

Some Thoughts on Thinking About Graduate School and then Acting on Those Thoughts

By William North, Associate Professor of History, Carleton College

Thinking about Graduate School

In terms of preparing yourself for graduate school, doing a considerable amount of reflection on your interests and academic/non-academic experiences is perhaps the most important first step not only in preparing the application materials, but in choosing the right field/discipline in which to apply.

Some questions you might ask yourself and discuss with your mentor/friends/profs: (And remember **WRITE STUFF DOWN!** When you go back to these notes when preparing statements, composing emails, or talking with recommenders, you will be glad you did. In fact, as you get into the process, it is a good idea to get organized, whether with file folders, a notebook, whatever—but be organized).

1. What classes have interested you? What projects have interested you? Why have they interested you? Was it the problems they addressed? The readings? The assignments? What about the problems, readings, assignments?
2. Are you interested in a particular region or time period? Are you sure? What about it appeals to you? Are these aspects ones that you will find in advanced study?
3. Are you confusing questions with content? For example, you take a course on heretics in the Middle Ages and love it: should you be a medievalist? Or a religion major? Or perhaps a political scientist who interests him/herself in regimes of control? Or a sociologist or anthropologist studying the phenomenon of liminality and the creation of the Other?
4. Try to assemble a list of the top three questions/problems that interest you, and the top three areas, periods, etc. of material that you might like to study.
5. What are your skills and strengths? Do you like learning languages (including mathematical) or is that about as fun as root canal without Novocain?
6. What really appeals to you about going on to graduate study? If the idea of teaching in graduate school is a powerful one, this should affect how you investigate programs.
7. What really doesn't appeal to you, and why do you think so?
8. Talk with your mentors, departmental professors, former majors in graduate school now about the issues noted above and more! Go prepared: it is easier to help those who have specific questions than vague ones, and those who have already looked into some things rather than none. Ask them about quality of programs, timing of

Carleton College

programs, typical pathway in grad school in their field, etc. If you have already turned up some programs that interest you, get their opinion of specific programs. Solicit their experience in graduate school or their knowledge of former Carleton students in your field. There is a lot of knowledge and anecdotal evidence out there if you but ask and look for it.

Researching Programs

The internet has made the research process much more efficient but researching an institution's programs, faculty, etc. is still time-consuming. Do not save it for the last minute, both for your sake and for your recommenders. And above all: keep records of what you need to look at and what you have investigated. (ORGANIZATION!!!)

Questions to ask as you look at programs:

1. Faculty: who is there, what do they work on and what are they working on now? What is the depth of the department (i.e. how many faculty total, how many in fields relevant to your interests)?
2. Structure of program: how is the program structured in terms of course requirements, secondary fields, language requirements, outside fields, etc? A spreadsheet or chart can be useful here. What is the "typical" graduate pathway (e.g. years 1 & 2 coursework; year 3 finishing coursework and qualifying exams; 4 & 5 dissertation research and writing)? How does the master's degree work? Is there a thesis, or is it granted by coursework and exam?
3. Teaching/Fellowships/Funding: How do graduate students support themselves? What kinds of resources does the department/university have and how are they allocated? When do grad students typically begin to teach? Does the program/university support research abroad and the dissertation writing phase'?
4. What are the offerings of the university as a whole? In languages? In related disciplines? What is the strength of the library or library network? Don't forget that a university's overall strength often means that each department is stronger in one way or another.
5. Where is this program? Could you live there? WARNING: Do not decide where to apply based on this criterion, but have it on your list. Many people have many prejudices about geography—wait until you get into a program, visit, talk with people, etc. and then make your decision on something approximating knowledge.

Applying

1. Obtain admission materials from programs in which you are interested as soon as possible. Read these materials carefully and take notes on the requirements. Pay special attention to the following:

Carleton College

- A. Deadlines for
 - a. GRE Test Scores (and which tests are required?)
 - b. Your application materials
 - c. Recommenders Letters

- B. Recommendation letters
 - a. How many?
 - b. Sent to whom (you, the department, the University?) and by when?
 - c. Is there a form/waiver for you to complete and give to-the recommender?

