

Finding Schools and Deciding Where to Apply

Two good sources of information on graduate departments in sociology are the **American Sociological Association's (ASA) Guide to Graduate Departments** (available in UAH's Department of Sociology) and the websites of graduate departments. National rankings of graduate departments in sociology are compiled and published by **U.S. News & World Report**. A truncated version of their rankings can be viewed, and full list purchased, at the following website:
<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>

Choosing which schools to apply to and then deciding which school is best for you will take some time and careful consideration. Talk with the sociology faculty regarding which graduate programs might be best for you personally and academically. Some issues to consider: (1) the size and location of the town, campus, and department; (2) the availability of assistantships and acceptance rate; (3) whether you wish to pursue an M.A. or Ph.D.; (4) areas in which a department specializes.

Tips

- Consider the characteristics of the areas in which each graduate department you consider is located. Think about whether or not you would be happy living in those areas. Also, consider the affordability of living in various areas.
- Do not apply to a school based upon the presence of a particular faculty member that you would like to work with. That person may change jobs, may not have the time to work with you, or may not be a pleasant person to work with, or you may develop new interests. It is better to focus on finding a well-rounded department rather than one with a faculty member or two whose research interests you.

Do not worry if you are unsure about the area(s) of sociology in which you would like to specialize. Many schools offer a wide range of areas in which students may focus. You, therefore, do not have to make a decision regarding your area(s) of focus right away. If you do have a particular research interest, however, make sure the departments you are applying to have strength in that area.

If you can, visit the department in which you might be interested or attend sociology conferences and try to speak to professors and students from that department.

Applying to Graduate School

If you are planning to attend graduate school immediately after completing your bachelor's degree, you will need to begin preparing to apply no later than the summer before your senior year. This is because most graduate departments set application deadlines in the fall and deadlines for assistantships in early spring, and require that students begin their studies the following fall semester. Also, you will need to begin preparing to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and do some research into various schools.

Sample Timeline

Graduation	Take GRE	Apply	Enter Program
Spring 2015	Summer/Fall 2014	Fall 2014/Spring 2015	Fall 2015

Application requirements will vary from department to department. The best source of information on application requirements is through the websites of individual departments. You can also either download an application from the department website or find an address or phone number through which you can obtain an application.

Graduate application committees usually look most carefully at three components of the application: the applicant's GPA, GRE score, and letters of recommendation. You will also be asked to submit a short personal statement regarding why you wish to study sociology in their department. If this is required, make sure you write it ahead of time and share a copy with faculty you are asking to write letters of recommendation on your behalf. Many schools also require that a writing sample accompany the student's application.

GPA

Just as your high-school GPA was important to your admittance into an undergraduate program, so will your undergraduate GPA be to your application for graduate school. Many of the most competitive graduate departments select applicants with GPA's above 3.5. However, this does not mean that you will be eliminated from consideration if you have a lower GPA. Your transcript—the record of your grades—will also be examined. Students who began their academic career with low grades, but showed remarkable improvement as they worked toward their undergraduate degree will not necessarily be eliminated for consideration by a graduate department.

While a 4.0 GPA is an impressive achievement, it will not guarantee your acceptance to a competitive graduate program. A well-rounded application—one showing excellent letters of recommendation, a strong GPA and GRE score—will be looked upon more favorably than one that merely reports a high GPA. Demonstrating leadership roles in other areas may also enhance your application.

GRE

Your score on the GRE will be one of the most important components of your graduate application. So be sure to allot yourself enough time to prepare for this exam. While you may be able to find classes which are designed to help prepare students for the GRE, these classes are often very expensive (sometimes several thousand dollars), and you can (with discipline) prepare yourself very well by using one of the many study guides available for the GRE. These guides can be purchased in most bookstores and offer test-taking strategies and provide exercises to prepare you for each portion of the exam.

It is best to take the GRE before the fall semester begins since you will be occupied with your studies and submitting graduate school applications in the fall semester of your senior year. It is also wise to take the GRE as early as possible so that you will have time to retake the exam if your original scores are lower than you feel they could be. But, you probably won't want to plan to take the GRE more than once, as the fee for this exam is currently \$195 (November 2014). Students who are eligible for financial aid may also be eligible for a fee waiver. To see if you qualify, visit UAH's Financial Aid Department. For information on the GRE and to schedule your exam, visit <http://www.gre.org>.

Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate departments require that the student have three letters of recommendation submitted with their application. These letters must be from university faculty members. You should request letters of recommendation from instructors who have taught you in class (more than one if possible) and who can attest to the quality of your work and your attitude toward your studies. Make sure you provide faculty with sufficient time prior to the deadline to write a letter. Also, make sure that you have given them all the necessary information including the deadline, website address (if it is an online form), and a stamped addressed envelope with the appropriate form. It is a good idea to give them a list of courses you have had with them with the semester the courses were taken.

Writing Sample

Some graduate departments require that you include a sample of your written work with your application. The length of the sample requested will vary by department—some schools will ask for a paper that is 10-15 pages in length, while others might ask for a paper of up to 25 pages. Fortunately, this portion of the application should not require much extra effort on your part, as you are encouraged to submit a paper that you wrote for an undergraduate course. While it is preferred that this paper be sociological, it is not absolutely necessary. Graduate departments in sociology often welcome students who have earned degrees in other areas of study, even those who have never taken a course in sociology. It is ideal that the paper you submit as part of your application is a good clean copy free of grammatical and spelling errors.