

# How to Apply to US Graduate Schools ?

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## How to achieve this goal?

1. Be confident: everybody can go to study abroad
2. Know where the opportunities exist
3. Know what the schools and professors want
4. Prepare your applications tailored specifically for them

## Financial aids available for foreign students

- **Research Assistants (RA):** Professors seek research funding and "hire" RAs
  - Professors spend TIME and MONEY
- **Fellowships:** Students come with external financial aids, but are quickly required to get an advisor
  - Professors spend TIME
- **In all cases, the reputation of schools and professors depend on the success of their graduate students**

## Goal

- **Get admission, with financial aids, into top US graduate schools**
- This talk provides a **faculty perspective**:
  - How do schools and professors select their graduate students?
  - What is a strong graduate school application?

## The US graduate school system

- **Example:** ECE@UIUC (ranked 3rd in EE and 4th in CE in US News; 96 professors) admission record in Fall 2003
- Number of applications: 2198
- Admission offers with aids: 175
  - Acceptances: 84 (9 Fellows, 53 RAs, 22 TAs)
    - Average GPA: 3.73/4.00
    - Average GRE Scores: 91% Q; 91.3%A; 71.9% V
  - Declinations: 91
- Admission offers without aid: 116
  - Acceptance: 47
  - Declinations: 69

Only domestic students can get TAs (Teaching Assistantships)

## Cost for each graduate student per year (at UIUC)

- Tuition and indirect cost (to school): \$23,000
- Salary + benefit (to student): \$20,000
- Others (travels, publications, computer services, lab accesses, materials): \$5,000 - \$50,000
- Total cost per year: \$50,000 - \$100,000

=> Together with the time commitment, it is a **big investment** from the school and professor

## What do school and professors expect from a graduate student?

### During the school:

- **Carry out research**  
*Require:* intelligent, creative, motivated, proactive, able to work with others
- **Publish papers**  
*Require:* communication skills, well organized
- Assist teaching  
*Require:* communication skills

### After the school:

- Have a successful career

## Application package

- Standard form
- Curriculum vitae (CV)
- Personal statement (PS)
- Recommendation letters (preferable 3)
- Test scores (TOEFL, GRE)

Note: Even if the school doesn't ask for all of these, you still should submit them all.

## Action plan

1. Take TOEFL, GRE/GMAT, TSE (if appropriate).
2. Obtain application brochures by emails or from Web.
3. Get official transcripts from your schools.
4. Select 5-15 schools to apply for.
5. Write Curriculum Vitae, and Personal Statement.
6. Contact 2-3 people to write reference letters.
7. Send application packages and application fee
8. Exchange emails with schools and professors

All of these require a lot of **thinking and preparation**

## Selection process

- At some schools, the selection is done by the departmental graduate admission committee
  - Students come and are guaranteed to be supported for the first 1-2 years (typically in form of TAs)
  - Need to find an advisor (e.g. TA -> RA or Fellow -> RA) as soon as possible
- At many others, professors directly made their offers (with or without RA) to incoming students
  - Most schools require PhD students to get an advisor for admission

## Selection algorithm

1. Test scores: GRE  $\geq$  X and TOEFL  $\geq$  Y?
2. Which school?  
Top: Tsinghua (China), IIT (India), NTU (Taiwan), NUS (Singapore),...
3. GPA (-> class rank) & Awards
4. Background and research experiences
5. Recommendation letters
6. Personal statement
7. Direct correspondences (emails, phones)

## Advice to students

- High test scores only get you into the short list
- To be selected, you have to make a standout application
- What make an application standout?
  - CV, personal statement, reference letters, and direct correspondence
- Schools/professors read these to **get an image of the candidate**

## Test scores

- Key for achieving good scores is practice
  - Lot of resources (books, websites) available
  - USguide ([www.svduhoc.vnn.usguide/](http://www.svduhoc.vnn.usguide/)) has a lot of information
- Target test scores:
  - Good enough: TOEFL: 580 and GRE: 1,800
  - Ideal: TOEFL: 600 and GRE: 2,000

