

Applying to Ph.D. Programs and Personal Statements

As you may know if you're already enrolled in a grad program or certificate and are considering applying to a new program, **grad school is a journey that requires guidance and mentorship from application to graduation.** Use the available resources to meet admission deadlines, check off requirements, explore funding and balance graduate school with life and career.

Graduate Resources

Meet with **Career Development Center** advisors for help with graduate school applications, program searches, understanding graduate school logistics, and résumé and CV.

The **OSU Graduate School** is also a great source of information about what graduate school is like and what it takes to be a successful applicant. For more information on Oregon State's offerings, visit gradschool.oregonstate.edu.

Researching Grad Schools

- Ask a trusted faculty member about program recommendations.
- Look at where researchers in your subfield went. Check conference listings, online CVs and names in scientific articles.
- Review industry association websites and online ranking services such as *The Princeton Review* and *GradSchools.com*.

Research Graduate Programs

- Are they research-heavy or course-based? Do they include a practicum? How does the curriculum compare to your dream job?
- Who are the faculty? Do they align with your interests?
- Where are graduates finding jobs? Check LinkedIn alumni search or program websites.
- What about the thesis, dissertation, projects and comprehensive exams?
- What are the application deadlines?
- Do you want to live where the program is located?

Master's vs. Ph.D.

| Practice-Based—Cultivating Practitioners | | | Research-Based—Cultivating Researchers | |
|---|--|---|--|------------------|
| Master's Program | Professional Program (Master/Doctoral) | Doctoral Program | Master's Program | Doctoral Program |
| 2-3 years | 3-4 years | 3-5 years | 2-3 years | 4-7 years |
| M.A. M.S. M.Ed. M.B.A. M.S.W. M.S.N. M.P.H. | Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) Doctor of Osteopathy (D.O.) Doctor of Dental Surgery (D.D.S.) Doctor of Pharmacy or (Pharm.D.) Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.) Juris Doctor (J.D.) | Ed.D. Dr. PH. Doctor of Nursing Practice (D.N.P.) etc. | M.S. | Ph.D. |

Ph.D. Program Frequently Asked Questions

IS A PH.D. RIGHT FOR ME?

Before committing, explore your desired career outcomes. Investigate real openings on job boards and required credentials. For many fields a bachelor's or master's is the terminal degree, so a Ph.D. may not be required. Do informational interviews with professionals and faculty to learn about fields/occupations of interest.

- **Benefits of a Ph.D.:** Pursue questions and passion for a subject matter. Become an expert. Gain experience in research and teaching. Build relationships with other scholars. Become more qualified/higher paid for certain positions (e.g., scientists, government positions, R&D, faculty).
- **Disadvantages of a Ph.D.:** Large time investment with reduced income potential for a period of years. Narrow geographic locations available. Over-specialization for some positions. Degrees can be difficult and social isolation is common.

WHAT DO I SAY TO A POTENTIAL FACULTY MENTOR? HOW DO I APPROACH THEM?

Often the first step is not to apply to a program but to establish a faculty relationship. Start building these connections early with intentional thoughtful outreach. Don't send generic emails, instead read about the faculty's most recent research and focus areas. Become acquainted with who they are. Then approach them with a few sentences discussing your past work, areas of crossover and why you are specifically interested in working with them. A good next step after email is setting up a phone, virtual or in-person conversation to continue learning about mutual interests. Remember, this is less of an academic transaction and more like being hired for a job. Put your best foot forward.

HOW CAN I HELP MY APPLICATION STAND OUT?

Do your research! Is there an important focus, piece of equipment, research center, etc. associated with the department? Become informed about what the department cares about and reflect these interests in your materials. Apply early; grad programs fill up so you don't want to wait until right before the deadline. Interview current grad students about how to create a strong application for the program and which faculty to approach. Ask others to review your materials or come to the career center.

HOW MANY PH.D. PROGRAMS SHOULD I APPLY TO?

Depending on the field, Ph.D. programs can be competitive and only accept so many applicants. It's a good idea to diversify your applications, keeping in mind that application fees stack up.

Applying to at least five programs is a good rule of thumb (more if you are aiming for Ivy League). Try to apply to a mixture of "dream" schools and schools admitting a greater percentage of applicants.

