



**University of Dallas
Department of Philosophy**

**APPLYING TO GRADUATE PHILOSOPHY PROGRAMS:
A SHORT GUIDE**

By Peter Antich ('12)

Introduction

The process of applying to graduate schools can be complicated and time-consuming. But it need not be overwhelming. This pamphlet offers some basic information and advice, designed to help guide you through your applications.

(1) Should I pursue graduate studies in philosophy?

Obviously, this is the first question you will have to answer. Further, if you are considering this question seriously, then it probably has no immediate answer. You ought to consider two factors in taking a decision: do you want to pursue graduate study, and will you be successful in pursuing graduate study?

Conventionally, guides to graduate study use this section to scare off potential applicants. Graduate study is not easy, and the financial compensation for your labor is relatively minimal. However, many do find it rewarding. This is only to say the obvious: graduate study in philosophy is not for everyone, but it is for some. Thus, in deciding whether you wish to pursue graduate study, it is advisable to inform yourself. The purpose of this section is to aid you in acquiring the relevant information.

(a) What is graduate study like?

In North America, graduate studies in philosophy involve a combination of course work and a dissertation. (In Europe, graduate studies often require only a dissertation and no—or minimal—course work.) Master's programs typically require one year of course work, with a Master's thesis that is often completed during the summer following the courses. Doctoral studies are more demanding. Depending on the program, the course work can usually be completed in three years of full-time study; spending another two to three years on the dissertation is normal. Graduate study allows you to broaden, but above all deepen your knowledge of philosophy. A typical graduate course will not be devoted to, say, Ancient Philosophy, and offer an overview of ancient philosophers and their systems, but rather to "Recent Interpretations of the Unmoved Mover" or to "Beauty in the *Enneads*." Graduate study is intellectually more demanding than undergraduate study; at most institutions, it is conceived as an initiation into scholarly research. In most fields of philosophy, studies at this level require knowledge of several languages: say, for someone wishing to pursue further studies of Aristotle, Greek to read the primary texts, and a combination of German, French, Italian, or Spanish to read at least some of the relevant secondary literature in modern languages.

The dissertation usually poses as much of an intellectual as of a moral challenge: not only do you have to master the material that you have chosen to investigate, but you also need the stamina, discipline, and determination to work for two or three years without receiving constant guidance. (Indeed, the amount of guidance a thesis director is willing to offer varies wildly, from situations where a thesis director becomes a real mentor and friend to scenarios where the student is largely on his or her own.) Many graduate students fail at the dissertation stage.

All this having been said, graduate study offers a wonderful opportunity for intellectual and personal development—an opportunity which those who pursue careers in less contemplative fields rarely have.

One UD graduate, Rebecca Longtin, has the following to say about graduate study:

“Graduate study is different from your undergraduate education. Graduate classes require more reading and the expectations for your participation in classroom discussion and for your writing are much higher. Additionally, you are more responsible for your education than you were as an undergraduate. Your graduate classes will have you read far more material than you can possibly cover during lectures and you will receive less feedback about your work. You will be more responsible for improving your work, developing your research skills, and seeking opportunities to become a better scholar. You must be able to work independently and stay motivated while working on difficult, time-consuming projects. If you decide to pursue a Ph.D., your goal is to become a scholar, someone who contributes to a specific field of knowledge, which means presenting at conferences and publishing articles. This work is demanding, but also stimulating and rewarding if you enjoy studying and writing.

In terms of your personal life, graduate school can turn into somewhat of an extended adolescence, because you will be limited in terms of your finances and career advancement. Your college friends who get entry-level jobs will work their way up to higher incomes, while you are surviving on a student stipend (typically \$20,000 or less a year) and working very long hours. Subsidized student loans are no longer available for graduate students and your chances of getting tenure are not great, so graduate school is not necessarily a great financial investment. Getting a graduate degree in the humanities is definitely not the same sort of investment as going to medical school, law school, or business school. Some graduate students become disillusioned when they realize that all the work they have invested in their education might not get them a secure, high-paying job, so it is best to know in advance what to expect. (Keep in mind that if your desire to study philosophy outweighs these financial sacrifices, these concerns shouldn't prevent you from pursuing graduate study. Also, some graduate programs are very generous in the financial support that they offer their students.)

