

# GRADUATE STUDY IN PHILOSOPHY

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## I. Is graduate study in philosophy right for you?

If you're seeking a fast track to wealth and power, you might want to consider something other than philosophy. But if you are philosophically driven, have substantial demonstrated talent for philosophy, and think you would like to teach, you may want to consider graduate study in philosophy and an academic career. Academics get to pursue their intellectual passions professionally, often with considerable autonomy, have comparatively flexible schedules, and (if they gain tenure) have intellectual freedom and job security. Salaries are usually decent, and the academic lifestyle can be very attractive. If you're a member of a demographic group not well represented among philosophers, you may have the chance to open the eyes of younger fellow-members to the insights of philosophy. Philosophers, like many academics, often express amazement that they get paid to do something they love so much. But you also need to be realistic. Graduate school is no picnic, and academic jobs, especially prestigious academic jobs, are scarce. Here are some things you ought to know.

- **You need a Ph.D.** There's not much you can do professionally with an M.A. in philosophy, and most of the best graduate programs don't even offer a separate M.A. degree (though they may award an M.A. to students en route to a Ph.D., or may award a "terminal" M.A. to Ph.D. students who don't want or aren't allowed to finish). There are some M.A. programs whose graduates go on to more elite Ph.D. programs elsewhere. Such M.A. programs are usually for students who were not philosophy majors or did not attend institutions with a strong, mainstream philosophy major, though it may be possible to be admitted to them with a weak background from a strong program such as the one at Rutgers. It's worth emphasizing, however, that there is no guarantee that an M.A. from one of these programs will lead to admission to an elite Ph.D. program.
- **Academia is the destination.** The main thing a Ph.D. in philosophy is good for is to get an academic job. You shouldn't pursue a Ph.D. in philosophy unless you really want to spend the rest of your life thinking about philosophy and teaching it, since that is what the doctoral degree normally leads to. You should not apply to graduate programs in philosophy as a default choice, attractive only because you're not sure what else you want to do.

There are three main kinds of academic jobs in philosophy: (1) positions in research universities, (2) positions at liberal arts colleges or state universities that do not have graduate programs, and (3) positions at community colleges. A Ph.D. is necessary for all three sorts of academic jobs.

- **What philosophers do.** The main responsibilities of any academic are research (writing books and articles), teaching, and to a lesser extent, service (departmental, university, and professional). The importance of these three kinds of duties varies depends on the sort of program one is in (research tends to

dominate at research programs, teaching dominates at liberal arts and community colleges, etc.) and whether or not one winds up spending time in academic administration, such as serving as department chairperson.

- **Be realistic.**

- **Getting in.** Top programs receive approximately 150 – 300 applications and admit between 2 – 15%. The application process is highly competitive. Random factors can play an unpredictable role.

- **Finishing.** Anywhere from one quarter to one half of those who start Ph.D. programs fail to complete the degree.

In graduate school the required levels of self-discipline, originality, and ability to be a “self-starter” – on your own to find and pursue worthwhile intellectual projects, and to engage fellow philosophers in intellectual inquiry – are several notches above the levels required to be a successful undergraduate major. Be honest with yourself about your capacities in these areas. Did you invent good paper topics yourself? Or were you best at writing papers on clear topics provided by your professors?