- **Med School:** Note that acceptance rates for med school applications are typically less than 10% nationwide. Applying to more programs and benchmarking your GPA and MCAT scores against averages can be helpful. Other tips for making a med school application stand out include getting some real medical experience or shadowing on your résumé, speaking a second language and doing research projects.
- **Law School:** Acceptance rates to law schools can vary greatly, with top schools like Yale and Harvard only accepting about six percent of students to less prestigious schools accepting 60% to 70% of applicants. Similar to med school, your GPA and LSAT score are heavily weighed. Other tips for a strong application include showing strong writing and reasoning skills, relevant extracurriculars and leadership, and having great recommenders.

Graduate School Application

GATHER YOUR MATERIALS

- Application form and fee
- Transcripts
- Personal statement or research statement
- Admissions exam scores—GRE, MCAT or LSAT (www.ets.org)
- Letters of recommendation
- A résumé or CV
- Double-check that you meet requirements for GPA, foreign language and prerequisite degrees.

ADMISSIONS EXAMS

If you haven't taken the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) test in the past five years, you may need to start preparing if your program of interest requires it.

Programs differ in how they weigh (or don't weigh) these scores. Ensure that you understand scoring requirements and preferences for programs of interest. Then reserve ample time to study and take practice tests (often available online).

Study books can often be checked out from the library. These tests reward those who have invested time in learning how to navigate and perform according to their logic.

BEFORE APPLYING

- When is the **application deadline**?
- What are the **program entry requirements** (education level, tests, essays, letters of recommendation, etc.)?
- How will you **fund the program**?
- What is the **funding deadline**?
- Are there circumstances to factor into your **timeline** (need to relocate, hours you can manage, etc.)?

Application Timeline

6-8 Months Before Application Deadline:

Reach out to potential faculty mentors to build a relationship and learn about Ph.D. mentee possibilities.

JUNE

- Narrow down programs to apply to.
- Review application requirements of each program.
- Mark down the application deadline.
- Start preparing for admission test.
- Register for the admission test.
- Reach out to each program and find the contact person to ask questions.

AUGUST

- Take the admission test.
- Search for financial aid and apply.
- Start writing personal statement.

SEPTEMBER

- Request letter of recommendation.
- Request official transcript.
- Fill out applications.
- Polish your résumé.
- Polish your personal statement.

OCTOBER - JANUARY

- Submit application.

JANUARY - MAY

- Review acceptances and decide.

Personal Statement

A personal statement is **used in the graduate program admissions process to assess applicants**. It describes your goals (e.g., research or study areas of interest) and intent for attending graduate school.

EACH PROGRAM IS DIFFERENT

Some may ask for a general personal statement or statement of research interests. You may also encounter essay questions that are very specific to your program of interest. Depending on the nature of the program, it might be advantageous to identify a faculty member you are interested in working with on your thesis or dissertation. However, in professional or practicum-driven programs, this might not be appropriate.

ADMISSION IS COMPETITIVE

Your personal statement needs to sell your unique qualifications, experiences and connections. Programs look for candidates with a strong point of view on what they want to learn and accomplish and a record of success. Even though it's called a 'personal' statement, skip the childhood story about seeing the ocean and wanting to become an oceanographer. Instead, focus on the details of real experiences that have equipped you for the program. Use faculty, mentors, alumni, the Writing Center and other resources to help you create your personal statement. Put your best foot forward!

| A great personal statement... | A poor personal statement... |
|--|--|
| ...is a narrative built on concrete skills, detailed experiences and evidence . It explains what you are doing in school/work now and how that relates to what you want to do in the program. | ...uses vague, broad sentences (often with too many adjectives) that don't convey your tangible skills and experience, and it doesn't include details. |
| ...identifies specific aspects of the program and/or potential faculty advisors whose work you are drawn to and shows you've done your homework. | ...focuses on broad desires for your future and general statements about the state of the world. It's not aligned specifically with the program and is not written to fit each program you apply to. |
| ...explains how graduate school fits into your long term-vision for your career or research plans. | ...focuses on childhood stories and inspirations and doesn't include a clear perspective of where you want to go in the program and after. |
| ...is well-organized and cohesive . Each paragraph has a clear purpose with supporting points. All paragraphs flow in a logical order building a case for why you would be an asset to the program. | ...is disjointed without a clear path from each paragraph and without clear evidence backing up your points. It meanders (points are made and then abandoned) and includes spelling/grammar errors. |

Personal Statement Examples

NATURAL RESOURCES EXCERPT

“Through my interpretation internship with The Nature Conservancy, I was exposed to the ecology of riparian corridors and learned about the complex interdependency between animals and native plant species. While sharing information with visitors about the preserve and answering their questions, I observed firsthand how invasive species can create a new normal in natural systems. For example, I saw the Himalayan blackberries covering the banks of the Willamette River or the American Bullfrog diminishing the numbers of native turtles, fish, snakes and other frogs in Oregon waterways. This understanding was further developed by a research project I completed in partnership with two classmates where we identified and catalogued 10 invasive species in the Olalla Reservoir in Toledo, Ore.

