

## What should I consider when thinking about graduate school in Anthropology?

*Should I even pursue an M.A. or Ph.D.?*

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Do you have the interest to sustain you for a longer program or would you rather do a shorter one? (Average Ph.D. completion time is 8.5 years, while an M.A. generally takes between 1.5 and 3 years.)
- How will a graduate degree help get you the career you want? Which degree is better for that career? Have you done some research to determine whether folks in that career path recommend an advanced degree?
- Is there funding available, or do you pay your own way? (usually M.A.'s are difficult to fund, a PhD should not be undertaken without full or nearly full funding).
- Do you want to get an M.A. to see if you like it, and then consider a Ph.D.?

*Other options to consider:*

Getting an M.A. degree in a discipline related to your anthropological interest, including regional studies disciplines, education, geology, etc. before getting a Ph.D. in anthropology.

Talk to advisers, people in the field, etc. about the process of graduate school, job prospects, state of the discipline, etc. As with any major decision, it is *caveat emptor*. Know pretty well what you're getting yourself into, and know the different career options ahead of time.

*Who gets a PhD anyway?*

Most get a Ph.D. because they have some questions they want to explore and want intellectual growth - *not because it's the automatic stepping stone to a particular career.*

Don't fool yourself: the academic job market has been pretty grim, and it's not going to improve anytime soon. Anthropology grad school (especially at the PhD level) is not a 'professional school' in the same vein as an M.B.A., J.D. or M.D. (One possible exception would be Applied Anthropology, but even that is debatable since applied work is not always available in the fields in which you train).

## Should I take time between UVM and grad school?

Ask yourself: Will I be burnt-out by my second or third year?

*If yes, wait.* Also, admissions committees are looking for maturity (not always what they award you a B.A. for), so time off will likely enhance your application, especially if you do work/travel in a related field/venue (In fact, the average age of Ph.D. recipients in Anthropology is 39!).

Besides the usual (job, travel) you might consider using your time between undergrad and grad to further your research goals.

Apply for a Fulbright grant, a Watson, attend a field school, work on language skills, or find work as a research assistant on a project (this will probably be easiest for archaeologically-bound folks), etc. The UVM Office of Fellowship Advising will have information on grants and programs. Even if you plan to work full time in an unrelated field, spend at least some time on an internship or unpaid research assistantship that keeps you close to Anthropology.

These considerations will affect where you apply, on what you chose to work, with whom you will work and, most importantly, it will help orient you throughout the entire process. Before proceeding, you will have to make some very sobering assessments and decisions, so it is important to carefully consider why you want to go to grad school.

## How Can I Best Prepare Myself Academically for Graduate School?

*Or, what to do before you graduate.*

Get to know three (or at least two) professors pretty well—they will write your recommendations for you. Try to discuss this with the professors before you leave campus if you think there's *any* chance of going onto grad school (even if it may not be anthropology). Keep papers *with their comments*, so you can show them to your recommenders down the road to remind them of your work (and what they thought of it). Good recommendation letters provide specific details about candidates.

*Courses in your major.*

What if you didn't major in the field you want to study in grad school? Don't let this discourage you from applying, since grad programs are always looking for people with interesting backgrounds. If you didn't major in the field, you may have to work harder in courses your first year than people who may have a background in the field. No matter what you major in though, you should have high grades in your major field—this shows them that you are a serious student when it comes to something that interests you

*Do a thesis or independent study, and/or a field school.*

Not only will this help you decide if you have the gumption and interest to handle advanced work and actual fieldwork, the products you create will be useful to send with your application so that the admissions committee sees your actual work abilities. As graduate school admissions get more competitive, research experience has become essential.

*Attend or present at a conference . . . or even publish a paper.*

Academic or professional conferences give you a sense of where the discipline is moving and a great opportunity to meet people or get exposure for your work. Besides, having to speak in front of a professional audience is a great educational experience! The AAA or NEAA are great for this. As graduate school admissions get more competitive, dissemination of research at a conference or even published form has become more important.

*Expand your network.*

It's also worth it to begin to expand your network and experiences in Anthropology before you graduate:

- attend lectures and workshops at other regional schools, again to meet more people and get a sense of what's going on in the discipline.
- take a job or research internship with an ongoing anthropological project or institution (i.e., an archaeology consulting firm, a development consulting firm, etc.) or become a research assistant to a professor.
- if possible, work with an established professional on one or more writing projects.

## What About the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations)?

The GRE is required for most graduate programs in the US, but is it important? Sort of. It hurts your chances for admission *only if your score is low*. It helps the admissions committee make a quick first cut. In some schools, they are more likely to give funding if your score is high.

There is no special exam for Anthropology (although there is for other fields such as Sociology).

