

APPLYING TO PH.D. PROGRAMS AFTER MAPSS:
INFORMATION SESSION, May 11, 2012

Admission to Ph.D. programs is more competitive than ever and should be pursued only if you have distinguished yourself in your M.A. work and have a committed interest in and a project appropriate to an academic research career. The application process is demanding and time-consuming for applicants (as well as for recommenders); you will not succeed if you do a rush job. This worksheet explains our major requirements and deadlines, should you desire MAPSS program support through this process.

Please pay careful attention to our advice, remembering that we have more extensive and up-to-date expertise in this area than any other voices you will hear. We read 800 good but below-the-cut Ph.D. applications annually, and we manage 80-100 MAPSS graduates' Ph.D. applications each year. Because of recessionary cutbacks, Ph.D. admissions conditions in recent years have been the most difficult in our lifetime. Yet, in the past four admissions seasons, 83%, 94%, 90%, and 91% of the MAPSS graduates we collaborated with on their applications in the core social science fields received funded admissions offers from top departments. (You should consult the complete roster of offers/departments/disciplines that is posted on our web site.) This record of success, nationally unparalleled, offers the principal reason for you to conform as closely as possible to our advice.

You SHOULD NOT apply for doctoral admissions if by November of admission season:

---- You have not completed your M.A. (If you graduate from MAPSS in Autumn quarter, we'll need both your faculty and preceptor M.A. paper evaluations in November.)

----You have not attained the grades, GRE scores, methodological training, disciplinary familiarity, research experience, and graduate faculty support necessary for you to be competitive.

----You do not have an effective writing sample.

----You have not settled on your scholarly discipline and are thinking of applying to more than one discipline. (One core discipline and one interdisciplinary field—e.g. History and Science Studies, Anthropology and Area Studies, Sociology and Ethnic Studies, Psychology and Public Health, Philosophy and Social Thought—may provide an exception to this rule. Even in this case, you should never apply to two Ph.D. programs at the same university unless explicitly invited to do so.)

----You do not have a specific research question and project carefully grounded in the relevant literatures of the discipline to which you are applying and contextualized in its preferred methodology. (E.g. for Anthropology, where will you do field work?; for

Psychology, what laboratory skills do you bring or seek?; for History, where will you find archives?).

---You will not have attained by matriculation in a Ph.D. program the linguistic or mathematical competencies required for doctoral research in your discipline and sub-field.

---You have not identified the eight to ten individual faculty members whose research interests are most closely congruent with your own project and who, on the basis of a close reading of their work, you can reasonably expect to want you as an advisee and whom you would be excited to have as a supervisor.

---You are unwilling to apply to the departments in which these individual faculty members are employed, regardless of the type or location of their universities.

---You are for any other reason unwilling to apply to a sufficient number and range of departments (public/private, large/small, inland/coastal) to be likely to be competitive for at least one funded Ph.D. offer.

---You have not gone beyond web pages in ascertaining the current sub-field or theoretical emphases of particular departments and whether targeted faculty remain in residence and active in graduate teaching.

In sum, "lightning" absolutely does not strike with Ph.D. applications. It hasn't for years and in the present environment, such an expectation is ludicrous. If you approach us with poorly thought out or last minute plans for doctoral study, we may refuse to provide support for you. We will not jeopardize the cachet MAPSS has achieved with the major social science doctoral programs across the country by appearing to support half-baked applications. You particularly lose all credibility with us if you insist on applying to departments that do not fit you, merely because they seem name brand, because you like the scenery, or because your significant other lives nearby. We apologize for being so frank, but our chief responsibility to both incoming students and MAPSS graduates is to maintain our extraordinary record of success in graduates' doctoral applications.

Timeline

If you will be able to satisfy all of the conditions stated above, you SHOULD apply for doctoral study. Your timeline for MAPSS support is as follows:

June-September

-- Complete your Chicago M.A.

--Identify your targeted faculty members/research supervisors in Ph.D. departments and carefully read their published work.

--Draft your personal statement. (Guidelines below).

--Take a GRE prep course and/or retake the GREs, if necessary. We will happy to advise you on the need for this based on the percentages (not the raw scores) of your past efforts. GRE scores are important everywhere, but particularly at public universities.

--Set up an account with Interfolio (<http://www.interfolio.com>), an online document storage system through which you will permanently manage your references. This step is required of all applicants.

September-October

--Send your draft statement of purpose to one of us for comment, according to the following routing list:

Sociology and Psychology: Barnaby Riedel (until September 1, 2012)

History: Avi Sharma (Until September 1, 2012)

Anthropology, Human Development, Area Studies: John MacAloon

Political Science and Philosophy: Chad Cyrenne

Professional Schools: Morrie Fred

Other: John MacAloon

The only exception to this routing would be if one of us happened to be your M.A. paper supervisor in a different field than that named above.