- C. Your materials
 - a. Is a CV required?
 - b. How many personal essays?
 - c. Transcripts: by when? Sent to whom?
 - d. Writing Sample? How long?
 - e. Forms to complete

- D. Financial materials relating to aid

2. Recommendation letters and involving your professors

Choosing Recommenders: Choose profs who know you well, in whose classes you have performed at your best, and/or have seen your various strengths. Keep in mind that it is a professor's obligation to base their recommendation on their direct experience and personal assessment of your potential; this means that, even if they think the world of you and your potential, if you got a C in their course, this will come up somewhere. Do not discount people for this reason but try to play to strength.

- A. Ask nicely, ask early, and do not feel either needy or embarrassed. Part of a professor's job is to support their students' plans for further study or career but, given the number of students, past and present, who may be seeking a professor's recommendation, organization, clarity, and follow-up is VERY MUCH appreciated.

- B. Try to present your materials in a coherent package so that the recommender knows, ideally at a glance, deadlines, destinations, and whether there are additional forms to enclose. If there are online recommendation forms, indicate this as well. Enclosing stamped envelopes, while thoughtful, is, in my opinion, not necessary and can be confusing. Paper clip together materials/instructions from the same institution.

- C. Ask your recommenders whether they want any further info (personal statement, Writing sample, CV, coursework) and provide it in a timely manner.

- D. Follow up courteously but diligently. Amidst the whirl of a term, recommendations do get forgotten, mislaid, or lost in the mail (not so with online versions but they have other issues). As deadlines draw near, check with the program to learn whether they have received the letters. If not, contact your recommender(s) with a

Carleton College

gentle reminder email. They will appreciate it and it is often easily rectified. But remember: be polite while being persistent.

3. Personal Essay

Personal Essays/Statements of Interest are difficult to write ... or at least the good ones take time. Leave yourself time to think (see Part I above) and write. As you try to avoid the tempting trap to “appeal to your audience” or say what they want to hear. And this for two reasons: a) you have no way of knowing who will be reading your file and what their particular interests and sensibilities are; b) you preclude your readers from getting an accurate read on your interests, strengths, etc. and their compatibility with their program. It is better, in the end, not to be accepted into a program on real grounds than rejected on false pretenses. Bottom line: be yourself, but be yourself after you have devoted considerable time and energy to what you really want to convey.

BUT being yourself does not preclude your discussion of how YOU see yourself fitting into their program, why you like it, and with whom you were thinking of working. In articulating these thoughts, do not feel like you are committing yourself to an indentured servant relationship. You aren't. Changes of interest, personalities, etc. are all variables that will alter the ultimate place your interests end up. But what such a discussion on your part shows is: a) you have done your homework; b) you show them your version of “the fit”; c) it allows them to locate where you might be in their department; d) you have the chance to discuss your interests in the concrete context of their institution.

4. Writing Sample

- A. Choose a paper that you think (and perhaps your professor(s) thought) really represents your skills in the field, your talents as a writer, and the way in which you think about problems/texts. Keep in view that your writing tells a lot about what you might be like as a grad student, and a great writing sample can help to offset a mixed record just as a poor or sloppy one offsets a solid record.
- B. Writing samples are NOT sealed in glass: if you can make the piece better—either argumentatively, rhetorically, or formally—please take the time to do so. Also, if you are cutting down a longer paper to fit the guidelines, **MAKE SURE TO REVISE THE PAPER'S CONTENT ACCORDINGLY**, and make the transitions, intro, and conclusions work for the new version.
- C. Observe page/word limits. If something is way too long, it is not impressive, it is annoying and faculty will often stop reading at the page limit (for fairness's sake if not pique).

5. Final Thoughts

You have limited space to present the fullest and best portrait possible. You can use that space most wisely by remembering that each piece is part of a whole rather than a stand-alone. Try not to repeat yourself in multiple documents but rather attempt, at appropriate moments in your writing, to integrate the pieces for your reader by verbally alluding to one

Carleton College

portion of your file or another. Inserting your professor's name at a particularly moment points the reader to his/her recommendation; mentioning "interdisciplinary coursework" points toward your transcript; etc.

Form and style matter. Complete all forms neatly and, ideally, type them (this can be a pain so make your own decision but definitely do not use your "writing shopping list for roommate leaving in a hurry" penmanship. Illegibility is not only frustrating, it sends the "she/he didn't take her time to give us her best" message. You will not get into graduate school on penmanship, but having a clean, complete, transparently legible application will make the evaluation of your application unencumbered by "background noise."