

GRADUATE SCHOOL IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES (OR RELATED HUMANITIES/SOCIAL SCIENCE FIELD) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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Deciding whether to apply

Q. Is graduate school right for me?

A. Graduate school differs from undergraduate education: rather than taking classes across a broad array of disciplines, you focus on a specific area of research. You should know which sub-field you want to study (e.g. American religion, ancient Judaism, religion in Africa, Buddhist Studies, medieval Christianity).

Q. I have good grades as an undergraduate. Does this mean I should go to graduate school?

A. Success at the undergraduate level is an important factor, but it is also important that you 1) enjoy reading and writing academic work; 2) are self-motivated in pursuing projects that interest you; and 3) welcome constructive criticism on your work.

Q. I'm interested in going to graduate school, but I don't have any money. Are there any options for me?

A. Yes, funding is available for many graduate programs. Ph.D. programs at top schools offer funding packages that include full tuition waivers and a stipend for 4-5 years. Master's programs often have fewer sources of internal funding, but you can look for sources of external funding. Many Master's and Ph.D. students work as teaching assistants or instructors to offset the cost of graduate school (especially at public universities). Some schools only admit students if funding is available, while other schools expect students to take out loans or apply for grants. Do your research on the funding opportunities at different schools before you apply.

Q. What does a Master's program involve?

A. A Master's program is usually 2 years long and involves up to a year of coursework and up to a year of research and writing on a Master's thesis. If you're in a sub-field that requires knowledge of specific languages, Master's programs can be helpful for gaining language abilities that you didn't learn as an undergraduate. A Master's program can also let you know whether you want to pursue further graduate education.

Q. What does a Ph.D. program involve?

A. A Ph.D. program usually takes 5-10 years, which are broken down into around 3 years of coursework, studying for and taking qualifying exams, conducting research for your dissertation, and writing your dissertation. A dissertation is a book-length study of a specific issue in your field that makes an original contribution to scholarship. Many Ph.D. students also serve as teaching assistants or instructors during their graduate careers.

Q. I'm really interested in Religious Studies and want to go to graduate school, but I'm worried I won't be able to get a job. What can I do with a Master's or Ph.D. in Religious Studies?

A. A Master's in Religious Studies can make you more competitive for jobs that value critical thinking, knowledge of cultural diversity and religion, and/or communication skills. Graduates of Religious Studies Master's programs go on to work in fields such as education, religious organizations, media, publishing, library science, consulting, or they pursue more education in law school or Ph.D. programs.

In the past a Ph.D. in Religious Studies usually led to a tenure-track job as a professor in a two- or four-year college or university. This is still the main goal for people pursuing a Ph.D. in the humanities, but it is increasingly difficult to obtain. If you decide to get a Ph.D. in Religious Studies, you should be aware of the different careers you could pursue with it aside from being a professor, such as educational technology, university administration, consulting, government work, working for NGOs, the media, etc.

Preparing as an undergraduate

Q. I decided I want to go to graduate school in Religious Studies. What kinds of classes should I take as an undergraduate?

A. In your junior and senior years you should take more classes directly related to your area of interest. If language is an important part of your research area, start taking language classes as soon as you can. In Religious Studies, the course on theories and methods (REST 300) is particularly useful preparation for graduate school. You should write an honor's thesis in the

department or do undergraduate research so you have experience doing research and working closely with a faculty advisor. Your thesis can also be an important part of your application materials.

It's also a good idea to start presenting your research at conferences such as the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion (SECSOR), the regional branch of the American Academy of Religion. In addition, you should consider submitting your work for publication in *Pursuit*, UT's journal of undergraduate research. Doing research, presenting at conferences, and publishing will prepare you well for the expectations of graduate school and academia in general.

Q. What should I do to find a faculty mentor to help me with my undergraduate career and prepare me for graduate school?

A. You should get to know professors in your area of interest by taking multiple classes with them and going to their office hours to discuss your interests. Professors are happy when students share their interests, so you shouldn't feel reluctant to approach them! Find a few professors you can talk to about graduate school to get a range of perspectives on the issue. Ask them to work with you on your honors thesis or other research project. If you aren't sure where to begin, start by making an appointment with your advisor. The Religious Studies faculty's areas of specialization are listed on the website if you want to contact the professor in your area of interest directly.

Q. Is studying abroad good preparation for graduate school?

A. Yes, especially when there's a close connection between your intended field of study and the country where you studied abroad. Studying abroad is often the best way to improve foreign language skills, as well. If the study abroad program involves other specific emphases, such as service learning or archaeology, those can offer additional advantages as graduate school preparation. The Department of Religious Studies offers study abroad programs to Uganda and Jordan, and you can talk to other faculty about university programs for studying abroad in other parts of the world.