*Key:* This seems to be the most intimidating aspect of the graduate admissions process, but it shouldn't be. Prepare for it, by either taking a course (expensive) or buying a book that includes some practice exams (cheap). Learn the tricks of how to take it and do well (prove to everyone how easy it is to circumvent the actual content of the test, and by implication, what a useless and biased test it is!). Many people take it twice, and improve markedly the second time.

Take the GRE before or just after you leave UVM. It is much easier to prepare for standardized tests in this setting than when you are working full-time in an unrelated field!

Be aware! Cultural anthropology departments generally only care about the analytical and verbal scores, but that doesn't mean you should sleep through the math.

If you demonstrate clarity of purpose, maturity and panache in your personal statement and have persuasive recommendations, grades, GRE scores, and so on should not really matter too much for admissions decisions (although they may for funding).

## Are My Grades High Enough to get into Graduate School?

Again, these will only hurt your chances for admission if they are low—*especially* in your major - implication: pretty much everyone applying to grad school has good grades (GPA 3.5+). As with a high GRE score, high grades might help you get funding.

If you demonstrate clarity of purpose, maturity and panache in your personal statement and have persuasive recommendations, grades, GRE scores, and so on should not really matter too much for admissions decisions (although they may for funding).

## How Do I Select a Program/School?

*Ask your professors.*

Your professors will know which programs are hot right now, which are strong in specific subfields, which have advisors who might be open to working with you, and which have funding you might be competitive for. Just as in college admissions, your professors will also have a sense of which schools are realistic for you and which might be a reach/safety.

*Check the departmental websites and the course schedules.*

- What special programs and foci do they offer?
- How often do they offer the courses you want?
- Will you be taking a lot of independent study courses if the course offerings are light or not in your areas of interest?
- Are there people in the department or other departments who would actually do these things with you?
- Can you take courses at other universities in the same city? (...one of the bonuses of NYC area).

*Paying a visit?*

Like with the Great College Tour, if you can afford it, visiting ahead of time can be helpful in making decisions. Find out when is a good time to go (Summer is always bad; Spring tends to be busy. Try early fall, before all the application deadlines, and when people are not yet working very hard). Arrange to meet with students and selected faculty, maybe even sit in on a class or a department-wide talk. Keep in mind that these people will be quite busy, but they should take you seriously since you are a potential colleague. If you can't actually visit, call or write to a faculty member or two announcing your interests and ask about the program. Your questions should not be questions that are available in the department's web resources (this annoys potential advisors to no end). Also, you could get in touch with a grad student from a program and ask him or her for details. You could visit schools after getting accepted at them (sometimes they'll pay or provide you with room and board), when you have a more concrete sense of the possibilities (and you won't get your hopes up that a particular school will accept you).

*Selection criteria number one: the faculty.*

- Who is there?
- Who do you want to work with? (Identify at least two or three)
- Will the professor(s) you want to work with be on sabbatical during your coursework?
- What are *professor-professor relations* like?
- Are they at each other's throats, or do they get along?
- Do students get in the middle of acrimonious squabbles? What are *professor-student relations* like?
- Do they cultivate mentoring relationships, or do you work more with a committee?
- There are important trade-offs to consider with each of these models:
  - *Mentors can bring access to resources*, research projects, etc. . . . but they can also be tyrants.
  - *Committees often allow more independent work*...but sometimes they don't take care of you like a mentor might. Do faculty include students in department-level politics and activities? Are the faculty formal, or informal with their students?
- Do they leave grad students to figure things out by themselves, including actual work, bureaucratic maneuvers, and practical career training, or do they supportively walk you through these things? (It will most likely tend toward the former, especially at universities where undergraduate teaching or faculty research is the primary mission or faculty are more concerned with their research.)
- How are M.A. students treated (as opposed to Ph.D. students or undergrads)?

You should identify up to two or three faculty with whom you would like to work, and you should consider contacting them ahead of time and let them know who you are. If they are enthusiastic about you, this could enhance your application.

*Other issues to consider:*

- Does the department have a general approach, style or regional concentration?
- For example, in Cultural Anthropology, Princeton is known for its interpretive approach, Chicago for its work on the structural aspects of culture, Cornell for Asian Studies, etc. This might ultimately shape what kind of Anthropology you do, and the networks in which you find yourself.
- Do you want preparation in all four fields, and does the department offer/require it? (Less and less common)
- What are relations like with other departments in the university? Do anthropology folks get involved with other departments and programs? Which ones? Do students actually do fieldwork? Where?
- How long do students take to finish? What are their stumbling blocks?
- Is there an exchange program with other grad schools (in the U.S. and abroad)? (This could make a difference if there are several people at different universities with whom you could see yourself working.)

