A Guide to Getting into Grad School


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Hard Work, Luck, and Uncontrollable Variables: A Guide to Getting Into Graduate School

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This paper contains friendly advise about getting into graduate school in sociology. It grew out of my own experiences as well as my general attitudes about facing life's challenges. Call it folk wisdom if you like. This is meant to be a down-to-earth guide that touches on several areas from self-esteem to what to do and what not to do. I hope this advise will be useful to a wide variety of people, like school counselors, graduate advisors, and potential students. Furthermore, I believe the information will be helpful to those working in government and business who are thinking about
returning to school or who know colleagues contemplating a move to further their education.

Many different types of people think about going to graduate school in sociology. Being accepted to a good graduate school may be entirely within their reach. If they want to go, they should be encouraged to apply. A substantial number, already working for public agencies and private businesses, have a lot to offer a sociology program. Work experience is more likely to be an advantage when pursuing a career in sociology as it provides a wealth of knowledge which can be turned into research projects.

A number of potential students don't feel confident about applying to graduate school. They may think they have too many strikes against them. Quite a few people I know, including myself, wanted to go to graduate school despite disadvantages. I would call a disadvantage any kind of hardship, such as, being economically or culturally deprived, being a single parent, having health problems or physical handicaps, or being a person of color who is labeled by race and ethnicity. A person may feel that he or she is not the typically desired graduate student, especially if he or she falls into more than one of these categories. Someone may be shy, female, older than the average student, bad at math, or have begun their undergraduate degree at a junior college. A person like this may think he or she won't be accepted. That simply isn't the case.

Graduate students and their professors come from all kinds of backgrounds. Some did face uphill struggles. In my opinion, what these people had in common was an attitude that they would reach their goals no matter what happened. They were very much aware that they would have to work the system even if the odds were against them. The following folk wisdom about getting into and surviving graduate school is offered in the spirit of that challenge.

**Thinking of Grad School As a Job Rather Than a Vacation**

Some people in my undergraduate and graduate cohorts took mellower views of graduate study than I did. One full-time grad student, who started out at state university and later got into a UC school, took a total of thirteen years to obtain a M.S. degree. While all styles of academic pursuits may be existentially valid, being focused and productive will put one ahead in graduate
school. For what it's worth, I have always looked at graduate school as a job rather than a vacation. Part of that job is doing research on potential schools, financial aid, fellowships, and professors. In addition, this job requires one to fill out lots of applications.

Local and college libraries have reference books on graduate schools. These books range from simple informational guides to advice manuals. The Way to Win In Graduate School by James W. Cortada and Vera C. Winkler contains a good overview of the qualitative aspects of graduate school. Another helpful informational work is the Guide to Graduate Departments which is published yearly by the American Sociological Association and can be ordered from them.1 The Guide to Graduate Departments provides addresses so one can write for applications. The guide also lists the names of professors and their specializations within each department. The guide will specify how many Ph.D.s were granted recently, a good indication of how supportive the school is and what kind of dissertation the department will tolerate.

A person may decide initially to apply to a local school which only offers a master's degree program. This can actually be to one's advantage. People who work are accommodated by these schools with part-time programs and night courses. Then again, some students can springboard from a master's program to a more prestigious doctoral program at a better school. Although it may sound like a delay in an educational timeline, it works rather well as a strategy. A student who does this will be better informed before he or she makes the BIG decision. Participating in a terminal master's program will give one a headstart in learning theory, methods and in doing research. A student will have room to grow before entering the grueling demands of a Ph.D. program. By the time one applies to that coveted school, he or she will have something more impressive to put on an application.

There are other reasons to pursue "just" a master's degree. Someone with unmet intellectual needs can explore new interests. On its own a master's degree qualifies you for higher-level business, public service, and government jobs. Master's programs turn out applied sociologists and grant-writers who are in demand at public agencies and private companies. Master's degrees equip people to teach some college courses. Many community college instructors only possess a master's degree. For a person with
quantitative and computer skills, there are plenty of jobs in other than purely academic fields.