- **Getting a job.** Despite increased undergraduate enrollments due to the Baby Boomlet, there are still many more Ph.D.s than there are academic positions. Especially if you are interested in a position in a research program, there is enormous competition for these jobs. Most of the better students at top programs (e.g., the top 25 programs) eventually get tenure-track jobs of some kind, though not necessarily at research universities, and these tenure-track jobs often come only after one or two one-year jobs at different institutions, often with demanding teaching loads. The success rates at lower-ranked programs are lower. For a sobering view about job prospects, see the companion article by Thomas Benton, “Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go.”
- **Be flexible.** While the very best students from the very best programs often receive multiple job offers, many highly qualified Ph.D.s have more limited options. You must be flexible geographically and willing to move, for instance, taking one or more one-year jobs before finding a tenure-track position. Accommodating the parallel career aspirations of a partner can make flexibility all the more crucial.
- **Graduate school is no picnic.** Many graduate students, fortunate in the programs they enter, find graduate school one of the most intellectually exhilarating times in their lives, and one filled with other interesting and companionable people devoted to the same discipline that excites them. For many, however, it is a period of substantial stress, both financial and personal. See the companion articles “A Bad Reputation” by Mary Ann Mason, “Grad-School Blues,” by Piper Fogg, and “Balance Sheet: Staying Healthy, and Even Happy, in Graduate School,” by Piper Fogg.
- **Consider how you want to balance family and career responsibilities.** From many perspectives an academic career can readily accommodate having a family. Your time is more flexible than in many jobs, and you have the summers with no concrete duties. On the other hand, making

tenure requires a more than full-time commitment, and universities are rather poor at offering childcare facilities, etc. For a discussion of this, see the companion article by Mary Ann Mason, “A Bad Reputation.” The pessimistic outlook she reports is more at home in the laboratory sciences than in philosophy, but her report should be taken seriously.

- **Make sure you are committed.** It’s not enough to have gotten decent grades as an undergraduate philosophy major. Very few majors in any discipline go on to graduate work in that discipline and a career as an academic. Make sure you are passionate about philosophy and have demonstrated talent for original work. Have a Plan B to pursue in case you are not accepted at a graduate program of the caliber that will enable you to pursue a successful academic career.
- **Surviving the tenure system.** Almost all colleges and universities have a tenure system, which means that after about five years of service as an assistant professor, your performance will be assessed by several levels of university committees in order to determine whether your record merits the guarantee of a life-long position at the institution. Since this is a major commitment on the part of the institution, the review is usually dauntingly rigorous and nerve-wracking. If you achieve tenure, you have a permanent guarantee of a job at the institution (barring future bad conduct on your part). If you fail to achieve tenure, you will have to seek employment elsewhere after a terminal year. You may have trouble finding a job, or you may only find a job at an institution less attractive than your original one. On the other hand, you may find a job at an institution that’s a better fit for your talents and interests, and one at which you will be happier.
- **Other options.** There are a few possibilities for combining graduate training in philosophy with advanced work in other fields. For example, there are programs offering joint philosophy and law degrees, and programs involving philosophy, biology, medicine, and/or law that prepare one to work in biomedical ethics. These programs may lead to jobs inside or outside philosophy departments (sometimes even jobs outside academia proper). If you think you have interdisciplinary interests of this sort, talk to a faculty member in the department who can best advise you.

## II. Long before you apply

- Make sure you take a coherent and rigorous course of study, including courses in the core areas of analytic philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, history of philosophy, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of science). You should take enough courses in these topics at the 300 and especially 400 levels to demonstrate to admissions committees that you have substantial training and can do well in high-level demanding work.
- Get to know several professors reasonably well, especially tenured professors (take more than one course from them; talk to them during office hours; give them a chance to get to know you personally). They will be able to give you good advice, and in due course they can provide detailed and not merely formulaic reference letters for you. Their assessments of your philosophical

talent will be much more valuable (to you, and to admissions committees) than the opinions of adjunct faculty or TAs. Learn which of your instructors falls into which of these categories!

- Consult the Director of Undergraduate Studies more than once about the course of study you are planning, so that you can ensure it will prepare you well for graduate admission and work. The D.U.S. is available to answer any other questions about graduate school.
- Involve yourself in activities such as the undergraduate philosophy club and the undergraduate philosophy journal. Become engaged in professional activities, such as attending philosophy colloquia at Rutgers and other nearby institutions. Attend local philosophy conferences or the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division annual meeting. Find out what the world of philosophy, beyond the undergraduate major, is like.
- Consider presenting a paper to an undergraduate philosophy conference and submitting a paper to an undergraduate philosophy journal. These will be excellent learning experiences, and on your applications will help to demonstrate your commitment to the field.
- If possible, find a position as a research assistant for a professor, especially if the work goes beyond routine clerical duties. This will be an excellent way to get to know one of your professors better, and to expand your research skills.
- Consider writing a senior or honors thesis. This, too, is an excellent way to get to know one of your professors better, and a way to try out your wings on an extended original research project.
- If possible, find a chance to teach (either at Rutgers or in your community; either philosophy or some other subject). If you have a career in philosophy you will spend a good deal of time teaching, and you don't want to discover four years into your doctorate that you really dislike teaching, or aren't any good at it.

