

# APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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This article provides one perspective on the process of selecting and applying to a graduate program in archaeology. I believe this advice is widely applicable within the U.S. and Canada. However, you should seek advice of faculty you trust, notably those who will be supplying your recommendations. Remember that the biggest factor in success in graduate school is you. Nonetheless, what graduate faculty you work with and how the graduate program operates matters a lot.

## Should You Go to Graduate School?

This is the first and sometimes the hardest decision. Wherever you go, getting a graduate degree in anthropology takes a lot of dedication and hard work, even in the best of circumstances. And, as you've doubtless heard, the academic job market—if that is your goal—is tight. My advice is that if you are not absolutely committed to getting a graduate degree and a career in archaeology, hold off. In my experience, students lacking that commitment are less likely to finish. On the other hand, if you feel it is really what you have to do, by all means go for it—but with your eyes wide open.

## Selecting a Graduate Program: Information Gathering

A number of criteria are relevant to deciding on the schools to which you will apply. It makes sense to research some of this before you submit any applications, and then later you can more intensively investigate those schools to which you are admitted.

A considerable amount of information will be available in the application materials provided by each school; this usually includes a description of the graduate program and a list of faculty. Be sure to read the available material before you call the school or contact a faculty member with questions! You'll also acquire important information through discussions with faculty, staff, or students at the schools you are considering. In many departments, the graduate secretary is probably the best person to contact with procedural questions, and he or she can put you in touch with a faculty member if necessary.

Some comparative information on graduate programs is available. The only poll on archaeology programs was published in 1993 in the *SAA Bulletin* (11[1]). While it is now old, it still has some useful information. The American Anthropological Association's *AAA Guide* (<http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/guide.htm>) is also useful, but expensive; check with the library or the anthropology department at your school. Make sure you are looking at a recent edition, as it is produced annually.

Consider attending a professional meeting prior to submitting your applications. You may be able to talk with faculty or graduate students from a number of institutions. The SAA annual meeting is in the spring, so you'd need to attend prior to the fall in which you intend to submit your applications. The AAA meeting is in the late fall, but it is less heavily attended by archaeologists than the SAA meeting. In recent years, SAA has had a Graduate School Expo with representatives of numerous schools who can talk to you about their graduate programs. Regional meetings may also be good venues to meet faculty from schools in which you are interested.

Some students visit the campuses of the schools in which they are interested during the fall or early spring, before admission decisions are made. It is my sense that these visits help the applicants learn about the schools, but they often do little to improve chances for admission. If you do visit early, come prepared with a brief summary that you can leave with each faculty member. Include in it your name, current institution, major, GPA, GRE scores if known, field experience, and interests.

After admissions decisions are made, visits are much more valuable. They allow students to assess the individual faculty they may be interested in working with, to understand the workings of the graduate program, and to talk with current graduate students. It is often difficult, however, to schedule these visits between the time the school makes admissions decisions and the deadline by which you need to make your decision on where to go. A visit is still worth it if you can do it, and sometimes the school will pay for your trip or at least house you with a current



Figure 1: While there are advantages to enrolling in a graduate program in the region in which you wish to do research, you want to consider other important factors that can impact your success.

graduate student. Try making arrangements through the graduate secretary.

### Considerations When Selecting a Program

The strengths and weaknesses of different programs will differ according to the goals, background, and financial means of each student. You may need to evaluate a variety of tradeoffs—there is no simple way to weigh all criteria and there is no universal “best fit.”

1) *M.A. or Ph.D.* Some schools offer only an M.A., while others offer a Ph.D. (often with an M.A. earned along the way). If you want a job as a college or university faculty member, you need a Ph.D. To move very far up the ladder in most cultural resource management (CRM) and government settings, you need at least an M.A. Remember that the best Ph.D. programs are frequent-

ly not the best choices for getting a terminal M.A. (“terminal” means that it is the final degree you are seeking).

2) *Selectivity of the Program.* In choosing schools, you should consider the strength of your record against the selectivity of the schools to which you are applying. Your advisor should be able to help with this evaluation. Most graduate programs enroll only a handful of new archaeology students each year. They usually admit more than they expect to come, but there are still very few slots available in most of the selective programs.

3) *Fit of the Program and Faculty to Your Interests.* This counts more if you have stronger rather than weaker commitments to specific interests (area of the world, methodological specialty, etc.).