Before committing to a graduate school, it is important to familiarize oneself with their requirements. Of particular concern looms the language requirement. For some people, learning a foreign language remains a significant barrier, as Cortada and Winkler (1978) have noted. Increasingly programs offer just a master's degree with no language requirement which can save a student time and money. The only drawback to studying in a master's program before going on to a separate doctoral school is that certain fellowships are contingent on the fact that someone is starting as a first year student. Many times you cannot use those particular fellowships when you go on to another school.

If someone only wants a master's degree, he or she should not apply to a Ph.D. program. Potential students ought to know that doctoral program give terminal master's degrees in order to end their relationship with problem students. Many employers know this.

**Apply to as Many Schools as Possible**

One way to increase the probability of acceptance into graduate school is to apply to a large number of schools. This takes time, research, and money but it is the most crucial investment a potential student will make. An aspirant will have to weigh the acceptance decision by a combination of factors, like financial support, possible mentors, areas of specialization, prestige of the school, and whether or not the school will accept prior credits. Some will accept the applicant and others won't. Some will support the student and some won't. At least, there will be some choices available. If a person applies only to the best schools, he or she may receive a pile of rejection letters. Then the student has lost another year because there are no other options. Encourage people to apply to the top schools as well as some sure-things. Then they can sort out the options later. I remember one bright master's student had just gotten out of the Army. He thought he couldn't get into Stanford. After much prodding, he applied just to please his graduate advisor. It turned out he was accepted with full support. What if he hadn't applied? He would have missed the opportunity of a lifetime.
Most departments are very idiosyncratic in their selection process. Many potential students don't know this. While you can get into University X, they will never accept you at University Y. College catalogs don't tell the whole story. One cannot really anticipate the kind of student a university will accept without inquiring into the matter. Potential students can do some research by asking graduate students and advisors. For example, locally it is common knowledge in academic circles that a certain UC program will not accept students from its neighboring state university. However, quite a few of those same applicants are regularly accepted at another more highly ranked school. Insider information like this helps applicants. Encourage them to apply to friendly conduit departments which value their previous degrees and academic work. That will also increase their chances.

One thing applicants cannot control is their competition. They may be competing against Harvard graduates or people who already have master's degrees in statistics or mathematics. Since they can't control the competition, they must apply to a lot of schools to even out the odds. Other uncontrollable variables may work in their favor. So the guideline here is, go ahead and apply! The department might decide to increase the size of its entering cohort, or it may want to increase the number of minorities and women. One year, they may want people with master's degrees. The next year may differ. There's no way to tell without inside information. Some of the process is just plain luck.

Money still remains one of problems facing people who want to go to graduate school. If a student is accepted to a great school which doesn't offer support, he or she should consider going anyway. Students can find jobs on their own. They can probably find a research assistantship or a job as a reader once they get into the school. Graduate loans go up to $7500 per year. These loans are less desirable, but they are there to help. When I was accepted at UCLA, the program did not offer me any financial support. I wrote every professor to say I was available for part-time work. The very last professor I wrote to hired me as a research assistant, then later as a teaching assistant. So I ended up with two jobs and a good mentor. Sometimes you make your own luck.

Even if one is not accepted to a school, there may be a "backdoor" into the program. That is to say, students can sign up with an extension program which will
allow them to attend classes on a provisional basis. This amounts to talking your way in by eventually gaining support from connections on the inside. It has been done, a good challenge for the diplomatic and well-connected student, but a rare occurrence.

Students should expand the range of their applications. Many students think only in terms of the boundaries of their own state. Sociology departments purposively add diversity to their cohorts by choosing out-of-state students. Although initially the fees may be higher, offers of financial support could increase. Other schools may accept previous credits, or provide the student with other benefits. Moving out of state can entail some pleasant surprises. I know one student and her husband who moved out of California so that she could attend the University of Oregon. They found many like-minded people interested in ecology. They also were able to purchase a house for the first time in their lives due to the lower real estate prices. The cost of living may be less in other states which can make life a whole lot easier. In Tulsa, a two bedroom apartment rents for $175. In Los Angeles, a similar apartment would cost $900. Depending on the circumstances, money can go farther out of state.