Even with these downsides, graduate work is rewarding. If you choose a graduate program that is a good fit for you, you will be a part of a community that understands your interests and can challenge you intellectually. Depending on your program, you might get the opportunity to be a teaching assistant or teach an undergraduate course, which is great for discerning if teaching is for you.”

(b) What can I do with a graduate degree in philosophy?

Though a number of degree holders in philosophy do pursue careers outside of philosophy (as editors in a publishing house, for example), generally graduate study in philosophy is suitable training only for a career in philosophy. Within philosophy, there is little diversity in career paths. While a small number of the philosophically educated, generally of previous substance, become independent scholars, the majority aspire to careers in academia: namely, as university professors.

The position of a full-time, tenured professor offers many privileges: the ability to devote one's life to studying and teaching a subject one loves, job security, academic freedom, participation in the self-governance of an academic institution, interaction with colleagues who share one's interests, and long holiday periods that can be used for study and publication. Tenure-track jobs are, however, becoming increasingly difficult to obtain as more and more institutions of higher learning shift increasing portions of the teaching load onto the shoulders of so-called contingent faculty. Contingent faculty (i.e., non-tenure-track faculty and part-timers who are appointed to teach individual courses) are cheaper to compensate and do not enjoy the protections of the tenure system. Nonetheless, even non-tenure-track

faculty often enjoy their careers. (Professional organizations like the American Association of University Professors and the American Philosophical Association are carefully monitoring and studying the trend toward more contingent faculty; their websites and publications offer more information.)

(c) What are my options for study?

Graduate study can be pursued at two levels: M.A. or Ph.D.

Students planning to pursue a career in academia will wish to earn a Ph.D. You may apply to Ph.D. programs directly from your undergraduate education (that is, you needn't earn an M.A. first). As already indicated, Ph.D. programs take five years on average to complete; they will generally grant an M.A. along the way. Such programs are usually funded (covering tuition and providing a modest stipend), but may require some teaching work.

Alternatively, you may wish to enter an M.A. program. A terminal M.A. in philosophy will allow you to teach at the community college level and at a few smaller colleges (as well as at high schools), but is generally not a sufficient degree with which to pursue a career at four-year colleges and universities. Additionally, M.A. programs tend to provide little or no funding to students, though you may apply for scholarships from other sources. However, it is far easier to achieve acceptance to M.A. programs than to Ph.D. programs, which are extremely competitive. Further, at the programs with which I am familiar, a majority of students enrolled in Ph.D. programs had previously earned an M.A. This is to say, you may find that an M.A. will improve your chances of acceptance to a Ph.D. program. Often, undergraduate applicants are unknown quantities; possession of an M.A. degree demonstrates to grad schools your ability to perform in the atmosphere of graduate studies.

(d) Am I a good candidate for graduate study?

A good candidate for graduate study should be willing to work many hours for little obvious reward, should have a deep interest in philosophy, and should have been successful in his or her recent academic career. However, having earned superior grades in your philosophy classes is not a sufficient index. Your work should show originality and promise for quality scholarship.

The student him- or herself is usually in a good position to judge whether he or she meets these requirements. Yet professors are able to inject a degree of objectivity into assessing a student's abilities; a professor has not only been through grad school, but has also often taught many generations of students. Consequently, in answering this question, it is advisable to consult those professors with whom one has had the most experience.

(2) How can I strengthen my application?

If you are giving serious consideration to graduate study, there are some things you can do to strengthen your attractiveness to graduate schools before application.

(a) What do graduate programs look for in applicants?

Obviously, graduate programs look for the traits that make you a good candidate for graduate study. In general, programs assess an applicant's natural ability and academic performance through that applicant's GRE (Graduate Record Exam) score and GPA. But these measures are imprecise. Thus, graduate schools will also look elsewhere. Besides the writing sample and letters of recommendation,

graduate schools will often require a CV (curriculum vitae) in your application. A curriculum vitae is something like an academic resume; a record of your professional activities and accomplishments. Extracurricular activities are not a requirement for acceptance; however, evidence of activity in undergraduate academic life is helpful.