Note: Some schools/professors don't pay much attention to the GRE scores

## Curriculum vitae

- Spend time write and rewrite CV.
- Study examples on the Web.
- Make it **short** (1-2 pages) and sharp
- Most notable:
  - GPA: Overall GPA and Technical GPA
  - Class rank
  - Awards/Honors
  - Research experiences
  - Publications
  - Special talents/skills

### Key: indication of an outstanding student

## Personal Statement (PS)?

- In 2 pages, it should provide:
  - A **clear** and **outstanding image** of **yourself**
  - You general plans for what to do in school and afterwards
  - These plans should be **specific** and **make sense** given your background and abilities.
- Good statement showcase the good side of your personality:
  - You are enthusiastic but not lightheaded
  - You are driven but not overly aggressive
- It also shows that you have effective writing style and good communication skills.

## Design your PS

- Think about your goals first
- Have a clear idea of what you want to achieve
- Ask yourself the following questions:
  - What do you want to achieve?
  - How do plan to achieve it?
  - What kind of self-image do you want to present?
  - Why do you want to study in the US?
  - What is your plan in the US?
  - What is your plan after graduation
- Answers should be unique!

## How to write an effective PS?

- Learn American communication style by reading articles written by Americans.
- Style: **specific, factual** (citing little stories or concrete examples). **No vague** statements
- Read sample essays -- good ones and bad ones.
- Discuss your PS with others -- ideally including experts.
- Spend time to write and rewrite
- Plan to use at least 50 to 100 hours to write your PS.

## Reference Letters

- Reference letters are very important:
  - They confirm your qualifications; and
  - Provide additional information about you that application forms and scores do not.
- A good reference letter should be **reasonable** and **specific**.
  - Reasonable means that the person writing the letter **knows you well** and **has the qualifications** to evaluate you.
  - Specific means that the person cites examples, provides specific information, and tells little stories about the student.
    - Example: what is your rank in the class? What is the outcome of the project you have done? How do you relate to others?
  - No vague comments.

## English communication skills

- This is different with the TOFEL taking test skill
- Being a good researcher requires being effective at:
  - Exchanging ideas via emails, at seminars, meetings, conferences
  - Writing papers
  - Giving talks
- These will be judged through PS and direct correspondences

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## Which schools to apply?

- Use school ranking from [usnews.com](http://usnews.com) or National Academies (from VEF website)
- Visit school websites to see if they do research in your areas of interest
- May contact the professors before applying
- Also consider:
  - It would be very helpful if the school already has some successful Vietnamese students.
  - Universities in boring states are much less competitive
  - Small schools are more likely pay close attention to your application

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## Contact professors in US

- Send a personalized email to the professor:
  - Make it short but sharp
  - Personalized letter gets more attention.
    - Indicate that you visited prof's homepage and find a good match
  - Don't send exactly the same letter to every professor
- Attach your CV with the letter
  - No Word document, use text document instead.
- **Mention if you already have a fellowship from credential sources (VEF, government,...)**

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## Do your homework... ... knowledge is your power

- Study the guides
  - Lots of information on the Web (see end)
- Study the schools
  - Visit schools' websites
  - Visit professors' homepages
  - Learn about their current research
- Study the US culture
  - Communication styles: Web, news, movies
  - Understand the US culture in advance is a strong point

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## Useful websites

- USguide:  
[usguide.hypermart.net/](http://usguide.hypermart.net/)  
[www.svduhoc.vnn.vn/usguide/](http://www.svduhoc.vnn.vn/usguide/)  
(a guide by Vietnamese students)
- BeBeyond:  
[www.bebeyond.com/StudyAbroad/StudyAbroad.html](http://www.bebeyond.com/StudyAbroad/StudyAbroad.html)  
(an English guide by Chinese students)

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## Conclusion

To be a successful applicant to top US grad schools:

- Be motivated
- Be persistent
- Be specific
- Create a standout image
- Do your homework: study and think!
- Advice to the universities in Vietnam:
  - Create awards/recognitions to identify top students (e.g. best students in certain courses or years, Dean's list of top students,...)
  - Offer plenty of research experiences (e.g. final year projects, independent study, undergraduate research projects,...).

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