Looking at parallel programs will also help the potential applicant. Some departments like communications, ethnic studies, and education could possibly be better funded than sociology. Thus, they can offer a student more financial support. Computer science, international relations, or women's studies grant those much desired degrees through which scholars pursue similar kinds of careers.

The On-Site Visit

This may sound a little strange at first to a potential graduate student, but I would recommend an on-site visit to a school after a student is accepted. A program will have a feel to it. In other words, I suggest that students take a reality test.

The reality test can go something like this. Meet the professor you idolize. Read the descriptions of the classes. Find the books and articles authored by the faculty. Ask yourself some pertinent questions. Can you handle the big city lifestyle? Can you cope with your potential mentor's personality? Do they use MacIntosh or IBM? Are you allergic to anything in the physical environment, like smog or trees? Do you want
to sit in that T.A. office without windows for four years? Wouldn't you rather have your own office with a computer connected to the mainframe, a laser printer, and a window? In the words of a popular comedienne, "It can happen!"

After an on-site visit, I personally turned down a graduate program which offered me financial support, because it just didn't feel right. It turned out to be a very good decision. The next year I received much better opportunities. This reiterates the importance of applying to as many schools as possible. With several choices, a person can act from a position of strength rather uncertainty.

Advice to Potential Students

When talking to students about getting into graduate school and staying there, I usually give them the following kinds of advice. Know what you want to do. That makes a positive impression. Unlike undergraduate programs, graduate schools will direct people into areas of specialization (Cortada and Winkler 1978). At least, act like you know what you want to do. Express an interest in research, teaching, and publishing which is what will be expected of you. Say this on your graduate school applications. When accepted, your research interests will allow professors to help you and make suggestions.

Let people know about your strengths. Don't advertise your weaknesses. Much of the time, people in the department, including those who make decisions about your future, will only know about you through hearsay. Be able to graciously accept criticism, especially about your work. Your merciless critic may be the next chair of a committee that decides your fate. He/She may drop much of their vehemence once you defer to them. If you have obvious weaknesses like a lack of self-confidence, math-a-phobia, or you've never taken a foreign language,---find out where you can get help from tutors and/or workshops before the problem grows bigger. Remember most problems can be solved if we just face them.

Join professional organizations like the American Sociological Association, and regional groups like the Pacific Sociological Association or California Sociological Association. The student rates are a real bargain. When you read your research papers at meetings, professors will view you more as a potential
colleague. Start compiling a curriculum vita, or CV as we usually say. A CV (some people don't know what this) is akin to an academic resume which includes your education, awards, scholarships, the academic jobs you've had, such as, teaching assistantships, as well as the names of your publications and the papers you've read at meetings. Although a CV may be small at first, it will grow as long as it is kept up to date. People will ask for a CV at a moment's notice. It could make the difference in getting teaching and research assistantships, scholarships, or travel funds. Include it in your school application so you'll look professional. Even a dot matrix CV is better than no CV at all. When I was so broke I couldn't afford anything but Xeroxed dot matrix CVs, I still got several part-time teaching jobs at community colleges just because they were on file with the dean.

Knowing what you want to do and being self-confident will only go so far. Remember once you are accepted, you will be expected to "go through the program" and be professionally socialized by the department. This issue may come up when a department wants a student to take extra courses. It may entail giving up on work from a previous school, like a master's thesis. In subtle ways, a student must show submission to the authority of the new grad school. Once professors see that you are willing to be resocialized, they'll feel comfortable having you as a member of their in-group. One student I know of was recently accepted at a good school with an assistantship. When he did go to talk to his new professors, he demanded credit for all previous graduate work. Within a few weeks, they rescinded his acceptance into their program. Always show a willingness to "go through the program."