(b) How can I strengthen my CV?

Activities that distinguish you from other applicants are desirable. Be involved and look for opportunities. UD's Philosophy Club is a good place to start.

Additionally, there are a number of undergraduate conferences and publications. Following the postings on the Google Group for philosophy is a good way of staying up to date on these opportunities.

(3) How do I choose which programs to apply to?

While some programs clearly carry more prestige than others, you will want to take into account that different departments have different strengths. It is generally true that, the more highly ranked the department is, the better your future job prospects will be. Nevertheless, apply with an eye to your interests: the areas in which you expect you will eventually specialize.

To get a good idea for the basic rankings of the top fifty programs, visit The Philosophical Gourmet Report at www.philosophicalgourmet.com. Note, however, that the rankings were last updated in 2009. Further, consider the criteria for ranking. The rankings should not be taken as absolute. Besides the rankings, this website includes a variety of helpful information and advice. Take some time to navigate it.

Applying to several programs is recommended. Ten is perhaps an average number of applications.

(a) How do I identify which programs suit my interests?

There are several ways to identify a department's particular strengths. First, you can use Philosophical Gourmet's rankings by specialty, which lists the top twenty or so programs in around thirty categories. Second, some professional organizations for specific specialties include lists of institutional affiliates or supporters. Third, ask UD professors, or any contacts you might have made in the philosophical community what programs they recommend. Fourth, once you have found out about several specific departments, browse their websites to get a good idea for what their focus is.

Pay special attention to the professors at each university to which you are considering applying. In graduate school, you will spend far more time with a few specific professors, and in particular will have to choose a thesis adviser. Thus, a major factor in choosing which institutions you apply to should be the faculty. If you are already somewhat familiar with the professional activity in your field of interest, one way of choosing a department may be researching where a professor teaches whose work you have read and admire.

Consider also: Will it be easy to get along with the professor(s) in question (remember you will be under his/her tutelage for the next 2–5 years)?

Additionally, department secretaries are an invaluable resource. Call the secretary of each department to which you are considering application and ask: Do students under—specific professor—manage to finish? Are they successful with this particular professor?

Lastly, most graduate departments have a site dedicated especially to their graduate students. Here you can find information concerning each student's interests and current research projects, in addition to contact information. (Do not forget: this will be the intellectual community you will be part of one day. Choose the right one for you!)

(b) A word about studying abroad

Pursuing graduate studies abroad has advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages is the fact that any extended stay outside one's native country serves to broaden one's perspectives—both in general terms and in terms of philosophy. Despite a lot of talk about globalization, traditions of philosophical inquiry—and even styles of academic writing—differ significantly across different cultures. Exposure to a tradition other than one's own typically enriches one's knowledge and thinking about a particular subject or philosopher. You would find, for example, that there is a particular American approach to medieval philosophy (focusing on the issues) which is not shared by philosophers in many other countries (who have a tendency to emphasize historically oriented research). Likewise, living in Germany (for example) would acquaint you with the state of the art in, say, German Kant or Hegel studies. It would also undoubtedly have a positive effect on your ability to grasp fine linguistic points in the writings of German philosophers.

Studying abroad does, however, present challenges that are not negligible. Academic systems and degrees are not standardized internationally. You will have to adapt. For example, the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* will insist that you take an MA there as a condition for being admitted to their Ph.D. program—even if you already hold an American MA. Inversely, will an American search committee for a philosophy position know what it means that you have received a *diplôme d'études approfondies* from a French university? Will they understand that the *Katholische Universität Eichstätt* has a respectable philosophy program? Or that there are good phenomenologists at the *Pontificia Católica Universidad de Chile*? These difficulties are not impossible to overcome. Moreover, sometimes studying abroad might lead to an international career.

(c) Where have other UD graduates studied?

Peter Antich ('12)—University of Kentucky, Ph.D.

Kirk Besmer ('93)—University of Notre Dame, Ph.D. Currently associate professor at Gonzaga University.

