

How to Apply to US Graduate Schools ?

Minh N. Do
Associate Professor
Electrical and Computer Engineering
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

How to achieve this goal?

1. Be confident: everybody can go to study abroad
2. Know where the opportunities exist
3. Know what the schools and professors want
4. Prepare your applications tailored specifically for them

Financial aids available for foreign students

- **Research Assistants (RA):** Professors seek research funding and "hire" RAs
 - Professors spend TIME and MONEY
- **Fellowships:** Students come with external financial aids, but are quickly required to get an advisor
 - Professors spend TIME
- **In all cases, the reputation of schools and professors depend on the success of their graduate students**

Goal

- **Get admission, with financial aids, into top US graduate schools**
- This talk provides a **faculty perspective**:
 - How do schools and professors select their graduate students?
 - What is a strong graduate school application?

The US graduate school system

- **Example:** ECE@UIUC (ranked 3rd in EE and 4th in CE in US News; 96 professors) admission record in Fall 2003
- Number of applications: 2198
- Admission offers with aids: 175
 - Acceptances: 84 (9 Fellows, 53 RAs, 22 TAs)
 - Average GPA: 3.73/4.00
 - Average GRE Scores: 91% Q; 91.3%A; 71.9% V
 - Declinations: 91
- Admission offers without aid: 116
 - Acceptance: 47
 - Declinations: 69

Only domestic students can get TAs (Teaching Assistantships)

Cost for each graduate student per year (at UIUC)

- Salary + benefit (to student): \$23,000
- Tuition and indirect cost (to school): \$27,000
- Others (travels, publications, computer services, lab accesses, materials): \$5,000 - \$50,000
- Total cost per year: \$50,000 - \$100,000

=> Together with the time commitment, it is a **big investment** from the school and professor

What do school and professors expect from a graduate student?

During the school:

- **Carry out research**
Require: intelligent, creative, motivated, proactive, able to work with others
- **Publish papers**
Require: communication skills, well organized
- Assist teaching
Require: communication skills

After the school:

- Have a successful career

Application package

- Standard form
- Curriculum vitae (CV)
- Personal statement (PS)
- Recommendation letters (preferable 3)
- Test scores (TOEFL, GRE)

Note: Even if the school doesn't ask for all of these, you still should submit them all.

Action plan

1. Take TOEFL, GRE/GMAT, TSE (if appropriate).
2. Obtain application brochures by emails or from Web.
3. Get official transcripts from your schools.
4. Select 5-15 schools to apply for.
5. Write Curriculum Vitae, and Personal Statement.
6. Contact 2-3 people to write reference letters.
7. Send application packages and application fee
8. Exchange emails with schools and professors

All of these require a lot of **thinking and preparation**

Selection process

- At some schools, the selection is done by the departmental graduate admission committee
 - Students come and are guaranteed to be supported for the first 1-2 years (typically in form of TAs)
 - Need to find an advisor (e.g. TA -> RA or Fellow -> RA) as soon as possible
- At many others, professors directly made their offers (with or without RA) to incoming students
 - Most schools require PhD students to get an advisor for admission

Selection algorithm

1. Test scores: GRE \geq X and TOEFL \geq Y?
2. Which school?
Top: Tsinghua (China), IIT (India), NTU (Taiwan), NUS (Singapore),...
3. GPA (-> class rank) & Awards
4. Background and research experiences
5. Recommendation letters
6. Personal statement
7. Direct correspondences (emails, phones)

Advice to students

- High test scores only get you into the short list
- To be selected, you have to make a standout application
- What make an application standout?
 - CV, personal statement, reference letters, and direct correspondence
- Schools/professors read these to **get an image of the candidate**

Test scores

- Key for achieving good scores is practice
 - Lot of resources (books, websites) available
 - USguide (www.svduhoc.vnn.usguide/) has a lot of information
- Target test scores:
 - Good enough: TOEFL: 580 and GRE: 1,800
 - Ideal: TOEFL: 600 and GRE: 2,000

Note: Some schools/professors don't pay much attention to the GRE scores

Curriculum vitae

- Spend time write and rewrite CV.
- Study examples on the Web.
- Make it **short** (1-2 pages) and sharp
- Most notable:
 - GPA: Overall GPA and Technical GPA
 - Class rank
 - Awards/Honors
 - Research experiences
 - Publications
 - Special talents/skills

Key: indication of an outstanding student

Personal Statement (PS)?

