

A Guide for Minority Serving Institution (MSI) Students Applying for a Ph.D.



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This guide is intended to assist students during their Ph.D. application processes. Applying to Ph.D. programs requires significant planning, time, and reflection. For Minority Serving Institution (MSI) students, many of whom are first generation college students, this process can seem mysterious and perplexing. While the points highlighted in this guide succinctly cover several key areas to this endeavor, it is by no means comprehensive. For additional support, consider reaching out to mentors and advisors on your campuses, as well as reviewing the resources listed at the end of the guide.

When should I apply and how should I prepare?	3
How do I decide where to apply?.....	4
How should I prepare for the GRE?.....	5
What’s the role of program faculty in graduate admissions?	6
What should I use as my writing sample?	7
What’s the statement of purpose and how should I write it?.....	8
What should I know about Ph.D. funding?	9



When should I apply and how should I prepare?

Most applications for Ph.D. programs are due the winter prior to the intended fall semester that the program begins (e.g. December 2018 deadline for Fall 2019 enrollment).

We recommend students apply during their senior year and enroll the fall after they finish their bachelor's degree.

One thing to keep in mind is that it's important to present the best version of yourself when you apply, so you should not apply without considerable preparation.

It is important to begin researching various programs and their application processes early on – we suggest the spring or summer before you apply; read program websites carefully and reach out to administrative staff for clarification when necessary.

Begin brainstorming your statement of purpose the summer before you apply for Ph.D. programs as the writing process can take many drafts.

Start connecting with potential faculty advisors and reaching out to letter of recommendation writers several months before the application deadline; we suggest the early fall. Contemplate meeting with faculty to share and explain your goals for doctoral studies—this context can often help them submit strong letters of recommendation.

You may consider creating a spreadsheet that lists the schools and programs, as well as their corresponding application requirements and deadlines, you are interested in joining.



How do I decide where to apply?

The graduate school experience is often different than what a student encountered as an undergraduate. Given the level of focus and the close working relationship with one particular professor in graduate school, considering the fit within a specific department/program is often more important than the larger university.

Consider your research interest and who are the best researchers on that topic. What is the professor's mentoring style? What is the graduation rate and time-to-degree of their graduate students? What types of positions do their students take after graduation? What types of support does the faculty and larger program/university provide students?

Faculty vary in the extent to which they make time for their students, support them, and provide opportunities for collaboration; connecting with their current and former students and asking them about their experiences can shed light on these factors.

Reflect on your work habits and goals and think through how they align with faculty members based on what you've learned about them.

Take a moment to read faculty's work to ensure they are exploring areas that are of interest to you. One suggestion is to find the most recent abstracts of their work from national/regional conferences in your field. This approach will give you a sense of the most recent scholarship that they are undertaking.



How should I prepare for the GRE?

Increasingly more and more Ph.D. programs do not require the GRE for admissions. Make sure that the programs you intend to apply to require the exam before investing in studying.

Start studying for the GRE well before the date you intend to take it.

Prepare a study schedule that includes time for study 3-4 days a week for several hours. The amount of time that you study will coincide with your areas that need improvement. For example, you may find that you need more math preparation than verbal, depending on your strengths.

Familiarize yourself with the types of questions and test format using GRE preparation materials (e.g. Kaplan, Princeton Review, Magoosh).

Test prep courses can be useful but expensive; take advantage of free materials online and see what's available at your local/campus libraries.

The most important aspect of test preparation are the practice tests; you should take at least 3-4 timed practice tests prior to your exam date.

Practice tests are most helpful when you simulate the actual test-taking environment; take them at the same time of day as when you are scheduled for the test and in a setting that is unfamiliar to you (i.e. not in your apartment/dorm).

Don't expect to score better each time you take a practice test, just know that gained familiarity and practice will ultimately benefit you when you take the real exam.

Take a break from studying before the big day, it's best to go into the test well-rested.

Make sure to examine the requirements across each program where you want to apply; some institutions are no longer requiring GRE scores, whereas others require additional subject-specific tests.



What's the role of program faculty in graduate admissions?

Faculty are critical to your admission into a doctoral program; building relationships with them early in your application process is vital.

Faculty decide who is accepted to the program and shape much of the Ph.D. experience.