To Take or Not Take the GRE

Almost every applicant worries about the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). No matter what happens or what your self-esteem level is, always take the GRE. Don't procrastinate on this either. You'll need the GRE Testing Service to send test scores when you apply for graduate schools. You can retake the test to improve your score. If things don't go your way and you can afford it, there are preparation classes available through Stanley Kaplan or other schools. Many schools use GRE scores to decide admittance and financial support. On the other hand, schools don't uniformly put weight on your GRE scores. They may admit you with low to mediocre scores especially on the quantitative exam.
Acceptance committees can use criteria other than the GRE. The only way to know is to ask the graduate advisor or to read the official publications put out by the department. By applying to several departments, you may inadvertently get a department that does not emphasize GRE scores.

**Method and Madness: Apply for Everything**

Check those bulletin boards and newsletters. A leaflet could lead you to thousands of dollars of financial support. Try to apply for everything. Once you start the graduate school game, your application skills should be geared toward an assembly line pace. Almost characteristically, the applications which take the least amount of time, bring in the most money. You should be keeping files on recommendation letters, your CV, samples of your written work, school documents, letters or notes from your professors, et cetera. Of course, access to a good personal computer and printer are very desirable.

When applying to graduate school, spend some "quality time" with your statement of intention. As stated before, express an interest in research, teaching, and publishing in a specific field of sociology. Many students make the mistake of rambling on in their statement of intention. Construct topic sentences for your ideally concise paragraphs. Your statement of intention can sway an acceptance committee especially when the choice is among equally qualified candidates.

Strong recommendation letters make a difference when you are applying to graduate school, but remember, recommendation letters constitute a big chore for professors. Tell them you may ask for more so that they will keep those recommendation letters on file or on computer disk. Keep copies yourself if you have a chance. Professors will want to know more about you than just classwork in order to write a good recommendation letter. Modestly let them know about your successes even when you don't have a recommendation letter in mind. You can also give professors you CV when you ask for a letter. Show up for events, like conferences, departmental parties, and colloquiums. This lets you increase your visibility in addition to keeping in touch with the latest grapevine news. In the case of conferences and colloquiums, you will grow professionally. As time passes, your
professional growth will be reflected in your work which in turn will give you more recognition by funding sources.

The quest for financial aid usually starts with the act of filling out the graduate school application packet. See your local financial aid and scholarship offices for more information on all types of aid. Some applications allow you to waive the application fee if you have a low income. Apply for teaching and research assistantships through your department. Also let professors individually know that you're available because they may have their own grant money to hire you. While teaching and research assistant salaries have not increased significantly, university fees and housing costs keep going up. State agencies do assist families below poverty levels especially with food stamps. Handicapped people are likely to get assistance and scholarships from on-campus as well as off-campus sources. College libraries devote whole reference sections to books which list scholarship and fellowship opportunities. Be sure to take advantage of this. Even in these hard times, corporations and the military pay for classes so that select employees can advance their educations. Minority students are receiving financial help when they connect with the right programs. Specialized programs, like Afro-American Studies, will sometimes give you travel funds and fellowships, even if you are in sociology, as long as you are involved in related research. Commitments to assist minority and women students, especially in terms of financial help, vary from campus to campus.

**Deadlines**

Usually deadlines for admission and financial aid are firm. What if you can't make a deadline? If you can reach an office by phone, check it out. Sometimes if you miss a deadline you may be put on an waiting list. If your number comes up, you'll get the help you need anyway. Sometimes agencies will accept a late application. I remember once my son had a temper tantrum when I was under the wire on a scholarship application. Everything stopped for that mini-crisis. I gave up on handing in the form. It turned out that I could have slipped it under the door of a scholarship office after hours, but unfortunately I didn't know that. I lost a $500 scholarship because I didn't know they would have accepted a late application.
Requirements

Sometimes "requirements" may not really be required. You can often get discouraged by looking at all the requirements for acceptance to a graduate school or for obtaining a degree in a program. If you really looked into the matter you might find out you can skip some requirements. For example, one department's catalog said it required a certain undergraduate course in urban sociology for admittance to the grad program. When I asked about this, the graduate advisor said that the course was hardly ever taught nowadays so they no longer insisted on that requirement. During the first year I was at UCLA, my field of specialization abolished two monumental requirements. Times change, so check things out before you spend extra time and money taking a course. Sometimes you can petition to be exempted from a requirement.