- What are the graduate students enthusiastic about? (All grad students are cynical, but you can usually tell if their gripes are major ones.)
- Are there differences in the ways that M.A. students and Ph.D. students are treated by the department or university? (i.e., access to funding, teaching, resources, etc.)
- Could you spend anywhere from the next two to nine years of your life in that town or city? Is there intellectual or social life beyond the university?
- Do you want to move away for a Ph.D.? If you do not want to (or cannot) actually move away to do a Ph.D., consider distance-learning options, such as the Union Institute, etc. However, the good ones are few and far between and require *incredible* independence.

With the increasing application fees, it isn't cheap to get the "privilege" to be considered for acceptance. Therefore, you should reconcile your pocketbook with the number of schools you're applying to. Nevertheless, it is usually better to throw a wider net than a narrower one (i.e., anywhere between 5 and 10 schools instead of just one or two), even if it is expensive. It's an investment in the future.

## How Can I Pay for Graduate School?

### *Funding, or "Show Me the Money!"*

- Does the school offer scholarships or fellowships? Full support (tuition, stipend, health benefits) or partial? Is it for the duration, or only a couple of years?
- Will you be required to teach (and how does that affect the amount of time to degree – it usually slows it down)?
- Will you have to get loans? How much? This is normal for an M.A, but you should not accept a PhD program offer without significant funding.
- \$100,000 at a private university, *in tuition alone!* And remember: you also have to eat, clothe yourself and buy books! Be prepared for the fact that an M.A. could require a relatively heavy debt load (especially if it is a private university) – easily over \$30,000.
- Do students have opportunities for summer funding?
- Do students get funding to do fieldwork and/or have employment prospects in the department?

You should consider applying for the following before you get to grad school to pay for it: NSF, Jacob Javits Fellowship, Ford Foundation, Mellon, NIMH, federal Title VI programs, regional studies centers (i.e., African Studies Center), etc. Recognize though that these are national competitions, so you have to have a pretty clear idea of what you are going to accomplish in graduate school as well as great GRE's/grades.

Check with the [UVM Office of Fellowship Advising](#) for information and grant applications.

If you are willing to pay for grad school, especially a PhD (i.e., you are heir to a fortune), then make sure they know it; they may not accept you solely on the basis that they've already given their fellowships to other candidates (even though they want you too); so if you can pay for it,

they might take you. On the other hand, if you cannot pay for it, let them know directly in the financial aid statement of the application - this may influence them to offer you funding to ensure that you come there. Be frank with them. You can generally defer undergraduate loans if you are going to graduate school.

## What Should I Know About the Application?

*Statement of purpose/intent.*

This is hands-down the most significant component of your application, so it has to be well-written and polished. Begin with a clear and forceful opening; remember that the admissions committee is seeing hundreds of these, and yours has to stand out. It could be a motivating question (it should not be rhetorical), a perplexing situation or contradiction (that you then explain), or an outright statement or observation - but it should convey a sense that it's not only important to you, but that it has wider relevance (otherwise it sounds narcissistic).

*In the body of the statement you should explain the following:*

- Why you?
- What have you done to prepare yourself to do well?
- What themes and region do you want to work on? (corollary: Who do you want to work with? Be specific and name names, thereby customizing each essay for each school to which you apply)
- What are your goals/plans with this?

A good way to organize your essay would be to devote one paragraph to answering each of these questions.

As you are communicating your desire to go onto graduate study, be aware that admissions committee people tend to like those people who they see as eager to take on the vagaries of graduate school itself, as well as it being an important part of their career plan; therefore you probably don't need to spend more than a sentence or two on your final career goals unless that is a specific essay question. Also, style counts: try not to plug in the answers to these questions mechanically, since they should organically meld into one another. Wrap up the essay by referring back to your opening observations, question, making the whole a tight package. Be sure to circulate this essay among recommenders, faculty, friends, etc. ahead of time to work out all the kinks.

Important point: While this is called a "personal statement" it is really a "professional statement" not an exercise in creative writing (as I walked out of my adobe hut and saw the sunset framing the children playing in the mud, I knew from in the depths of my heart that I was destined to be an anthropologist). You are likely to annoy your readers if you write something that might be suitable for an undergraduate admissions essay. Also, no one cares if

you've wanted to be an archaeologist and dug up your backyard with a spoon when you were six. You want to establish yourself as mature and sophisticated, yet humble.

In identifying your areas of interest, be as specific as possible. Although you won't be held to them since everybody's interests and projects evolve, you show them that you have a wider sense of where you are going in the field and life. A good committee will be looking for a delicate balance between a solid sense of direction and an open cast of mind.