Javier Carreño ('00)—Catholic University of Louvain, Ph.D.

Brian Garcia (MA, '11)—Catholic University of Louvain, M.Phil.

William Hannegan ('11)—University of Northern Illinois, M.A.

Brian Harding ('99)—Fordham University, Ph.D.

Michael Hayes ('12)—University of Kansas, Ph.D.

William Jaworski ('93)—University of Notre Dame. Currently associate professor at Fordham University.

Katariana Lee ('12)—New York University, M. A. (Bioethics)

Rebecca Longtin ('06)—Emory University, Ph.D.

Oscar Ortíz Duarte ('10)—St. John's College, Annapolis (MA)

John Paletta ('03, MA '06)—Catholic University of Louvain, M.Phil.

Mary Tetzlaf ('08)—Catholic University of America, Ph.D. [?]

Chris Wolfe ('09)—Claremont Graduate University, Ph.D.

Others:

Boston College

Pennsylvania State University

(d) A list of programs recommended by UD professors

Analytic Philosophy:

Fordham University

Georgetown University

Notre Dame University

University of Chicago

University of Pittsburgh

Ancient Philosophy:

Catholic University of America

University of Notre Dame

University of Toronto

Continental Philosophy:

Boston College

Fordham University

University College Dublin

University of Chicago (Committee on Social Thought)

History of Philosophy:

Boston College

Catholic University of America

Loyola Marymount University (MA)

University College Dublin

University of Toronto

History and Philosophy of Science:

University of Pittsburgh (Department of History and Philosophy of Science)

University of Notre Dame (Doctoral Program in History and Philosophy of Science)

Medieval Philosophy:

Catholic University of America

Catholic University of Louvain

Nottingham University

University of Dayton (MA)

Thomas Institute at the University of Cologne

Renaissance Philosophy:

Warburg Institute, University of London

Thomistic Studies:

Fordham University

Catholic University of America

Franciscan University of Steubenville—MA (recommended also for: Augustine, Franciscan tradition, Bioethics, Personalism)

(4) What does the application process involve?

Each application is slightly different from every other. The only way to identify what you must do is to research each department's website, and the website of its corresponding graduate school.

Though specific dates vary, students planning on entering grad school directly after graduation (in the fall subsequent to spring graduation) will be expected to have all application materials prepared and submitted during the winter of their senior year.

(a) Overview

Despite the differences in the various institutions' application procedures, here is an overview of the basic components involved for each: application forms, GRE score, official transcript, CV, statement of purpose, three letters of recommendation, and a writing sample. Most of these are relatively self-evident, but a few may be elaborated upon helpfully.

i: GRE

The GRE is a standardized test required for most graduate programs. It consists of three sections: verbal, quantitative, and analytic writing. There are many products designed to help students prepare for the GRE, and it is recommendable for most students to invest in a guide book and a GRE vocabulary trainer. For students planning on applying to graduate schools during their senior year, it is advisable to take the GRE during the summer after their junior year.

Graduate schools do not place paramount importance on GRE or GPA. However, students with low GRE scores are far more likely to be weeded out during early rounds of the application review process. Again,

different grad schools attach different degrees of importance to the GRE. But, to give one example, at the University of Chicago, the average scores were thus:

verbal: 710

quantitative: 740

analytic writing: 5.5

Students both well above and below this average were admitted. (The average GPA *in philosophy*, of students accepted at the University of Chicago, is 3.9.)

ii: Letters of Recommendation

Generally, three letters of recommendation are required. These must come from your professors, almost always those in the Philosophy Department. The purpose of the letter of recommendation is to assess your ability to think “philosophically.” Likely, philosophy professors possess a far greater ability to perform this assessment. Choose professors who know you particularly well (and in a positive light) to write your letters: the more knowledgeable and insightful (about you) the letter, the more successful it will be.

Do not be afraid—bluntly—to ask your professor: “Has my performance been such that you could write me a stellar recommendation letter?” It is better to know beforehand whether the professor’s comments will be in your favor.