### **III. What to expect in Graduate School**

- 5 – 8 years for the Ph.D.
- 2 – 3 years of coursework, with almost all courses requiring a substantial term paper
- Various distribution requirements that will include logic and history of philosophy, as well as subject areas such as epistemology, ethics, etc.
- Qualifying and/or doctoral candidacy examinations
- Writing a dissertation (200 – 400 pages) which must be an original contribution to scholarship
- Some combination of fellowship and Teaching Assistantship support, which will usually provide just barely enough to live on. Don't go to graduate school without some such financial aid package, ideally for five years. The best programs offer them to students they really want. The prospects of academic employment are too uncertain, and the salaries of academics are too modest, to justify going into significant debt in pursuit of the Ph.D. If you do not receive a decent financial aid package, take it as a message about how your talents

measure up against the national competition. (Terminal M.A. programs often offer little or no financial support, though this may vary.)

#### IV. Applying to Graduate School

- You need to start on this process early on, usually during the spring semester of your junior year. Many who have gone through this process recommend that you complete as much of the application process as possible during the summer before your senior year. Almost all graduate programs start in the fall; application deadlines are the winter before (typically December – February). Consult with the faculty who know you best. Ask them to tell you candidly whether they believe you have the talent to go on to graduate school and a career as a philosopher. Talk to them about which programs it is realistic for you to apply to, and which ones would best answer your special interests in philosophy. Ask whether they would be willing to serve as references for you, and if so, whether they can write a strong letter or merely a “supportive” letter. Start investigating which programs would interest you. As you develop your set of programs of interest, make a list of important details for each one – the deadline for applications, whether they require GRE scores, whether they accept or require online applications and/or letters of recommendation, how long a writing sample they want, whether they want a list of courses you’ve taken, etc. Make sure you start the application process soon enough so that if there are surprises – Program X only announces half-way through its electronic application process that it requires hard-copy letters of recommendation – you have time to adjust.
- **Identify the programs to which you want to apply.** Brian Leiter’s *Philosophical Gourmet Report* (<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com> – see the Rutgers Philosophy Department website link) provides useful rankings of programs and subspecialties and lots of useful information and advice about graduate study in philosophy, though you shouldn’t attach too much significance to small differences in the rankings. (For a skeptical view about these rankings, see the companion piece by Richard Heck “About PGR.”) Scour departments’ websites to see what areas the faculty identify as their areas of interest; read some of their papers to see whether their approaches interest you; read the graduate students’ webpages to see what they’re interested in and working on; look at department colloquia to see whom the department invites to give talks; look at what courses are actually offered (not just listed in the catalog); find out what other activities such as conferences, discussion groups, or journals are hosted by the department; check out the degree requirements to see how heavily the department is focused in certain areas (e.g., historical vs. contemporary approaches). Talk to Rutgers professors who may have taught or visited or received their degrees from programs of potential interest to you. If at all possible, visit schools of interest, sit in on graduate courses, and talk with grad students and professors.
  - **Strength of program, general.** Only consider programs in the top 50. If you really want a job at a research university, you probably shouldn’t seriously consider programs outside of the top 25 or so. If you’re attracted

to jobs more heavily oriented towards teaching (say, at a liberal arts school), less highly-ranked programs may serve your purposes. Be aware that fine philosophers, who can provide excellent training, are now scattered across a great many doctoral programs, not just clustered in the top few institutions.

