

APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL – SOME HINTS AND TIPS

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The following are some suggestions to consider as you begin the process of applying to graduate school. Many of these hints and tips may also be useful if you are considering applying to a professional program (e.g. law school, business school, etc)

Letters of Reference

- Contact potential referees in person, by email, regular mail or by phone far before the application is due, at least 1-2 months prior. Asking people at the last minute for a reference may result in a letter that is less strong and convincing or the professor may simply say no.
- You need to have letters that are very strong, verging on glowing – remember, graduate programs are increasingly competitive to get into and you'll be up against a lot of other top students. If a professor you contact seems at all hesitant to write you a letter, you should look for another referee.
- The best letters of reference are the ones that are the most detailed and can speak to your specific strengths and how they will serve you in your chosen graduate career or program. Therefore, when you contact potential referees, let them know to which program you are applying (with a webpage link so that the professor can quickly access any necessary information), provide a list of all due dates, a copy of your CV (see below), a copy of your statement of purpose or proposal to be submitted to the graduate program and a brief paragraph outlining what you would like to do in grad school (and perhaps also beyond grad school).
- If you are a year or two out of university, your professors may not remember all the details regarding your performance in their classes. Therefore, it is best to keep a file of your final papers or assignments completed in their classes. When you contact potential referees, let them know that you can provide a sample of your work if they need to see it in order to write the letter.

Applying for Funding

- The primary sources of funding for graduate students are Teaching Assistant (TA) and Research Assistant (RA) positions. In general, TA positions involve either grading or in some cases actual classroom instruction in the form of running a tutorial/discussion section. RA positions often involve either general research assistance to faculty or work on a specific project. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. If you are interested in going on to a career as an educator – within the university or perhaps in K-12 – you may be interested in some experience as a TA. An RA position, however, may allow you to combine your research and your studies more directly or open up

future research networks and opportunities for you. During your years in graduate school, you may have the opportunity to do both.

- Scholarships are, of course, an important part of graduate funding, along with tuition waivers. Beyond the standard graduate funding packages, however, you should investigate whether there are specific and targeted scholarship opportunities available to you either on the basis of background or research area. At UVM, for example, significant funding is made available to potential graduate students in the area of transportation research, regardless of which department they are in.
- A word of caution: While attending graduate school in a country other than the United States can be an enriching academic experience, there are some drawbacks. If you plan to go to graduate school outside the United States, be aware of which scholarships and funding opportunities are available to you as an international student. At many schools abroad, you will not have access to scholarships or funding from national funding agencies if you are not a citizen of that country. As well, you may not have access to U.S. funding either. If the graduate program to which you are applying offers you a fellowship for a limited amount of time (i.e., 1 year for a Master's), be sure to ask if you can renew the fellowship and what the success rate is.

Approaching Graduate School Faculty

- It is always worthwhile to do as much research about your prospective program as possible; go through the website, find out as much as you can about the faculty, grad students (if there is a graduate student association in the department, see if they have a website), graduate college, etc. and perhaps see if you can arrange a site visit. Occasionally, you may be invited to visit the campus following submission of an application and your trip paid for – more than likely, you will have to visit on your own dime.
- After doing your “homework” on your prospective department/program, select 2-3 faculty members with whom you would like to work (i.e., do research) and contact them (see next point below). It is important in many programs to identify at least 2 faculty members who share your research interest/field. These faculty members will chair and sit on your thesis committee, providing the bulk of mentoring and guidance during your time in graduate school.
- Sending emails outlining your research interests to individual faculty is also a wise idea; some may not respond, but many will. This is especially important if there is a specific faculty member with whom you are interested in working. It is important to make sure that they will actually be present in the department or program while you are in graduate school (professors are often on leave or away doing field research for part of the year). As well, by establishing contact with a professor ahead of time, you may discover opportunities that lead to collaborative research with that professor or

alternatively, you may be able to do a subset of that professor's larger research project (and get funding for it).

Project Proposal

- In some course-based graduate programs, a thesis or research project is not a key element. Nevertheless, you will need to be able to articulate what you want to study during your graduate career.
- In geography, you will have to pick a side(s). You will have to articulate in your project proposal that you want to pursue human or physical geography and/or geotechniques. Geotechniques can be combined with either physical or human geography. It is extremely difficult to pursue both physical and human geography at the same time.
- If you do need to propose a specific project, it is advisable that you show your referees a copy of your project or area proposal.
- Your proposal needs to be clear and direct. It must be well-organized, coherent, and accessible. The challenge is to write in language that is sophisticated without being alienating; stay away from jargon and avoid trendy words and phrases.
- You need to articulate several things in your proposal
 - What is the issue/problem you wish to examine?
 - Why is the issue important, timely, and relevant?
 - How do you propose to investigate it?
 - Why are you qualified (or how will you become qualified) to undertake this particular research?
 - Why is it appropriate for you to undertake this research in this particular institution and program (i.e. faculty, research resources, location, etc)?

Your Academic and Professional Record

- Find out what is the proper format and style of an academic curriculum vitae (c.v.). This is not the same as a resume for a job. A c.v. lists your academic accomplishments and credentials. Check our department website to see how c.v.'s in our discipline are structured.
- The c.v. generally does not list the courses you have taken unless it demonstrates a particular technical skill or attribute; however, if you do have special training (i.e. language, computer programming skills, GIS, remote sensing, statistics, database management) you should mention these.

- If you have presented at any conferences – student, national, regional – make sure to list these along with the title of your presentation.
- List all awards, honors and activities connected to your studies that you've participated in – from study abroad programs, to departmental service (e.g. Navigator work), to volunteer activities – no matter how small or temporary any of these have been.
- A word to those who are still sophomores and juniors: Be aware of and pursue as many academic opportunities at UVM as possible. Your objective is to show that you are serious about your coursework as an undergraduate and that you have the necessary preparation for graduate school. Here is a list of some opportunities you might want to consider in the coming year(s): take challenging, upper-division coursework in your senior year, write a CAS or Geography Honor Thesis, take a Readings and Research course, apply for internships, pursue undergraduate fellowships and grants to do research (i.e., HELiX, URECA, etc.), and maintain a high GPA and subsequently be invited to join TGE or Phi Beta Kappa. Your objective is to make yourself stand out in the crowd.