

# ACADEMIC GRADUATE STUDY: MASTERS and Ph.D. PROGRAMS

Academic graduate school is specialized, advanced education in a specific academic discipline that allows you to study a subject you love in greater depth. This guide provides general directions for pursuing academic graduate school in all fields. Find detailed information specific to your intended field of study in the Professional and Graduate School section of the Career Services Center website at [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu).

The Master of Arts (MA), the Master of Science (MS), the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) are the most commonly conferred academic graduate degrees. MA and MS programs take typically one to two years, often require research and a written thesis or culminating exam, and are appropriate if you want to study a subject in depth to prepare for doctoral studies, to work at an intermediate level in research, or to teach in high school or at some community colleges. The MFA (two to three years long) is for students seeking advanced education prior to becoming practicing artists, creative writers or designers, and requires the production of evaluated artwork. The PhD generally takes four to eight years, requires extensive research and a written dissertation, and is appropriate for those planning to become professors and/or researchers in colleges and universities or high level researchers in industry or government.

## GET EXPERIENCE AND PREPARE

**Academic Preparation** - A bachelor's degree is required, but you don't necessarily have to major in the same field as your proposed area of graduate study. However, you will need a solid foundation of relevant knowledge in the field. Always check with programs to see if they require any prerequisite classes or subjects for admission. While a GPA of 3.0 is often specified as a minimum (particularly in your relevant upper division courses), many graduate programs expect a higher level of achievement from their prospective students. The average GPA to get into most PhD programs is above a 3.5.

**Experience** – Admission committees look for students with excellent critical thinking, communication and problem-solving abilities, strong motivation, perseverance, and a zest for knowledge. Programs will look for ways that you've gotten involved outside of the classroom to develop these traits. Whether it is research, work experience, internships, student org involvement or volunteering, get experience to explore your field of study, prepare for graduate school, enhance your application, and get to know writers for letters of recommendations.

- **Do Research** – Take advantage of independent study opportunities (199), honors programs and other research experiences to explore your field and develop skills. Visit [ugresearch.ucsd.edu](http://ugresearch.ucsd.edu) and the Career Services Center website to find opportunities. PhD programs, especially, will expect applicants to have had significant research experience.
- **Join Student Orgs** – Get involved on-campus, gain leadership skills and meet other like-minded students. The Center for Student Involvement ([getinvolved.ucsd.edu](http://getinvolved.ucsd.edu)) provides a list of all registered student organizations on-campus.
- **Internships** – Gain experience in your field, test out career paths and obtain valuable experience for graduate school. Identify opportunities through the Academic Internship Program ([aip.ucsd.edu](http://aip.ucsd.edu)) and on the Internship Supersite and Port Triton at [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu).
- **Experiential Learning** – Community service and international opportunities such as study abroad, can also be beneficial to explore your options and learning new skills. Visit [experience.ucsd.edu](http://experience.ucsd.edu) for helpful resources.

## THE APPLICATION PROCESS

**Find Schools** – Identify programs where your interests match the department's mission and your studies will be supported by faculty with similar interests, appropriate resources and experiential opportunities. Use these resources:

- The *Peterson's Graduate Program* books, available for reference in the Career Services Center, online at [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com), and in Geisel Library, include short descriptions of programs of study, admission requirements and deadlines, cost and available support, and faculty research interests. For similar information searchable by keyword, visit [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com).
- The field-specific graduate school pages on the Career Services Center website provide links to lists of graduate schools by academic discipline.
- Department websites of programs that interest you should be your next stop. Thoroughly review these sites for admission and program information, the curriculum and degree requirements, and details about faculty.
- Talk with professors, research mentors, graduate students and other contacts in your field of interest to create a network of people who can help guide you in choosing programs.

- Do a literature review for people publishing in your field; explore the programs where they attend or teach.

*When choosing schools:*

- Look at the quality of the specific graduate department, not just the university. Not all departments are the same.
- Learn about the faculty in your specific area of interest, the quality of their research or scholarly projects, and their history and relationship with the graduate students they advise.
- Review the program's mission statement, instructional philosophy, curriculum and degree requirements.
- Investigate the attrition rate and number of years to completion for students in the program.
- Evaluate the institutional resources (libraries, laboratories, museums, research facilities, field station, etc.)
- Check the student/faculty ratio. Large universities may have larger classes and less accessible faculty. Small universities may have restricted offerings, limited facilities, and scarce resources, yet greater access to faculty.
- Find out about financial aid and the percentage of students supported. Doctoral candidates are often "funded," meaning tuition, living expenses, and sometimes more is covered by the department. Learn your programs' details.
- Also consider: tuition and fees (if department support is inadequate), housing, student support services, graduates' outcomes, geographic location, diversity of students and faculty, student organizations, the availability of recreational activities and child care. See [www.phd-survey.org/advice/advice.htm](http://www.phd-survey.org/advice/advice.htm) for other important questions to ask.

## COMPLETE THE APPLICATION

Although all graduate schools will have slightly different application processes, there are some common factors to anticipate and prepare for. Research your particular programs for specifics. Helpful guides and resources for these application basics are available in the Career Services Center and at [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu).

Applications – You'll submit applications found on the program's website in the late fall/early winter of the academic year before you want to start. Follow the specific directions and fill out the applications thoroughly and accurately. You will have to send official transcripts from all colleges and universities you've attended. An application fee is usually required.

GRE – The Graduate Record Examination is required by most graduate programs. The GRE General Test is a computer-based test available year-round which measures verbal, quantitative and analytical writing abilities. GRE Subject Tests (offered only three times a year) are required by some programs to evaluate your knowledge of specific fields. Learn more, find preparation materials and register online at [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org). Register early enough to prepare (1-2 months is average) and for your score to be sent (approximately a month) before your application deadlines.

Recommendation Letters – Most programs require two or three letters from faculty or professionals in your field who know you well and can comment in detail on your academic preparation, potential for graduate study, research or other relevant experience. Ask for letters in advance (1-2 months) to give your writers time to meet your deadlines.

Application Essay – Your Statement of Purpose or Intent lets you convey your experiences, preparation and suitability for graduate study. Describe your foundation and interest in your field, discuss specific activities (research, special projects) that have helped you develop the necessary skills and interest, and identify school/program-specific faculty, resources, or other details that support your particular field of study. Be sure to have your essay critiqued by people in your field.

Portfolio & Writing Samples - Some graduate programs in visual art, writing and performance may require you to compile examples of your creative work into a portfolio that will be evaluated as part of your application. Other academic programs may want examples of your scholarly writing. School requirements can vary as to length, format, media, etc., so carefully follow specific instructions. Work with people in your field to identify your strongest materials.

Financial Aid & Fellowships - Financial aid awards are based upon a combination of academic achievement, scholarly promise, and financial need. Databases of fellowships and other detailed information can be found at [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu). Most PhD students receive financial support directly from their department. Your program and the financial aid office at the university where you matriculate are your primary source for information and help.

For additional help with graduate school preparation and applications come into the Career Services Center for more resources or to meet with an advisor.