



Graduate Programs in U.S. Universities
Applications and Admissions:
Process and Procedures
October, 2009

CONGRATULATIONS!

Application Action Plan



GOAL

- To get admission, with partial financial aid, into top U.S. graduate programs.

How to Achieve this Goal?

- Be confident;
- Know where the opportunities exist;
- Know what the schools and professors want;
- Prepare your applications tailored specifically for them.

Financial Aid Available for Graduate Students

- **Research Assistants (RA):** Professors seek research funding and hire RAs (**more usual**).
 - Professors spend TIME and MONEY
- **Teaching Assistants (TA):** Professors get \$\$ from the department or graduate school and hire TAs (**less usual**).
 - Professors spend TIME and MONEY

Not from beginning
- **Fellows:** Students come with external financial aid, but are quickly required to get an advisor.
 - Professors spend TIME
- **In all cases, reputation of schools and professors depends on success of their graduate students.**

Cost for Each Graduate Student per Year

- Average total cost per year: \$40,000 - \$50,000
 - Tuition and indirect cost (to school)
 - Salary + benefits (to student)
 - Others (travels, publications, computer services, access to labs, materials, etc.)
- => Together with the time commitment, it is a **big investment** of the school and professor in graduate students.

What does the School and Professors Expect from Graduate Students?

During your degree program:

You need to work hard to

- **Carry out research**

Requires you to be: intelligent, creative, motivated, proactive, able to work with others

- **Publish papers**

Requires: communication skills, being well organized

- **Assist with teaching**

Requires: communication skills (esp. spoken English)

After your degree program:

- Have a successful career

Prepare to Apply

- Prepare application documents
- Know application timelines
- Submit application timely

Be well aware of

- Competitiveness of US University admission
- No influence from VEF



Application Package

- Cover letter
- Check list
- Application form
- Statement of purpose (SOP) aka essay
- Letters of recommendation (incl. one from VEF)
- Other supporting documents
 - Educational documents
 - Certified transcripts (translated) with Vietnam's grading system available from Institute of International Education (IIE)
 - University diplomas
 - Evidence of financial resources (VEF letter of financial support)
 - Evidence of English level proficiency (TOEFL) (sent by ETS)
 - Academic admission exams (GRE) (sent by ETS)
 - Awards, merits (certified translation)
 - Curriculum vitae (resume)
 - Explanation of Vietnamese name

Application Form

- IMPORTANT to state that you are “a nominee for a VEF Fellowship” and that you are “seeking supplementary/partial financial support from the school”.
- check (✓) boxes asking that you are requesting financial support* from the university.

Action Plan

1. Have your transcripts (translated, description of courses , Vietnam's grading system - available from IIE), university diplomas, awards translated and notarized (by universities/ public notary office)
2. Search application requirements from school Web site (from graduate school and department; investigate requirements and deadlines), note the **Institution Code(s)** and **Department Code(s)** (for ETS to send TOEFL and GRE scores)
3. Concentrate on 5 recommended schools
4. Write & rewrite SOP (tailored to each program, contact SOP reviewers for editing and refining)
5. Contact additional (3) professors who know you well to write LORs
(Please do not initiate to contact the U.S. professors who interviewed you.)
6. Send application packages (online or paper) and application fee (if required, keep receipt)
7. Follow up
 1. With admission office (complete document set)
 2. With professors (email subject: important, different from)
 3. By checking online status

All of this requires a lot of **thinking** and **preparation**.

Selection Process

- Only complete applications are reviewed
- Possible interview (in-person, or phone)
- In general, the selection is approved by an admission committee
 - At some schools, the selection is done by the **departmental** graduate admission committee
 - At many others, professors directly make their offers (with or without RA) to incoming students
 - Most schools require Ph.D. candidates to get an advisor for admission

Selection Factors

- Statement of purpose (SOP)
- Letters of recommendation (LOR) (*should be different*)
- Background and research experience
- GPA (class rank) & awards
- Test scores: TOEFL $\geq Y$ and GRE $\geq X$: (GRE General Test, GRE Subject Test)
- Reputation of home university
- Direct correspondence (emails, phone calls)

What Makes an Application Stand out?

- High test scores only get you into the short list
- To be selected, you have to make an application that stands out
 - SOP, LORs, CV, and direct correspondence
- Schools/professors read these to **get an image of the candidate**

Letters of Recommendation (LOR)

- Letters of recommendation are very important:
 - They confirm your qualifications; and
 - Provide additional information about you that application forms and scores do not.
 - A good letter of recommendation should be **reasonable, specific, & personalized**
 - **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 was your rank in class? What is the outcome of a project you have done? How do you relate to others?
 - **Personalized** recommendation letters that give insight into what kind of person you are and show that the recommenders believe in your potential.
- => **Recommender & contents of LOR should match SOP** (research experience, work experience)

Curriculum Vitae

- Spend time writing and rewriting CV
- Make it short (1-2 pages) and sharp
- Most notable:
 - GPA: Overall GPA and Technical GPA
 - Class rank
 - Awards/honors
 - Research experience
 - Publications
 - Special talents/skills

Key: indication of an outstanding student

Recommended U.S. Universities

- Five recommended U.S. universities.
- Others: refer to
 - school ranking from <http://www.usnews.com/sections/rankings/index.html>,
or
 - rankings of Ph.D. programs at <http://www.phds.org/rankings>.
- Also consider:
 - It would be very helpful if the school already has some successful VEF Fellows, Vietnamese students.
- **Google search:** Key words of research interest, fields of study
-> professor names -> schools

Contact University & Professors in the U.S.

- Contact admissions office by e-mail -- the quickest and easiest way to get answers.
- Send a personalized email to the professor
 - Make it short but sharp.
 - Personalized letter gets more attention.
 - Indicate that you visited professor's homepage and find a good match.
 - Don't send exactly the same letter to every professor.
- Attach your CV with the letter.

Do your homework . . .

Knowledge is your power

- Study the guides
 - Lots of information on the Web
- Study the schools
 - Visit schools' Web sites
 - Visit professors' homepages
 - Learn about their current research

Application Time Lines

- Application seasons: late September to mid-December
 - Difference from university to university, from discipline to discipline
 - Weekly reviews of **complete** applications.
- Encouraged to apply early
- Admission decision: December 15 to early March.
- **Deadline to inform VEF: April 1**

Application Submission

Online application

- Fast
- Lower application fee
- Can track the application status on line

Paper application

- Takes time for mailing
- More expensive
- Cannot track the application status on line

* Some universities have online application only

Mail Documents to the U.S.

- Pay close attention to application deadlines.
- Submit all documents electronically IF the school allows. Be sure your scans are very, very clear!
- If not, mail your documents directly to universities.
- **USE EXPRESS MAIL.**
- Keep track of the documents after sending.

Tips Shared by VEF Fellow Cohort 2007

- Stated admission criteria are not always the “musts”, exceptions do exist!
- You are the **author of your SOPs**, the SOP reviewer will provide advice and comments only. **Contact your SOP reviewer early** so that you have more time to improve it.
- If a school has its **own form of LOR**, use it (give it to your recommenders).
- Certified transcripts and diplomas can be translated and **notarized at the universities** you have attended.
- Work **diligently** and **patiently**.

Conclusions

To be a successful applicant to top U.S. graduate schools:

- Be proactive
- Be motivated
- Be persistent
- Be specific
- Create an image that stands out
- Do your homework: study and think!

**Thank you
&
GOOD LUCK!**



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