In my graduate studies, I not only want to deepen my understanding of conservation challenges like these, but I want to measure the public’s knowledge of specific threats to riparian ecosystems and correlate this understanding with policy action. Human-nature interaction is complex and presents ever-growing challenges on a local and global scale. I seek to understand both the science of natural resources and stakeholder involvement so that I can position myself effectively for conservation advocacy or policymaking in the future.

I was drawn to Oregon State University’s online Master of Natural Resources program because of its focus on ‘workable solutions for complex natural resources challenges.’ It’s important that we work with the existing economic and environmental systems, developing a full understanding of all public interests, in order to create real change in the Northwest. In particular, I appreciate the balance offered in your curriculum between ecology and human systems, as well as the ability to choose a tailored focus area...”

LIBERAL ARTS SAMPLE

Vague Sentences: “As a master’s student, I took a lot of classes in writing and rhetoric where I learned to be a better communicator. I want to continue learning about rhetoric and the theories about how people persuade each other in graduate school.”

Specific Sentences: “Through master’s level courses in critical theory, I began to learn how to use the work of theorists like Foucault as a lens to understand and dissect the dynamics of power and knowledge in our society. In particular, I’m fascinated by how power and powerlessness intersect with issues facing displaced people groups and refugees seeking asylum. I’m interested in further developing my understanding of critical theory with a social and ethical focus. I believe Dr. Rutherford’s research into the Syrian refugee crisis would align well with my research interests.”

Complete Personal Statement: Education

I distinctly remember the moment that I knew I wanted to become an educator of teachers. I stood in the front of a dilapidated classroom in Ghana. Its dusty walls, rickety wooden chairs and single tripod that held a small whiteboard were far from an ideal classroom. I was mid-lesson with my nine students in the Agriculture Education class when one of my students raised her hand and excitedly described an idea. She wanted to teach sustainable agriculture by having her students design and execute a real experimental garden. She was forming a notion of teaching as more than lecture. I saw several proverbial light bulbs flick on as my students envisioned the real situations and possibilities in which they would teach. After several weeks of assigning them lesson design and learning theory, it became concrete. And I realized my path was in developing others into really great teachers.

This moment happened last summer when I joined AgriCorps and moved to Africa. My husband and I were placed at the Kumasi Institute of Tropical Agriculture, an agriculture training college located outside Kumasi, Ghana. It was this experience of teaching collegiate level students that solidified my ambitions. It is thus my goal to earn a Ph.D. in Science Education from Oregon State University with the goal of teaching agriculture at the post-secondary level, focusing on agriculture education and teacher training.

Based on my previous training in pedagogy and agriculture, I believe I would be an asset to your program. I have been building my experience over the last seven years, starting with earning a B.S. in Agriculture Education and a teaching credential at California State University, Chico. Following completion of my degree, I accepted an agriculture teaching position at Liberty Ranch High School in the summer of 2011. This young program provided opportunities for me to write curriculum, create new agriculture classes, write grants, and help build a program from the ground up. The four years I spent at Liberty Ranch were unforgettable. I quickly realized that I found the greatest joy not in the aspects I originally became an agriculture teacher for (county fairs, chapter officers), but in the classroom. The day-in day-out multi-faceted puzzle to create the 'perfect' lesson fueled my energy.

During my second year teaching, I began the online master's program in Agriculture Education at CSU and graduated in the spring of 2014. This degree allowed me to explore advanced learning theory, use scientific inquiry to measure my teaching performance, and provided me with tools to help improve my own department. My thesis investigated the factors in which first- and fourth-year agriculture students enroll in agriculture classes. The research presented many findings, one of which was that the fourth-year agriculture students in my district enrolled in agriculture courses because they were more challenging and dynamic than their non-agriculture counterparts. This process not only enhanced my abilities to conduct research, but also gave insight into the nature of my students.

While teaching at Liberty Ranch, I had the opportunity to work with other education professionals in creating agriculture curriculum through California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom. I also presented the curriculum I developed for my Agriculture Chemistry class at California Agriculture Teachers Association (CATA) road shows and biannual meetings. These experiences helped refine my abilities to create rigorous and relevant curriculum.