Show the recommenders your application materials (statement of purpose, personal statement, transcripts, writing sample), so they know how you are presenting yourself, and ask for feedback to edit them. Make sure you are organized: remind professors of deadlines and which letters should be submitted by mail and which by email.

iii: Curriculum Vitae

As said above, the CV is a sort of academic resume. One should include information such as education, scholarships and awards, professional and relevant activities, and languages. It may also not be inappropriate to include some sampling of your non-professional activities, if they lend a peculiar flavor to your application.

iv: Statement of Purpose

This is an opportunity to formally state your interests and goals, as well as to provide any information that you feel is relevant, but not called for elsewhere in the application. The statement is generally not of high importance in determining whether or not you will be admitted, and so should not be treated as an advertisement. Stick to facts: your experience in philosophy, your goals for graduate education, your expected areas of concentration, why this university is the right place to pursue those goals. Again, every department will have slightly different expectations for the statement of purpose. Check the department's website, and while you will probably wish to have a basic outline of the statement, be prepared to customize it for each institution. The statement will generally run approximately one page in length.

v: Writing Sample

It is generally acknowledged that this is the most important portion of your application. Often, the writing sample is derived from a particularly successful term paper (consider your Junior Seminar work). It should be a paper that reflects your interests and represents considerable effort. It should be a paper in which you take particular pride. Above all, your paper should exhibit clarity and original, philosophical content. Make your choice carefully, and be sure to take your decision in consultation with your professors.

The length of the writing sample is generally between fifteen and twenty pages. As always, different institutions will have different length requirements. Further, your paper should be appropriate for the departments to which you are applying. Ask yourself whether your paper makes you a desirable candidate for your departments.

(b) Further Advice

(i) Financial

Prepare financially for your applications, which may be expensive. Application fees alone may run close to \$100 per school (one must also pay to take the GRE, and for transcript requests). For example, one UD graduate is applying to ten schools, and expects this to cost him as much as \$1300. Probably, your application will not run quite as high.

(ii) Timing

Rebecca Longtin provides the following advice gleaned from her application experience:

“I applied for graduate school twice. I learned from my failures. The first time, I put together very poor applications hastily. My GRE scores were good, but not great because I did not study for them. (The GREs are much more difficult than the SATs, so don’t overestimate your skill at taking standardized tests). My personal statement was really bad. My writing sample was poorly chosen. I applied to programs that were not suitable for my interests, a clear indication to admission committees that I clearly had no idea what I was doing. I got into two programs, but without funding. My professors advised me to take a year off from school and improve my applications. So the following year, I lived with my mother, waited tables, took a graduate class in logic, retook the GREs, worked more on my senior thesis (to submit as a writing sample), researched graduate programs, and thought about which areas of philosophical study interest me the most. After reapplying, I got into seven of the nine programs to which I applied and ended up with an excellent financial package in a program that has been ideal for me. Having a strong application is a lot of work, but it is worth it – not only because you will get better offers, but also because the application process forces you to think about *why you want to go to graduate school and what you want to do*. If you decide to pursue a Ph.D. it is a long, arduous task, so thinking about these questions in advance can help you to decide if you really want to make that sort of commitment.

In general, treat applying to graduate school like a senior level course. You must research programs, study for the GRE, produce your best written work, and manage a lot of deadlines under pressure.”

(iii) Suitability and Tailoring Your Application

Rebecca Longtin also advises:

“Being a *good fit*, i.e. a suitable candidate, for the program is the elusive quality that your application must demonstrate in order to be accepted. You demonstrate suitability in your writing sample, statement of intent, and personal statement. This requires **research**, because you are only familiar with your own philosophy department.

The first thing you must do is figure out your general areas of interest and approach to philosophy. Given the breadth of your philosophical studies at UD, this task may be difficult. You might have many interests. Nevertheless, you can't say you love all philosophy, because you don't give an admissions committee any idea of who you are as a thinker. Professors know that your interests will change and develop, so your statements are not written in stone. However, if you think about yourself as a student, you can recognize that you gravitate towards certain topics, periods of history, thinkers, questions, and methods (all of which will become clearer with some reflection and will eventually solidify as you pursue graduate work). What was your senior thesis? Why did you choose this topic? How did your thesis arise out of your coursework? What were your favorite classes and readings? When you studied for your comprehensive exams, what were your favorite readings to review? These questions can tell you a lot about who you are as a thinker, where you should apply, and how you should present yourself. Find programs that emphasize the thinkers, topics, historical periods, or methods that interest you. Spend time skimming articles and books that interest you and find where those scholars teach.