- In 2 pages, it should provide:
 - A **clear** and **outstanding image** of **yourself**
 - You general plans for what to do in school and afterwards
 - These plans should be **specific** and **make sense** given your background and abilities.
- Good statement showcase the good side of your personality:
 - You are enthusiastic but not lightheaded
 - You are driven but not overly aggressive
- It also shows that you have effective writing style and good communication skills.

Design your PS

- Think about your goals first
- Have a clear idea of what you want to achieve
- Ask yourself the following questions:
 - What do you want to achieve?
 - How do plan to achieve it?
 - What kind of self-image do you want to present?
 - Why do you want to study in the US?
 - What is your plan in the US?
 - What is your plan after graduation
- Answers should be unique!

How to write an effective PS?

- Learn American communication style by reading articles written by Americans.
- Style: **specific, factual** (citing little stories or concrete examples). **No vague** statements
- Read sample essays -- good ones and bad ones.
- Discuss your PS with others -- ideally including experts.
- Spend time to write and rewrite
- Plan to use at least 50 to 100 hours to write your PS.

Reference Letters

- **Reference letters are very important:**
 - They confirm your qualifications; and
 - Provide additional information about you that application forms and scores do not.
- A good reference letter should be **reasonable** and **specific**.
 - Reasonable means that the person writing the letter **knows you well** and **has the qualifications** to evaluate you.
 - Specific means that the person cites examples, provides specific information, and tells little stories about the student.
 - Example: what is your rank in the class? What is the outcome of the project you have done? How do you relate to others?
 - No vague comments.

English communication skills

- This is different with the TOFEL taking test skill
- Being a good researcher requires being effective at:
 - Exchanging ideas via emails, at seminars, meetings, conferences
 - Writing papers
 - Giving talks
- These will be judged through PS and direct correspondences

US Grad School Applications

19

Which schools to apply?

- Use school ranking from usnews.com or National Academies (from VEF website)
- Visit school websites to see if they do research in your areas of interest
- May contact the professors before applying
- Also consider:
 - It would be very helpful if the school already has some successful Vietnamese students.
 - Universities in boring states are much less competitive
 - Small schools are more likely pay close attention to your application

US Grad School Applications

20

Contact professors in US

- Send a personalized email to the professor:
 - Make it short but sharp
 - Personalized letter gets more attention.
 - Indicate that you visited prof's homepage and find a good match
 - Don't send exactly the same letter to every professor
- Attach your CV with the letter
 - No Word document, use Text or PDF instead.
- **Mention if you already have a fellowship from credential sources (VEF, government,...)**

US Grad School Applications

21

Do your homework... ... knowledge is your power

- Study the guides
 - Lots of information on the Web (see end)
- Study the schools
 - Visit schools' websites
 - Visit professors' homepages
 - Learn about their current research
- Study the US culture
 - Communication styles: Web, news, movies
 - Understand the US culture in advance is a strong point

US Grad School Applications

22

Useful websites

- USguide:
usguide.hypermart.net/
www.svduhoc.vnn.vn/usguide/
(a guide by Vietnamese students)
- For advice, research resources from other Vietnamese students:
<http://nghiencuusinhh.org>
- BeBeyond:
www.bebeyond.com/StudyAbroad/StudyAbroad.html
(an English guide by Chinese students)

US Grad School Applications

23

Conclusion

To be a successful applicant to top US grad schools:

- Be motivated
- Be persistent
- Be specific
- Create a standout image
- Do your homework: study and think!
- Advice to the universities in Vietnam:
 - Create awards/recognitions to identify top students (e.g. best students in certain courses or years, Dean's list of top students, scholarships,...)
 - Offer plenty of research experiences (e.g. final year projects, independent study, undergraduate research projects,...)

US Grad School Applications

24