--Finalize your roster of faculty recommenders. (See instructions below).

--Consider contacting targeted faculty members. (See below.)

October-November

--Send to each of your faculty recommenders, including your MAPSS recommender, a packet containing:

1) a final statement of purpose

2) a copy of your curriculum vitae

3) a list of the specific faculty to whom you are applying, their departments/universities, application due dates, each department's preferred mode for receiving letters, and full mailing addresses for any that do not accept electronic letters. (See below for further information)

4) names of your other recommenders

5) a Confidentiality Rights waiver form from Interfolio and from any school that does not accept electronic letters

N.B. Some recommenders may prefer to have this material earlier.

November-December

Deliver your portions of the application—including personal statement, transcript, recommendations, GRE scores, and other electronic deliverables—by the university/department deadlines.

February-April 15

Keep your MAPSS recommenders closely informed of your admissions outcomes and decision-making processes. This is imperative.

The Statement of Purpose

The full statement should never exceed 2-1/2 to 3 pages. Structure it into the four sections described below. It is very important that you present them in this order. It is a major mistake is to write a life history that starts from the beginning and moves chronologically: “I grew up in. . . .”; “My grandmother said that even as a child I was interested in the past.” (PLEASE, NONE OF THAT; this is not a college application!) Instead, a good personal statement is written back to front, so to say, that is from the future to the present, to the past, ending with the future once again. Your busy readers want to know instantaneously what your research interests and project will be if they admit you. They will be seriously irritated if they have to wait to find this out until you’re done with your mini life-story.

Section I: Research Proposal

What is your research question and how is it taking shape into a specific project for doctoral research? How do you conceptually and methodologically situate your project in existing disciplinary literatures? Which writers have most influenced you and what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches? What is your main hypothesis or provisional answer to your problem and why should anyone care whether it turns out to be right? What kind of evidence will be required to address your problem and how and where do you propose to get it? What will you have to learn in the course of your doctoral program in order to refine and carry out your research program? If you wish to conclude by mentioning additional research interests, OK, but be very cautious. These shouldn’t take more than a line or two and must clearly come off as secondary to your main research trajectory.

This section should be around 50% of your personal statement. Be as specific as you can be without just making things up, seeming ridiculously narrow, or suggesting that you have nothing left to learn. If you are uncertain as yet whether your project will go in direction “x” or direction “y,” say so honestly. Everyone knows that your project will clarify and change as you move through your doctoral course work; that’s why you are

entering a doctoral program, instead of just writing a notable book. But if you can't show that you have a determined project, you will not be admitted no matter how smart or accomplished you might be, because the fit with the department faculty can't be determined, and that is the single biggest predictor of graduate success.

Remember that this is a research proposal statement and that you are writing for experts. This is not a course paper much less a précis of everything you know. The name of a significant author, theory, or text is sufficient. There should be no footnotes or bibliography in a personal statement. The most effective prose is thoughtful, economical, and straightforward. You want your readers to finish this section saying to themselves; "This project is very interesting, this person is clearly competent, and our department certainly has the resources to move her forward."

Section II: Previous Training and Research

The next section (25% of your p.s.) lays out exactly how your previous studies have prepared you to pursue your questions in a doctoral program, beginning with what you accomplished at Chicago. Start with the topic problem and main argument of your M.A. paper, stating what you think you accomplished, what loose ends were left (data, time, expertise, etc.), and how your doctoral research will build on this pilot project.

Mention your M.A. supervisor and other particularly influential Chicago faculty, courses, laboratory and workshop experiences. Remember you are highlighting the things directly related to your continuing research, so please do not attempt to be exhaustive about your Chicago year. Your readers will have your transcript, and our MAPSS departmental letter will review all your courses, naming the faculty who taught you and characterizing your overall intellectual trajectory. Your other recommenders will obviously go into more detail about your M.A. and seminar papers or your research training. Our MAPSS letter will articulate how your specific doctoral project is situated in your total intellectual biography. (This is our special art, and what most applicants for doctoral admissions do not have in their dossiers.)

No more than a sentence should be devoted to your undergraduate career, and only if there is something directly related to fomenting your on-going research project that is not reproduced in your MA career. You are a Chicago graduate now.

Section III: Other Relevant Research, Work, and Life Experience

In this section (about 15% of your p.s.), you briefly describe other training, life experience, or work history directly related to your academic vocation and specific research trajectory. Discuss what you are doing and will be doing between completing your M.A. and matriculating in a Ph.D. program: continuing lab work, learning a new statistical package, traveling to identify possible archives or field sites, getting an immersion experience in your research language, working in a museum or academic association, etc. Here you give further evidence that yours is indeed a scholarly life, one

that you are already living, and you show that you are aware of and are directly addressing any training deficits.