The Grad Student Grapevine

All of us have heard the rock and roll classic, "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." The grapevine will give you a lot of raw data that must be interpreted on your own time. We often think of gossip as negative information (or just plain lies). Useful information remains embedded in this informal news network. You will definitely learn about the professors and their personalities. Take head to this type of information. One professor may be brilliant making incredibly helpful suggestions, but you may find out that he forgets to write recommendation letters or to follow through on his commitments. You may hear that a professor is intimidated by other professors, or subverts his own students. A professor can be passive-aggressive which will lead to wierd complications. Some professors have problems with women. If you are a women, find out who they are ahead of time.

With professors who may help you intellectually, talk to them during office hours or informally. Raid other territories in academia for advice, but don't put problem professors on your committees (Cortada and Winkler 1978). One way to find a potentially helpful committee member is to find out under whom the majority of theses and dissertations are being approved. Some professors allow their students a significant amount of autonomy. If you need emotional space, do some checking on this through the grapevine. Even if you cannot avoid a certain professor, you can anticipate what to expect.
You can find out about other grad students through the grapevine. Grad student comradery helps us survive. You'll quickly learn who to trust. However, suffice it to say, not all grad students are nice people. Some just waste your time with their needs for favors and attention. A small segment are compulsive philanderers, loud-mouth jerks, offensive bigots ("They really lowered their standards here by letting in all those minorities."), and/or sexual harassers. One of the only ways to find out ahead of time is through the grapevine. If you think that you will be exempt from meeting less desirable people once you get to graduate school, you are probably mistaken. By the way, you'll meet some terrific new friends and illustrious scholars despite the previous cautions.

An important part of the grapevine is the administrative staff. Most "secretaries" possess a whole lot of information on how to conquer the bureaucratic maze. Quite frankly, some administrative assistants almost run their departments. They can help you out on a range of things from getting a job ("Just looking out for you, kid.") to patiently explaining what forms you must fill out (Here, honey, you have to do it this way.) to what is the right thing to say ("We'll have to backdate it and tell a few little white lies, but it will go through. Don't worry about it."). A good administrative assistant who likes you can be one of your best allies.

Finding a Mentor

Finding the right mentor involves research and reality testing. If you have searched through the Guide to Graduate Departments, you know about different schools and their orientations. You might want to double-check by phone to see if the professor you want to study with is still at that university. If you've attended a few conferences and read journals, you'll know who the leading people in your field are. Apply to departments that will encourage your interests and provide good mentors. The Way to Win In Graduate School has an extensive discussion on "the care and feeding" of mentors and major professors. Mentors are important for everyone. If a respected member of the faculty considers someone a junior colleague, others will too.

Conclusion

Advisors as well as other sociological practitioners are welcome to pass on any of the information contained
here if they think it will help those interested in graduate school. In summary, getting into graduate school and earning a Ph.D. requires lots of hard work and a little bit of luck. Applicants can mitigate some of the effects of uncontrollable variables by applying to a large number of schools. Both formal and informal information gathering is extremely important to the whole process.

My advice to those seeking a degree comes down essentially to this. Most of all, don't be discouraged---and don't let the system psyche you out. Sort out the information. Keep trying. And remember the image of the dog and the frisbee. Always go for it!

References


Endnotes

1. The Guide to Graduate Departments can be obtained through the American Sociological Association, 1722 N. St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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