A sense of wonder drove my husband and I to join AgriCorps in the fall of 2014. The prospect of agricultural development work in conjunction with a teaching position at the collegiate level intrigued me. My work at KITA has included an amalgam of duties such as teaching, administrative work, teacher evaluations and project planning. Progress is slow and cultural barriers often halted achievement. Yet, if there's one thing I've realized in Ghana amidst the limited resources and struggling economy, it's that a good teacher has no border. What works in a small dairy community in Galt, California, often can work in a farming college in rural Ghana. Despite the foreign language and different teacher-student dynamic, I found this realization incredible.

It is this experience that has prompted me to pursue a higher degree in agriculture education and to devote my career to helping new and existing teachers utilize fail-safe teaching strategies. During my studies, I am specifically interested in investigating learning theory with regards to how agriculture teachers can create critical thinkers and problem-solvers in their classrooms, the changing nature of agriculture education with the adoption of new nationwide assessments, and how I can best prepare educators to meet the needs of 21st century students.

After speaking with Dr. Croom last fall, I believe Oregon State University can foster my learning in such a way that provides collaborative opportunities with department faculty and staff, encouragement to explore and research unanswered questions, and provide ample opportunities to enhance my teaching skills.

Instead of a vague 'love of teaching,' the student gives a specific, tangible example to anchor the essay. She avoids terms like 'passion' and 'fell in love with' to describe her educational path.

Student identifies her long-term goal and how the higher degree supports it.

Student discusses her credentials that help qualify her for the program.

Student is mentioning some of the theories and techniques she knows which will be part of the advanced degree.

Student explains the relevance of these experiences in terms of skills that transfer to the program.

Student lays out a direction for her program including what she wants to study and with whom. She also mentions a specific faculty member.

Complete Personal Statement: Microbiology

Japanese culture has a tradition of folding one thousand paper cranes to give someone good luck. After my best friend got into a catastrophic car accident, I began a collaborative project to encourage him through this tradition. I enlisted the help of five friends, bought supplies and did a lot of folding. At the end of the hard work, my friend was honored at the colorful strands we strung in his hospital room. Those cranes represent a lot about me: I'm organized, collaborative and creative when facing challenges and opportunities. These traits will serve me well as a member of the academic community and in my long-term goal of being a microbiology professor.

In all aspects of my career, I focus on utilizing new resources flexibly and creatively. At University of California - Berkeley, my curiosity for learning motivated me to take a variety of courses to gain laboratory skills and expose myself to different fields of knowledge, from sequencing projects to biofuels, to marine ecosystems, to extreme microbes. At New Generation Sciences, I learned Excel independently to organize large datasets and find particular points of significance amongst many pages of background data. I enjoyed determining ways to save time with creative combinations of formulas. Similarly, at the University of New Mexico, I currently pioneer new lab protocols for qPCR and a Biomek liquid handling robot, focusing on human microbiomes during disease and antibiotic treatment. I really enjoy putting together and testing out novel information, and I have the flexibility to figure out new techniques from prior experience or literature research.

Through these two laboratory positions at New Generation and UNM, I showed precision and organization. I kept thorough records of plans and projects in meticulous laboratory notebooks. I am the kind of person that even enjoys making Excel spreadsheets to categorize and sort information. I have worked on multiple projects in which I carefully handled and tracked hundreds of unique samples. Even more, my previous laboratories have been small environments with lots of overlap between projects, so I understand that careful recording of protocols and clear communication are essential to ensure data integrity is maintained across projects.

Additionally, I have demonstrated my skills in collaboration and inclusivity through teaching and mentoring. At University of California, I taught both as a lecture and a laboratory teaching assistant, helping students understand the material, review and solve problems. I had a particular aptitude for being a laboratory TA because I could connect more personally with a small group of students and demonstrate hands-on techniques. As a graduate student, I also mentored two high school students through beginner projects in molecular biology. I taught them the techniques and theories behind PCR from start to finish and gave them advice about applying to colleges. I still have the thank you notes they wrote to me pinned on my bulletin board. In my professional life, I strive to communicate clearly to foster greater understanding and gather new perspectives on a problem from someone with a different viewpoint from mine.

Lastly, I have strong research experience, having written and orally defended a master's thesis, as well as wrote, revised and published a recent research article. I can bring numerous skills in teaching, writing, editing and planning to your lab and work with undergraduates. Microbiology fascinates me, and I will be glad to apply these skills to studying the complexities of microbial communities in partnership with your team.