After figuring out this information, you must tailor *every application*. Your statement of intent and personal statement should have slight differences for *every program* because you want to emphasize *why that particular program appeals to you* and *how you are the perfect candidate for that program*. Taper according to the type of program it is (analytic, historical, continental), the faculty who are there (it is good to state a few specific faculty with whom you would like to work), and certain foci that the program or school might have (great books, language requirements, logic requirements, interdisciplinary opportunities, environmental initiatives, etc.). If the program requires you to take two foreign language exams, your personal statement should describe your background in foreign languages and state if you have any experience translating philosophy from original texts. If you are applying to a school where there is a scholar whom you cited in your thesis, put this information in your statement of intent to explain why you want to study at this particular program. Graduate schools list their specializations on their websites. Make sure that your statement of intent lists at least one interest that the philosophy program lists as an area of specialization. Note that tapering means you emphasize different aspects of your interests and accomplishments as a student; it does not mean that you make things up or pretend to have an interest that you do not. Creating a false identity so you are more appealing to a particular program means that you will be very unhappy if you end up there.”

(5) How do I take my decision?

If you have been accepted to multiple programs, you must now decide which invitation you will accept.

Factors to consider in taking your decision include the following: (1) ranking of the institution (generally and for your specialty), (2) individual faculty members, (3) how much money you've been offered (compared to cost of living near the institution). Of course, other factors, perhaps personal, may play a role as well. Your calculation can thus become quite complicated and is rarely absolute. As at every stage of the process, consult your professors for advice. If you have several offers that are particularly close in appeal, you may wish to go visit those programs (you are discouraged from visiting programs prior to acceptance). Many institutions will pay for your visit, and the experience can be quite enjoyable. Be sure to sit in on classes, meet with the faculty with whom you are most interested in working, and talk to other grad students.

Conclusion

This pamphlet provides a basic survey of relevant information and advice. It is strongly recommended that you discuss these issues further with your professors, and research independently on the internet. Please consult the links provided below, and feel free to contact the listed UD alumni. Good luck with your application!

Contacts

Peter Antich - 2012 - University of Kentucky - continental philosophy - paantich@gmail.com

William Hannegan - 2011 - University of Northern Illinois - analytic philosophy -
Z1651962@students.niu.edu

Rebecca Longtin - 2006 - Emory University - continental philosophy - rebeccalongtin@gmail.com

Links

<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/>

(The most widely accepted rankings of philosophy programs. Also includes a variety of useful information and advice.)

<http://philosophy.uchicago.edu/prospective/admissions.html>

(Excellent overview of the application process. Lucid presentation of the graduate program's perspective on the application process and of what is required of you.)

http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.com/2007/10/applying-to-philosophy-phd-programs_08.html

(Another excellent overview of the application process. More lengthy, but for that much more concrete. Highly recommended.)

<http://the-brooks-blog.blogspot.com/>

(More rankings and advice for graduate students. This blog can also give you an idea of what academic philosophy is like and if it is for you.)

<http://pluralistsguide.org/program-recommendations/continental-philosophy/#awp::program-recommendations/continental-philosophy/>

(Rankings for continental philosophy, and several other specialties.)

Reflections on graduate education:

“Graduate School in the Humanities? Just Don’t Go,” by Thomas H. Benton

<http://chronicle.com/article/Graduate-School-in-the/44846/>

“Fear and Loathing in Graduate School,” by Mark Braude

<http://chronicle.com/article/FearLoathing-in-Graduate/129061/>

Many thanks to William Hannegan, Daniel Ortiz, and Rebecca Longtin for their suggestions and contributions. Thanks also to those professors who offered advice, and to Dr. Rosemann for his contributions and for formatting the guide.