

Things to Consider in Applying to and Choosing a Graduate School

1. Be thinking about the big picture of what you want to attain by going to graduate school. There may be multiple routes to that end -- with some being a better match for what you want to do than others, given your interests, background, length of time you are willing to commit to graduate education, and long-run goals. One can study Environmental Economics in Economics graduate programs, in graduate programs in Agricultural and Resource Economics, in Environmental Studies graduate programs, or in graduate programs of Public Policy. One can study Development Economics in Economics graduate programs, in graduate programs in Agricultural and Resource Economics, in graduate programs of Public Policy, or in graduate programs in International Relations. One can study Labor Economics in Economics graduate programs or in graduate programs in Labor and Industrial Relations. One can study Game Theory in a variety of different types of graduate programs.
2. Know whether you want to directly go into a Ph.D. program or if you just want a Masters degree for now. You should do entirely different types of searches based on your answer to this question. If you just want a Masters degree for now, it is best to apply to a school with a terminal Masters program because you will likely get better financial aid (if you are honest regarding your intended highest degree) and have an experience that better fits your desires.
3. Try to build a reserve fund of money to finance taking the GRE, applying to multiple schools, and to if possible fund trips to visit schools you are considering attending.
4. Do WELL on the GRE or other required admissions test (prep for it if you can).
5. Line up faculty members and/or internship supervisors who can write strong letters of recommendation for you.
6. If you want to teach at a research school, know that the ranking of the school you get your Ph.D. from is highly positively correlated with the ranking of potential job placements open to you right after getting your Ph.D.

7. Talk to faculty members here about what might be good schools to match your talent level and interests.
8. Carefully check out the suggested mathematical and other prerequisites for identified graduate programs and compare them to the background you expect to have when starting graduate school. Also carefully note whether the program has a “math camp” before the regular school year starts and whether there is a common first year track or multiple tracks depending on one’s math and statistics background.
9. Be careful in interpreting departmental rankings. Some departmental rankings are based on past publications of faculty members who are no longer associated with a given university.
10. Check out the current faculty of the departments you are considering and their research interests and output. Also try to determine if important faculty members are on multi-year leaves of absence.
11. Some departments rank higher in some specialty areas than their overall ranking. That can matter.
12. Try to check out the placement record of graduates of the departments you are considering applying to. Many departments have something about this on their web pages.
13. Try to investigate the pattern of dissertation supervision and committee membership by faculty within a department. Some of this information may be on a departmental web page under job market candidates.
14. Try to get a feel for mean or median time to completion of a Ph.D. or other relevant degree in the departments you are considering applying to.
15. For graduate programs you are considering, get as much information as you can about departmental financial aid with respect to potential maximum term of funding, levels of financial support, summer coverage, whether out-of-state differentials are waived, and what you must do to stay in good standing for continued support.

16. Apply to multiple schools -- not all of which may be similarly ranked. Not all of the programs you apply to need be at exactly the same degree level or in exactly the same department, but there should be a *clear focus* to your search.
17. In making your decisions, remember that what you think you may want to specialize in could change over time.
18. Paperwork-wise and financially, it may be easier to switch departments within the Graduate School of a university than to switch to a similar department at a different university. Switching departments in graduate school does happen, just like switching majors as an undergraduate – but it is much less common.
19. If thinking about get a Ph.D., carefully investigate how the departments you are considering decide who gets to continue working towards a Ph.D. and who must leave with a Masters degree. Does the department just use course grades and class ranks in making these decisions, or are there prelims or qualifying exams? If the department uses prelims or qualifying exams, how do they operate? When do they occur? What do they cover? Who can submit questions? Is there any choice of questions you can answer? What is the grading standard? How well does one need to do? How many attempts does one get? What is the recent history with respect to pass and failure rates?
20. Try to meet and/or talk to graduate students presently at schools of interest.
21. Investigate graduate level syllabi and past prelim questions of schools of interest, if available.
22. If graduate students teach a lot for their financial aid, what do they commonly teach?
23. Check out the workshop schedules and any distinguished speaker series in the departments you are considering applying to in order to get an idea of the quality of outside scholars you may be exposed to. These are frequently available on departmental web pages.

24. What ties does the department of interest have with other areas on campus and are there other interesting distinguished scholars in other departments on campus whom you could take courses from or work with?
25. How do the various graduate programs prepare students for writing a dissertation, Master's thesis, or required second year paper?
26. What recent changes have occurred at the different departments you are considering, and why?
27. Are there any departmental politics issues that are worth knowing?