Section IV: Why you think there is a good fit with this Ph.D. program

In this final section (about 10% of your p.s), you say exactly why you think Ph.D. study in this particular department would give you the further training you need to do professional-caliber work. Name the two faculty--two in case one is on leave or leaves; no more than two or you'll come off as desperate or confused--you'd like to work with and why. What in their work has influenced you or led you to believe that your interests fit with theirs? Remember that many faculty have a sixth sense about when someone claims to want to study with them but really knows nothing of their work beyond a website description.

If you have discussed your application with targeted faculty or have visited or corresponded with the department, mention that here. It is OK to briefly mention extra-departmental resources potentially helpful to your project (research centers, archives, etc.) but be careful not in any way to suggest that your focus is not fully on and in the department to which you are applying. This is why it is usually not a good idea to mention that you want to work with prominent faculty members outside the department.

Absolutely avoid bromides about the department or the university and do not finish your personal statement with presumptuous banalities about your future life as a university professor. You are NOT applying for a comfortable career as a tenured university teacher; you are applying to accomplish doctoral research that makes a difference in your field.

The Writing Sample

The writing sample you include should not exceed 20-30 double-spaced pages in 12 pt. font, the gold standard for article-length writing in most of the social sciences. Tinkering with the font, spacing, or margins won't help you; the people reading your work will recognize such tinkering at a glance. Your reader wants to see whether you can put powerful arguments together within these page constraints. Be sure that the first five pages of your sample frontload your conclusions and address the questions outlined in Section I above. Otherwise, it's very unlikely that anyone will bother reading to page six.

Letters of Recommendation

The only letters that help build your case for doctoral admission are those written by Ph.D. academics able to discuss your scholarship and research training in detail. The normal expectation is that all of your letters will come from Chicago faculty. We appreciate your loyalty to your undergraduate mentor, but at this stage a letter from him or her will do no good and perhaps introduce doubts. If, since your MAPSS graduation,

you have been working for a Ph.D. faculty member or research director at another institution, a letter from that person will be fine.

Your M.A. paper advisor's letter will likely receive the most attention, but the letter that we write for you from MAPSS is also hugely important in providing a comprehensive overview of all that you accomplished during your year at Chicago. (Do not ask a preceptor who is a Ph.D. candidate to write a separate letter of recommendation for you; preceptors' evaluations are used in developing the MAPSS faculty letter.) Your third letter should come from a course instructor or lab supervisor. Of course, it is preferable that letters come from faculty with appointments in the discipline you are applying to join. However, it is more important that your recommenders know your work well and are enthusiastic about it, even if they are ostensibly in a different field. Moreover, few of those reading your applications will fail to know about the distinctive interdisciplinarity of the Chicago social sciences faculty and of its supervisory practices. These days, few departments will be unaware of the specific nature of the MAPSS program.

It is obviously important to have your recommenders enthusiastic about and engaged in your research process. To that end, have a face-to-face conversation to ask their advice about which departments and which faculty supervisors you might be productive with around the continent or abroad. If you are intending also to apply to Chicago, of course you can discuss your fit here and assure the faculty members that they would be your first choice among mentors should you be fortunate enough to be invited to stay here. But avoid backing them into any corner. Do not press them any further on your chances to be admitted at Chicago. What you want from them above all is an enthusiastic and effective letter addressed to their colleagues around the national and international discipline, not just to their departmental colleagues. "Fit" is just as much an issue at Chicago as it is anywhere else. Understand that your big offer at Stanford or Irvine or Emory or Virginia or Michigan does as much for your sponsor's reputation as an offer to stay with him or her at Chicago.

No readers will take seriously recommendation letters that are not written on a confidential basis, so make sure you sign all of the appropriate waiver forms.

Be certain to establish the autumn whereabouts of your recommenders and to ask them for their preferred date and means to receive your materials. Ask if there are any materials beyond those listed above that your non-MAPSS recommenders would like to see before writing for you (best seminar paper, M.A. thesis, GRE scores, transcript). Stick carefully to the arrangements you've made with your recommenders. Inform them as to who else is writing for you. Most faculty write and send all the letters as a batch for each student, so prepare a complete packet of all of your materials and send them all together to each recommender.

Things are a bit complicated as to methods of letter delivery these days. It is your responsibility to ascertain the preferences of each of your targeted universities and to inform your recommenders. Whatever the method of delivery, it is your responsibility to

insure precise and accurate addresses (e-mail or street) and adequate time for routing and reception.

