

Applying to US Universities to Complete a Ph.D.

Many universities and research organizations require more than an MA degree (masters). The Ph.D. degree usually entails two years of course work and then three years of focused research on an important question that culminates in a dissertation. The course work focuses more heavily on theory, research design, and methods of analysis than an MA degree does. In most US social science graduate programs, the preparation includes a multi-term sequence in statistical methods.

Usually a Ph.D. candidate will also be required to teach discussion sections of undergraduate courses or work in a lab part-time during the third or fourth years.

Admissions Season

The application process takes about a year for most schools. Applications become available online (electronically) on or about September 1. Most application due- dates fall between December 1 and January 1. Decisions are announced between mid-March and late April. A few programs have rolling admissions and will admit people at more than one point, but most have a single hard-and-fast deadline.

Note that some programs require applicants to take a standardized test and to report these scores. Information about standardized test requirements appear in the application packets for each program. It is sometimes possible to waive this requirement.

Admissions Process

A committee reviews applications. It makes decisions based on a variety of considerations, including previous training or demonstration of capacity to do the work, professional experience, and demonstration of ability to frame a question as the discipline would and to think about possible answers. It must also balance each class with people of different backgrounds and interests in order to spread responsibility for mentorship across all members of a faculty. Therefore, all schools turn down many qualified applicants each year.

The personal statement should respond to the question the committee has posed in the application packet. Talk about a question or small set of questions that currently interest you and the kinds of answers you think could advance knowledge. Be *specific* and avoid general statements, such as, “I would find further study personally enriching.”

Many programs want to see evidence of solid quantitative skills. Almost all require that participants take a course in statistics and at least one course in economics. They offer “math camp” before the start of the year, to provide a refresher, but many will not admit applicants who have not taken algebra or statistics previously.

Individual faculty members have no influence on admissions. It can be useful to point to people who teach courses you would like to take and say why their work interest you. However, there is no such thing as faculty sponsorship. European universities may operate differently in this regard.

You may be able to seek a waiver from application fees. Just ask the schools to which you apply.

Financial Aid

A few programs will cover the costs of tuition and a modest living stipend, but others do not. Check the application brochures carefully and consider applying for assistance from one of the scholarship programs available (Humphrey, Fulbright, ...) Note that stipends are not designed to support a family in the United States. They are based on costs of living for the degree candidate only. Often they do not cover travel costs.

Universities to Consider

Always apply to several programs in order to increase the probability of winning admission. Often people use US News and World report rankings, though these are not definitive by any means. The lists provide some guidance, but anyone investing in a five- to seven-year degree should visit the departmental website of a program of interest and read further before applying.

Here is an example of a ranking

<https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-humanities-schools/political-science-rankings>

And here is another

http://sites.nationalacademies.org/pga/resdoc/pga_051962