#### *Miscellanea:*

Along with your application send a copy of a particularly good paper you wrote (thesis or independent study), or publications, to give the admissions committee an idea about your actual work and abilities.

Make sure you list any honors, presentations, conference participations, and foreign experience. This is the kind of stuff that could be offered on a C.V. that you include with your application.

### What Should I Know About Recommendation Letters?

These are also extremely important, so be sure that these people know you and particularly your work and abilities.

A key problem for an admissions committee is how to evaluate students coming from different academic and social contexts, so they tend to rely on recommendations from colleagues to get a sense of the applicant's abilities. This means that if your recommender knows someone at the school to which you are applying, or your recommender's work is more widely known outside of your department, then the admissions committee will be able to contextualize your application better. You do need to be aware of these dynamics (some might call it an 'old boy's network,' although this term is inaccurate because academia is not so exclusive nor are anthropology departments necessarily dominated by men), since the applications process is only the beginning of having to deal with this and it will be there constantly throughout (at least the early years of) your career. After all, academia is a social network! This is not to say that you won't get accepted at a place where no one knows who your recommenders are; but you could certainly use this knowledge to your advantage and apply to those places where there may be previous relations between them and a recommender or two (or even if a student from your department has gone there and done well). Having some kind of benchmark on which they can rely enhances your possibilities immensely. But don't let this scare you from applying at places even where you feel like it could be a longshot - you never know!

If you have taken time off after your BA, it is acceptable to use the recommendation of an employer who knows you well. However, *at least two out of your likely three* recommenders should know you from an academic context.



When you ask for any recommendation from a professor or employer, ask well in advance of the deadline (especially professors, who are swamped with writing recs when you want yours) and send them an updated resume/CV so they know you better as a whole person. Be sure to tell the recommender what you want him or her to include in the letter (i.e., skills, experiences, service, internship, TA experience). And consider asking them for feedback on your personal statement.

## When Should I be Completing the Steps Toward Graduate School Application?

*A basic timeline.*

The following timeline will help you think about when you should be doing things, if you are applying for fall entry. If you're applying to a school with rolling entry (uncommon), adjust this schedule accordingly.

The year before you want to enter:

- *Spring/Summer:*  
Study for and take GRE; send for catalogues, applications and identify desirable departments; send letters to faculty that you might be interested in working with; let recommenders know so if they want they can begin to write recommendations; request info on national competitions for grad funding such as NSF, Javits, etc.
- *Early Fall:*  
Take GRE again (if necessary); definitely secure recommendations from advisors; write and circulate personal statement; visit schools and talk with students; prepare c.v. and materials to include with application.
- *Late Fall:*  
Fill out and mail in applications; apply for national competitions such as NSF, Javits, etc.

Year you enter:

- *Early Winter:*  
Finish sending applications.
- *Late Winter/Spring:*  
Wait to hear from schools... and then wait some more...
- *Late Spring/Early Summer:*  
If you're accepted, make a visit and weigh offers (see What if I am accepted?); set up financial aid and loans

## What If I Am Not Accepted to Any of the Schools to Which I Applied?

First off, please try not to feel so bad. You can never know for certainty why a school did or did not accept you - there are many dynamics internal to departments that you can't know from the outside. Nevertheless, you should try to find out what eliminated you as a candidate, and see if you can correct it before applying next year (by taking more college level courses, retaking the GRE, getting relevant work experience, or rewriting a personal statement, etc.). Or, you could apply in a different discipline, or for an M.A. instead of a Ph.D.

## What If I Have Been Accepted?

**Funding:** Now, the question is, how am I going to pay for this?! If you were lucky, you got a fellowship offer. If you have multiple fellowship offers, you can use them as bargaining chips to get a slightly higher stipend or benefits. Be modest and humble - don't push these things - but if a school is serious about you, they may see what they can do so they don't lose you to one that gives you a better offer.

If you are going to be paying with loans (Stafford, Nellie Mae, etc.), you need to think about applying for them the spring/summer before you enter. The financial aid office will help with this.

Don't expect a deferment unless you worked it out with the school ahead of time, especially if they have offered you a fellowship. Fellowship monies are limited, and can disappear if no one takes it, so departments are nervous if accepted students don't come. Most will not even guarantee that you will be accepted next year, since the next crop of applicants could be stronger. If you need to ask, do though.

*Is there a way to prepare for entering your first year of grad school?*

Rest! Don't feel like you have to read all sorts of stuff to prepare yourself - unless you're normally like this you'll probably just exhaust yourself, and the first year of grad school is intense enough as it is (in terms of the quantity and quality of work expected), that it probably won't do you any particular good... (This is open to debate, though. For example, some might argue that a reading group with friends or colleagues would be helpful...)