Most universities accept letters that have been uploaded, faxed or posted by your recommenders into your Interfolio file, accompanied by the signed waiver form with your file code that you or Interfolio will provide each recommender. Interfolio sends out your dossier to each university you tell them to. (As they will do for you in future years when you are applying for grants or jobs; this is why everyone must open an account.) However, many universities today give preference to another electronic service provider (e.g. Embark Online) or have their own electronic system. In such cases, you provide your recommender's e-mail address to the department in your application and your recommender will receive an e-mail with instructions as to how to upload her or his letter. Finally there remain a tiny number of universities that do not accept electronic letters at all. In this case provide your recommenders with precise mailing addresses and signed cover sheets. You can ask your recommenders if they also want you to prepare mailing envelopes. If the answer is yes, make sure that you use lick-sealed not pressure-sealed envelopes and that the recommender's return address and the department's (or school's or dean of students') mailing address is carefully and neatly typed.

Some universities (including Chicago) ask you to have your recommenders return their letters in flap-signed envelopes to you to be sent in with your application packet. Never fail to send your packet in to meet the deadline, even if one or more letters are not included. They can always come along afterward. Be advised that some faculty members (the MAPSS Director among them) refuse on principle to provide students with sealed and flap-signed letters. All universities understand this and accept paper or electronic letters directly posted to them by the recommenders. A few faculty either don't use e-mail or else refuse to send electronic letters. Again, all universities understand this and are happy to receive posted letters.

What about those check-box rating sheets you may have downloaded or received with your application forms? The important thing is the section where you accept confidentiality. If you use these forms at all, you must carefully fill out and sign this section before providing this cover sheet to your recommenders in the packets you prepare for them. Generally speaking, these forms will accompany only paper letters. Electronic letter requests sent by universities to your recommenders contain their own check-box ranking forms.

Interfolio letters will obviously not have each university's check-box form attached. We know of only two cases in recent years in where this made the slightest difference to the receiving department. Both were professional schools, one public health, one social work. In both cases the recommenders were contacted directly. Arts and Sciences faculties seem quite able to tell from the prose of your recommenders how strongly you are supported and what the comparison group is like. This is, after all, Chicago.

Finally, do not hassle your recommenders about formal deadlines. You should understand that these deadlines may be strict for *your* materials to arrive at the departments, but we

faculty are in the same business together all around the country, and we cut each other some temporal slack. Nearly everywhere there's a lag time anyway for the administrative assemblage of the dossiers between the application deadline and when actual reading begins. We have never experienced a case in which a faculty letter was refused because it was late, and if a missing letter could indeed make a difference, departments will contact you or your recommender directly. Understand that your recommenders do this year after year according to their own systems. So unless you have evidence of a major disconnect, do not irritate the people you are counting on by nagging them.

Contacting Targeted Faculty

Certainly if you are in the same metropolitan area or state as a department to which you might apply, it would be foolish not to try to get an appointment with or attend a seminar given by a targeted faculty member. It can seem a bit odd to such a person later reading in your personal statement that you wish to consign your academic future to him or her, yet you could not be bothered to come across town to meet.

For distant departments, we advise the following. In early autumn send an e-mail to the targeted faculty member briefly identifying yourself and in a very few sentences describing your research agenda. Say that you are considering applying and wonder if the faculty member is still working on "x" or remains interested in "y". Say that you will follow up in a week with a phone call and do so. Many faculty will indeed respond to you. If you receive no response, this is still a worthwhile effort, since that professor will find your statement of purpose somewhat familiar when he or she begins reading it and will credit you with having been serious enough to try to make contact.

Several of the departments you are considering will have recent MAPSS graduates in them. These persons can be valuable resources for you, and they will certainly be important in your post-admissions recruitment visits.

Follow up

Giving careful advice, writing letters of recommendation, and otherwise supporting your applications is laborious and time-consuming work. Failure to keep your recommenders closely informed on the outcome of your applications is the height of professional and personal discourtesy. It is also quite foolish, as you can use our help to properly evaluate your financial aid offers, interpret faculty contacts, get off wait lists, and ultimately determine which offer of admission to accept.

The MAPSS leadership works hard to ensure the spread of applications in any discipline across a sufficient number of institutions to make it likely that everyone has at least one offer. In the current environment of widespread wait list usage, the MAPSS Director, Associate Director, and Johnson Instructors are the main clearinghouse of information as to which departments have made offers and to whom. Remember that MAPSS has a

strong track record with most of the departments to which you might apply. Make the best use of that record of attainment.

J. MacAloon, C. Cyrenne, 05/03/12