- **Strength of program, subspecialties.** It's important to study in a reasonably well-rounded program, both for those who don't yet know what subfields interest them most (you need to be exposed to different areas of philosophy at the graduate level to make an informed decision about where to specialize) and for those who do (specialists in any field need a decent background in other areas of philosophy). Pay special attention to programs that are strong in your specialty area (if you have one). At the same time, watch out for programs that may be strong in your specialty area, but also have many faculty and students working in areas which you regard as anathema, and whom you wouldn't find congenial companions for five years.
  - **Realistic choices.** Try to have a realistic assessment of the strength of your application, and submit most of your applications to places where you have a realistic prospect of admission. Add one or two "aspirational" applications and one or two "insurance" applications. You should apply to no fewer than eight programs. Bear in mind that the application process is expensive. Each program requires an application fee (in 2008-09, fees averaged around \$70 per program), and the associated GRE fees (in 2008-09, \$140), mailing, copying, etc., costs can add up. Some programs will waive their application fee if you can show financial hardship – take advantage of this if you qualify.
  - **Time required to apply.** The application process is *extremely time-consuming*. You should expect that it will take the same amount of time during the fall of your senior year that a 3 credit class would take – *or more*. Be mindful of this when you choose your schedule for that fall semester! Our recent undergraduates going through this process cannot emphasize this fact enough.
- **Application components.** Often a first cut is made on the basis of objective data, such as your GPA, your GREs, and the status of your undergraduate institution and its philosophy program. These factors can continue to play a role, but at this point letters of reference and your writing sample will also become extremely important.
    - **Undergraduate grades.** Anything below a 3.5 (overall) and a 3.5 (Philosophy) at Rutgers is going to be problematic at the top 50 programs. Normally your grades should be significantly higher.
    - **GREs.** These are often much more difficult than students expect, especially the verbal section (even for those who received an 800 on their SAT verbal section). Study hard for these, ideally during the summer before senior year, and take many practice tests. Take

the GREs early enough so that if you don't do as well as you'd like, there's time to take them again and even a third time.

- **Statement of purpose.** This will be part of each application. Some programs require both a statement of academic and a statement of personal purpose. The statement need not be profound, but it should be thoughtful, mature, and well written. It is very helpful to provide a statement that helps personalize you as more than just another bright student interested in epistemology or metaphysics. Try to tailor or adapt your statement for different programs to specific features of these programs, rather than submitting the same generic statement to each program. Familiarize yourself with the work of the most prominent faculty in each program you're applying to, and, if appropriate, cite their names as individuals with whom you would be particularly interested in working. (But be careful that you don't insult others in the same area by not mentioning them!)
- **Letters of recommendation.** You are typically asked for three letters of recommendation. These should all be academic references, and it's usually best if they are all from philosophers (unless you're explicitly interested in interdisciplinary work). Best yet are letters from senior professors with established reputations in their fields. Provide your reference writers with work you did in their courses (copies of papers and examinations), transcripts, a rough draft of your statement of purpose, and a list of the programs to which you plan to apply. To repeat: try to get to know at least two philosophy professors reasonably well (take more than one course from them; talk to them during office hours; give them a chance to get to know you personally), so that they can provide detailed and not merely formulaic references.

Have your letters filed with the Rutgers Office of Career Services. This will cost you a little money, but remember that your professors may take jobs elsewhere, retire, or die. It is important that you obtain recommendations when their memories of you and your abilities are fresh in their minds.

Do not wait to ask for letters of reference until two weeks before the application deadline when your professors are busy with grading and the end-of-semester crush.

Many programs now offer, or require, electronic submission of applications and of letters of reference. Set these up for your letter writers well in advance, and later check whether all the letters have been submitted successfully. For hard-copy letters, provide stamped, addressed envelopes. Frequently there is a hard-copy form for the reference to fill out. Fill out the appropriate portions of these forms (including choice about whether or not to waive your right of access to the letter) and provide them to your letter writers in a timely fashion. Admissions committees

sometimes take a letter more seriously if you have waived your right to see it, but this choice is up to you. In some cases the letter writer sends the letter directly to the program. In other cases, the letter writer will seal the letter in an envelope and return it to you to be included in your application. Work out the logistical details early on, so you are not handicapped by professors' less frequent visits to campus after final exams start at the end of the fall semester.