4) *Admissions Strategy of the Graduate Program.* Some places admit a fair number of first-year students, using a “survival of the fittest” sort of logic. They see which ones sink and which ones swim after a year or two and then go with the swimmers. Other places admit smaller numbers but mentor them and expect all of them to finish. That doesn’t mean they all finish a Ph.D., but it does mean that there is no conscious effort to weed people out.

5) *Size of the Program (Faculty Numbers).* The less certain you are about what you want to do, the more problematic a small program might be—it leaves you fewer options. However, if you’re really sure you want to do X, and place Y has a strong specialist on X, a small program can work well. Alternately, if you’re quite flexible, a small program with good people can be great. Large programs tend to offer more options in terms of career trajectories and advisors, but you may be more anonymous. If you explore the *AAA Guide*, be sure to look at a recent edition and distinguish regular faculty from faculty in other categories (adjunct, emeritus, in other departments, etc.). In some cases, the latter people are key players in the department, while in others they are irrelevant to the graduate program.

6) *Reputation.* There are several dimensions to reputation: the overall institutional reputation, the reputation of the anthropology department as a whole (which may be heavily weighted by sociocultural anthropology), and the reputation specifically in archaeology. Reputation is tricky to evaluate because a given program might be strong in one dimension and not in another. Furthermore, reputation has a substantial time lag relative to current quality. The people doing the ranking in surveys tend to think that the place they got their degree is still great, even if that was 20 years ago and now, in fact, the program is not very good. Nonetheless, the reputation of the institution, the department, or of the program can have considerable effect on getting jobs.

7) *Nature and Quality of the Graduate Program.* How does the graduate program work and does it fit your style? Some schools have essentially a single Ph.D. program in anthropology that is applicable to all subdisciplines. Others have programs that are

largely distinct for each subdiscipline. How much does the program focus on archaeology and how does it integrate with the other subdisciplines? Does the archaeology program appear integrated and well thought out, or does it simply reflect an *ad hoc* combination of faculty interests? How open are faculty to working with students? Do faculty frequently publish with students? Bear in mind that quality is not necessarily correlated with reputation.

8) *Quality of the Faculty.* What is their activity in publication, grants, and fieldwork? Field activity is particularly important if you do not already have established connections for fieldwork that you intend to pursue. What is their other professional activity, such as serving as officers or committee members for professional organizations or as editors of journals or books series? Do they regularly attend professional meetings? Faculty who are players in the national arena can help you in getting jobs—they can't get them for you, but networking does help you get looked at.

9) *Quality of the Graduate Students.* You'll learn an enormous amount from your peers. Are they a collegial group, do they cooperate, do they spend a lot of time on campus? Do they apply for and get NSF Dissertation Improvement Grants, Wenner Gren grants, and the like? Do they publish as graduate students? Do they frequently attend national and regional professional meetings?

10) *How Successful are the Graduates.* What sorts of jobs do the graduates seek, and, most importantly, do they get them? Whatever the job context, are recent graduates of the program regarded as productive professionals?

11) *Grad Student Opinions.* It is probably useful to talk both with junior and senior graduate students about the program; they often have different perspectives. Remember that every program has a few disgruntled students. Talk to enough students that you gain an appreciation of the range of perspectives that graduate students have about their program.

12) *Financial Support.* The pattern of funding within a department is very important for your long-term prospects for aid. In some cases, support for first-year students may be poor but much better in subsequent years. In others, there may be very attractive recruitment offers but not much for later in the program. These factors should be considered and compared with the long-term advantages of each institution.

13) *Time to Degree.* This may seem like an obvious criterion, but I think it is a tricky one. Other issues, like the value of publishing before graduating, the availability of financial support, and the potential for success in the job market, should be weighed against a rapidly acquired Ph.D. In any case, be forewarned—the AAA reports that for anthropology as a whole, the average time to a Ph.D. from a completed B.A. degree is 8–10 years.



Figure 2: When preparing your application for graduate study in archaeology, describing your practical experiences and demonstrating your understanding of the discipline are important.

14) *Location.* For North Americanists, there is some advantage to being in school in the region in which you want to work. I didn't do this, and lots of successful people don't, but it is easier to get in the network and to keep up with what is really going on in your region of interest. If you're choosing a specific school based on the weather or scenery, think about whether you really want to go to graduate school!

## The Application Process

Carefully check the requirements for each school to which you are applying. A complete application generally consists of an application form, a statement of purpose, transcripts, GRE scores, letters of recommendation, and a financial aid application. Be sure that the application is complete by the university's deadline, which at many schools is December 31 or January 1. You cannot control the timing of several key elements of an application (GRE scores, transcripts, recommendations), so start early. If your application is not complete by the deadline at a given school, you may miss out on admission or funding.