Identify faculty members whose interests align with yours and reach out to them early on; we encourage you to reach out to faculty in August-October prior to the December-January deadlines. When reaching out to faculty, look for people who conduct research in similar, but not necessarily exact, areas as you do. And, make sure to identify connections between your research and theirs when you reach out via email and/or have a phone conversation.

When reaching out, begin with a short email in which you briefly introduce yourself and ask to speak with the person on the phone. As you are asking for the faculty member's time, make yourself available to them rather than limiting the time you are available. Also, make sure to be considerate of the faculty member's time. Most faculty have very busy schedules and cannot plan meetings with only a few days' notice.

Meeting them in person either via a campus visit or at conferences can be beneficial, but remember to always be respectful of them and their time (try to schedule well in advance). Come prepared with a list of questions (4-5) about the program and their research. Demonstrate to them that you have done your due diligence and that you are committed to pursuing your doctorate.

Some faculty members do not accept students every year and the process is competitive so you should apply to a minimum of eight programs (consider application fee waivers from the institutions); to better your chances, you should connect with a potential faculty advisor at each school to which you apply. When you're talking with faculty, you may wish to ask them whether they are seeking to accept students during the admission cycle when you're planning to apply.



What should I use as my writing sample?

Some programs will invite you to submit a writing sample (anywhere between 15-20 pages). This writing sample is meant to demonstrate your writing abilities, as well as your competencies with research. We encourage you to identify a strong paper that you have written during your junior year that you can further develop during the summer and fall semesters prior to applying to Ph.D. programs. It is essential that you have your mentors and your peers review your writing sample as this type of feedback will strengthen your work and ensure that you submit your strongest writing to Ph.D. program admission committees.



What's the statement of purpose and how should I write it?

The purpose of this statement is to discuss why you are interested in pursuing a Ph.D. in a particular discipline, why the program you are applying to is a good fit for you, and how you will contribute to the program and discipline. Be sure to closely read the guidelines offered by each institution as there may be a slight variation across programs.

Start early and get feedback from others who have gone through the process; however, maintain your voice and make sure that the statement is an authentic representation of yourself.

Remember that the statement of purpose is just one aspect of the entire application and will not be read in isolation; it is an opportunity to demonstrate aspects of yourself that may not be evident elsewhere in your application, and to elaborate on your experiences and accomplishments.

Consider framing your statement with an anecdote that illustrates something important about your journey and your interest in the discipline.

Make sure to mention at least one faculty member in the program and explain how your research interests relate to theirs.

Demonstrate familiarity with the discipline but at the same time recognize that you have much to learn; discuss what you are most curious about within the field and why you wish to study it.

Proofread for grammar and typos; Ph.D. programs are writing-intensive so it is essential to demonstrate strong mechanics and effective communication via writing. Keep in mind that writing multiple drafts of your statement is normal and will strengthen it. Identify 2 or 3 people—faculty, peers, or other colleagues—to review multiple drafts of your personal statement.



What should I know about Ph.D. funding?

Ph.D. funding varies program to program; private institutions typically provide more funding than public institutions. Contact representatives from graduate admissions offices (faculty members may be less familiar with the current funding packages) if you have further questions about funding packages after you have reviewed their online materials.

Funding is often tied to research or teaching assistantships and Ph.D. programs typically require you to be enrolled full-time (with no other employment).

In situations in which institutional funding does not cover the full costs of attending the program, you should pursue outside grants and scholarships to supplement your funding; student loans can serve as another source of funding.

Current students can shed light on how well stipends cover costs and how they have navigated financing their doctoral education; you might also ask them about funding for conference attendance and travel.

When reviewing acceptance offers, remember that cost-of-living varies by location; a difference in stipend amount does not necessarily mean that a program is better covering costs of attendance.

If you have multiple offers and the stipend is a deciding factor, you can politely let a program know that you are interested in enrolling but that another school has made a better offer; however, this should be done tactfully.

Programs sometimes offer relocation assistance to those who request it; this would be a one-time funding supplement at the start of the program.



FOR MORE INFORMATION, CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

A Guide to Graduate School for Minority Serving Institutions (2015) by the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions

Journey to the Ph.D. (2003) by Anna Green and Lekita Scott

Applying to Graduate School: Tips, Time, Timeline, and Tools of the Trade by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation.



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