?
  - Sunny weather?
  - Prestige?
  - Money?
  - Work-family balance?
  - To help people?
Part 2
NEGOTIATING THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS
Where To Apply: Do Your Homework

- When looking at programs to which you might apply, consider the following:
  - Do faculty in this program work in the subfields in which I want to work? Can I identify 1-3 possible mentors in the program?
  - Are there opportunities for research or professional experience in this program?
  - How is the curriculum organized? Does it fit my expectations and needs?
  - What are funding opportunities like in this program?
  - What kinds of jobs are recent graduates of this program getting?
  - Does the department & university environment meet my needs?
Where To Apply

• Apply to programs with
  – At least TWO (and ideally more) faculty working in your broad area of interest
  – National reputation if you plan to pursue an academic career (i.e., professor)

• Apply to programs with varying status
  – Safety, reasonable chance, reach
Contact Programs Before I Apply!

• **Who?**
  – Contact graduate or admissions director and professor(s) of interest

• **Why?**

• **How?**
  – Indicate you are interested in studying similar topics (graduate school faculty) or in their professional specializations (professional school)
  – **DO NOT** ask about funding, mentoring style, or any questions available on website!
What Matters in an Application?

• Transcript
  – Appropriate courses (need not be major)
  – Good grades (stable or improving over time)
• Standardized Test Scores (GRE for most PhD programs; varies for professional schools)
• Personal Statement
• Writing Sample
  – Choose your BEST sociological work, ungraded (clean) version
• Recommendation Letters (usually 3)
• Other Activities
  – Research experience (senior thesis, independent or collaborative projects, internships, conference presentations)
  – Community/college service
  – Organizations (honors or professional societies, etc.)
  – Academic honors
• Fit between student & department
Personal Statements and Essays

- Why are you pursuing a master’s/do doctoral/professional degree?

- How have your academic, professional and/or personal experiences culminated in this decision/goal/path?

- What do you want to gain/learn/pursue while you are in graduate or professional school?

- What do you want to do with that knowledge once you have your degree?

- How will this particular program help you to further your progress towards these goals?
Tips & Techniques for Your Personal Statement

• Draft, revise, draft, revise!

• Proofread!

• Have others read it
  – especially professors!

• Be clear, organized, succinct

• Follow guidelines provided by program/university

• Be confident, not arrogant

• Don’t overshare
What about Recommendation Letters?

• Build relationships with ladder-ranked faculty (Assistant, Associate, or Full Professors) so you have people to ask
  – Take 2 or more classes with them
  – Inquire about research assistantships, internships, or other opportunities with them
• Ask primarily **faculty** who know you and can **add** to what your transcript already says.
• Some professional school applications might also want letters from past internship supervisors or employers
How Do I ask for Letters?

- Meet with your letter writers in person
- Give your writers at least 4-6 weeks notice before the deadline
- Give your writers important information about you:
  - Curriculum Vitae
  - Transcript
  - GRE scores
  - Personal statements/essays
  - Logic of where you are applying
  - Other relevant information (career plans, internship experience, research experience, employment history)
- Highlight sources of strength or vulnerability in your materials.
- Provide stamped, addressed envelopes for mailing letters to the intended programs or returning them to you.
Standardized Testing

- It’s a measure of your ability to take this particular test... and it can be taught!
- Invest in a class if at all possible
- Use practice tests & study guides
- Take it when you are ready
How Do I Get the “Extras”? 

- **Research Experience**
  - Talk to faculty
  - UCR Mentoring Summer Internship Program (MSRIP) [http://graduate.ucr.edu/msrip.html](http://graduate.ucr.edu/msrip.html)

- **Community/Professional Experience**
  - Volunteering in organizations related to your research or professional interests
  - Travel to places where you may want to conduct fieldwork

- **Professional Experience**
  - Attend (even better, present at) conferences
  - Introduce yourself, make contact with people
  - Work in a related field
Important Miscellany

• Be aware of—and meet—deadlines
  – May be different for fellowships than for admission—submit by *earliest* deadline

• Demonstrate interest, not peskiness
  – Faculty will have limited time for you until you are admitted

• Use graduate & professional students as a resource

• Use the web as a resource
How To Decide

• Fit and funding
  – Fit is both academic and social/environmental
• Professional Associations
  – American Sociological Association
    [www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org)

• Campus library & guide books to graduate & professional schools

• Campus career services office

• Faculty members & other mentors in the field

• Websites for standardized tests
  – GRE: [www.ets.org/gre](http://www.ets.org/gre)
• MA vs. PhD Degrees in Sociology
• Some of this comparison also applies to other academic fields
What Can I Do with an MA in Sociology?

- Become a faculty member at a community college or teaching-oriented college

- Applied sociology
  - Government/civil service and “think tanks”
  - For-profit private sector researchers
    - Market research
  - Non-profit sector
    - Labor organizing
    - Social services
    - Policy organizing
What Can I Do with a PhD in Sociology?

- Become a faculty member
  - Teaching-oriented institutions
    - Community colleges
    - Many liberal arts colleges
  - Research-oriented institutions
    - Universities
    - Hybrid institutions

- Applied sociology (with higher pay than with MA)
  - Government and “think tanks”
  - For-profit private sector researchers
    - Market research
  - Non-profit sector
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How Much Time and Money Do You Have?

**TIME**
- PhD
  - ~5-7 years+
- MA
  - ~2 years

**MONEY**
- PhD
  - Most likely to be funded
- MA
  - Unlikely to be funded
- Remember lost earnings while in school
Doctoral vs. Master’s Degree

- **Time**
  - Doctorate takes more than 2x longer
    - Time to degree for MA: 2 years
    - Time to degree for PhD: 5-7 years

- **Prestige**
  - Doctorate is more prestigious

- **Employment Opportunities**
  - PhD trains primarily for faculty positions at research and some teaching institutions
  - MA trains for non-academic positions and community college teaching

- **Money**
  - Doctorates are paid more (but perhaps not much)
  - Doctorates MAY be initially less expensive to obtain

- **Access**
  - Doctorates are generally harder to get in to

- **Intellectual stimulation**
  - A PhD program is typically more challenging
What Does a PhD Program in Sociology Look Like?

Sociology PhD at UCR

- **Year 1**: Required courses in contemporary and classical theory, quantitative and qualitative methods, professional development
- **Year 2**: Courses in student’s areas of interest, plus working on MA thesis
- **Year 3**: Complete coursework in 2 areas of specialization (Criminology and Socio-Legal Studies, Gender, Organizations and Institutions, Political Economy and Global Social Change, Race and Class, Social Psychology, Theory)
- **Years 3 and 4**: Complete qualifying exams and prospectus
- **Year 4+**: Research and write dissertation
- **ONGOING**: Work as a Teaching Assistant, apply for/receive fellowships, collaborate with faculty on research, present at conferences, submit papers to journals
Current and Recent Dissertation Projects

• Social control and class politics in the logistics industry (warehouses)
• State and media responses to teacher sexual misconduct
• Use of visual narratives in the environmental movement
• How gay Republicans and gay Catholics negotiate their identities
Where Do PhDs End Up?

- Recent PhDs at UCR have gone on to
  - Postdoctoral fellowships
    - 1-4 year appointments as researchers in academic settings
  - Tenure-track positions at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, state colleges like the CSUs, and research universities
  - Private sector
    - Nielsen Ratings
  - University administration
  - Lecturer positions (non-tenure track)