- **Writing sample.** Give the writing sample a good deal of thought and work hard on it. Don't just use an unrevised short paper that got you an A in some upper-division course. Use a more substantial paper that shows your best work (especially your originality). *Revise and perhaps extend it, ideally with the help of feedback from your professor or philosophically knowledgeable other critics.* The prevailing standards for writing samples have become very competitive at the top programs. You cannot overestimate the importance of working hard to write the strongest possible writing sample.

If you have written a senior thesis, it is likely to provide a good basis for your writing sample, since it is likely to be much more polished and deep than a strong term paper. (But be aware that many programs set a page limit, shorter than most theses, on the writing sample.) If you would like to use a portion of your thesis for this purpose, you will need to have written the relevant sections during the fall semester of your senior year. This means getting started earlier: thinking about it seriously during your junior year, and ideally starting to conduct research on it by the spring of your junior year and certainly over the summer before your senior year. This will also give you a longer working relationship with your adviser, who will likely write letters for you.

## V. Deciding where to go

If you are accepted by more than one attractive program, collect more information to determine which one would be best for you. If possible, make campus visits (many programs host group visits for all students they have admitted; these are a great chance to meet your prospective peers as well as older graduate students and professors – but of course the department will make sure to put its best foot forward during this event, so keep your eyes open and ask probing questions). However, much information can also be collected at a distance. You should also discuss your choice with your faculty advisers.

- **Strength of program.** All else being equal, choose the program that is ranked most highly (though you shouldn't attach much significance to small differences in rankings). Among the obvious other assets, a higher-ranked program will almost always have a better job placement record.



- **Strength of subspecialty.** All else being equal, choose the program that is strongest in the areas in which you want to specialize (though you shouldn't attach much significance to small differences in rankings). Whose work most interests you? How many people does the program have in your subspecialty and related areas?
- **Talk to current graduate students.** Contact current graduate students at the programs you're considering. Ask them about the realities of financial support, how well their support enables them to cope with the cost of living in their area, student morale, accessibility to faculty, things they like most about their program, and things they like least. Make a special point of talking to graduate students in your specialty area, especially anyone working with faculty with whom you might like to work.
- **Finding congenial faculty.** Find a program with faculty in your subspecialty whose work especially interests you, and who have earned the reputation of being good for graduate students to work with. It's better to find a program with more than one such faculty member. You want to be exposed to different ideas. Also, you don't want to have all your eggs in one basket, in case that one faculty member leaves, or the person isn't accepting more dissertation students, or you find you don't work well with him or her.
- **Financial aid.** Compare the guaranteed and/or expected financial aid packages of programs. Which program offers more aid or aid for more years? Which program offers more fellowship aid? Is there any summer support available? Which program offers substantive opportunities to teach, especially (later in your program) to design and teach your own course?
- **Placement success.** Compare the data about job placement of different programs. How many students find tenure-track jobs? During their first year on the market? In later years? What kinds of institutions hire them?
- **Opportunities to take courses at near-by institutions.** A program located near other programs with strong faculty that offers courses of interest that you would be eligible to take can be a notable asset.
- **Special note about applying to Rutgers.** If you apply to the Rutgers Philosophy Department, your application will be reviewed on the same basis as that of all other applicants. However, you should know that we strongly encourage our undergraduates to apply to *other* graduate programs. You've now spent four or five years taking courses from the philosophers at Rutgers, and you will learn the most from being exposed to the ideas and perspectives of philosophers different from the ones who have trained you up until now.

## VI. Later transfer to a different program

Although it's unusual, occasionally students find they are not in the right graduate program, and arrange to transfer to another program. This can result in time and

course credit lost, and difficulty integrating oneself socially with a new group of students, but in some cases may be a wise choice.

NOTE: This document was written by Holly Smith, based on a similar document written by David Brink (Philosophy Department, UC San Diego), and on suggestions from Rutgers faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates. We are grateful to Professor Brink for permitting us to use his excellent materials.