1) *Application Form.* This is university-specific and mostly bureaucratic. Be sure to keep contact information current with the departments you have applied to, including email addresses and phone numbers.

2) *Statement of Purpose.* The single thing over which you have the most control is your statement of purpose. What I look for is sophistication in writing about archaeology. In addition to giving some of your salient background and your interest in the specific program, you should talk about some intellectual problem you have tackled that interests you or that you'd like to address in your graduate work. No one will hold you to any of

this, but it gives you a chance to discuss an archaeological issue and make clear that you understand the nature of archaeology—that it is more than just the joy of working outdoors or the romance of digging. The statement is also the place to address, briefly but clearly, any irregularities in your college transcripts or GRE scores. In my view, statements of purpose are ideally a page and a half or two pages of double-spaced text and no more than three double-spaced pages. Needless to say, these should be written well. I figure that someone who can't write a coherent two-page statement is going to have problems writing term papers or professional articles. It is a good idea to have at least one of your faculty recommenders read a draft of your statement and make suggestions.

3) *Transcripts*. Have official transcripts sent to each school to which you are applying; include transcripts from all institutions where you obtained undergraduate and, if applicable, graduate credit. Allow adequate time for your request to be processed and mailed.

4) *GRE Scores*. The Graduate Record Exam is a standardized test that is usually required as a part of graduate applications. You need to register to take the test, and there is a 4–6 week delay in scoring and mailing the results. You must arrange to have ETS (which administers the GRE exams) send your scores to the schools to which you are applying (<http://www.gre.org>). Note: International students who are not native English speakers will be required to also take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test, also administered by ETS (<http://www.toefl.org>).

5) *Letters of Recommendation*. Usually you will need three letters of reference. Letters from archaeology or anthropology faculty are best, but you want people who know you well enough to write a well-informed, persuasive letter. If there is a faculty member in another department who can speak strongly to your abilities, by all means request a letter from that person. If all a recommendation can say is that this person did very well in my course, that doesn't hurt you—but neither does it help much. It's useful to have one recommendation from a field supervisor if you have done fieldwork, whether in an academic, CRM, or volunteer setting. I don't find recommendations from non-anthropology jobs very helpful. In no case should you have more than one recommendation from someone *other* than a faculty member.

To help your recommenders, discuss your professional objectives with each of them. This will remind them of who you are and what you have done, and it will give them a chance to give you advice. Providing them with a copy of your statement of purpose is a good idea, as is giving them a résumé or summary of your experience and a list of your classes with them (including the grade you got). This gives the recommenders immediate

access to all the information they need to write a strong recommendation. You also should provide a stamped, addressed envelope for each recommendation. Be sure to give your recommenders a reasonable amount of time (I'd say at least 6 weeks) before they are due.

6) *Financial Aid Application*. You need to contact individual departments to determine what kinds of financial aid are available at the department level (e.g., teaching assistantships, research assistantships, tuition waivers, clerical work) and to find out whether there are forms you need to submit. Be sure to inquire as to whether there are special programs or research initiatives for which you might be considered.

## Fellowships

If you have a strong record, you should investigate national fellowships *early in the fall* (school-specific fellowships referred to in #6 above are dealt with by the school in the financial aid considerations). National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowships, for example, are generous awards that pay you *and* the school you go to for 3 years. The trick is that you need to apply for these before graduate applications are due; the NSF applications are currently due in early November. From what I can tell, these fellowships favor students with a clear focus. You need to make an articulate case for a research issue that you want to attack. The current NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program announcement may be found at <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2003/nsf03050/nsf03050.pdf>, the FY2004 Javits Fellowship Program announcement is at <http://www.NASFAA.org/publications/2003/frjavits080103.html>, and the Ford Foundation announcement is at <http://www7.nationalacademies.org/fellowships/index.html>.

## Admissions and Decisions

Graduate programs can offer admission as early as they like. Offers of admission, however, are usually made by March 15. Often the timing of financial aid offers will lag behind admissions offers; most graduate schools do not require a student to accept or reject financial aid until April 15. As discussed earlier, visit if you can. Through a visit or email or phone conversations, assess the school's interest in you. If there is a faculty member you think you would like to work with, how interested does that person appear in you?

My overall advice is to first do a reasonable job of investigating and applying to a range of schools that interest you. When you find out where you have been accepted and what each program is offering you, collect all the information you can, discuss the options with people whose opinions you respect, juggle it all in your head, and then go with your best instinct. ☐