Q. I'm really interested in graduate school, but my grades aren't that good. Is there anything I can do to fix this?

A. Grades are an important criterion in graduate school admissions, and a mediocre GPA will prevent you from getting into the most competitive programs. However, if your grades in your area of interest are strong and you do significant research as an undergraduate, this can help

compensate for lower grades overall. If you are in this situation and want to pursue a Ph.D., you should strongly consider getting a Master's degree from a less competitive program before applying to competitive Ph.D. programs.

The application process

Q. When should I start seriously thinking about the application process?

A. The application process takes time, so you should start thinking about it seriously by the spring semester of your junior year. This will give you time to research different programs, study for and take the GRE (and allow time for makeups), and solicit recommendation letters from your professors. Application deadlines are usually in the late fall-early winter (November-January), so you should have your materials together by October.

Q. How do I decide where to apply?

A. Talk to your faculty mentor about different graduate programs and do your own research. Some programs expect students to finish the degree quickly, while others give students more time. Some programs are more competitive, others more collaborative. Some graduate advisors work closely with their students, while others give students more independence. It's important that you choose a graduate program that suits your personality and academic strengths. You should also consider funding packages in different programs, the specializations of the faculty, seniority of the faculty, and the placement of recent graduates.

Q. Can I apply directly to Ph.D. programs even though I don't have a Master's degree?

A. You can apply directly to Ph.D. programs without a Master's, but you have to show that your undergraduate education has prepared you for the rigors of a doctoral program. If you have already done extensive research as an undergraduate and/or mastered some of the languages required by Ph.D. programs, you will have a better chance of getting into a Ph.D. program directly. Otherwise it would be better to apply to Master's programs first.

Q. Should I visit or contact people at the universities to which I'm applying?

A. It's best if you can visit these universities to give yourself a more complete picture of what graduate study would be like there. This also lets you meet the faculty and current graduate students in person and talk to them about specific questions. If you can't visit the campus, you may contact faculty and/or graduate students in your prospective program with specific

questions. Keep in mind that the graduate students will have a better understanding of what it's like to actually be a student in that program.

Q. What do applications include?

Once you've decided on a list of schools, you'll start preparing your application materials. These usually include a personal statement, undergraduate transcripts, writing sample, GRE scores, and three recommendation letters.

Q. What is the GRE, and how important is it in my application?

The Graduate Record Examination is a standardized test that most graduate programs use as a criterion in admission. There is no subject GRE for Religious Studies, so you would only take the general exam. Currently the GRE consists of the Verbal section, Quantitative section, and Analytical Writing section. The essays in the Analytical Writing section are graded by people, so you do not get your results instantly. There are many study guides for the GRE, and it's best to give yourself enough time to prepare.

The importance of your GRE score varies by institution. Some graduate programs have minimum requirements for the GRE, while others don't give it much weight at all. You should check to see if the program to which you're applying has any specific criteria for GRE scores.

Q. Which professors should I ask for recommendation letters?

A. The ideal letter writer is a senior professor in your area of interest from whom you've taken several classes. It's best to have at least one letter writer who has published a lot in her/his field and whose name will be familiar to the faculty reading the letters. This is another issue you can bring to your faculty mentor if you're unsure whom to ask.

Q. When and how should I ask professors for recommendation letters?

A. You should ask your professors about a month in advance for recommendation letters, especially if you need multiple letters from them. Your professors might ask to see your other application materials, particularly your personal statement, so they can write the strongest letter for you.

Q. What should I put in my personal statement?

A. The personal statement for graduate school is very different from an undergraduate application essay. In your personal statement you need to show your familiarity with your sub-field and explain your planned area of research, which should be neither too broad (e.g. Christianity) nor too specific (e.g. a single text). The personal statement is *not* about your life story or personal experiences that shaped your academic path. Unlike undergraduate applications, which admissions officers read, your graduate application will be read by faculty in the department to which you're applying. This means you should tailor each personal statement to a specific department by demonstrating how your research interests align with those of individual faculty members. Make sure to get feedback on your personal statement from your faculty mentor.

Q. How do I choose my writing sample?

A. Your writing sample should demonstrate your ability to do research in your field of interest. It's best to use an honors thesis, seminar paper (for a 400-level class), or other example of undergraduate research. Use a piece of work that has already gone through revisions and does not have errors in spelling and grammar. If you have multiple possibilities and aren't sure how to decide, ask your faculty mentor.

Q. What should I do if I don't get into my desired school?

A. If you don't get into the school you want, or into any school, you can always apply again the next year. There are a limited number of spaces and sometimes programs can't afford to admit all of the qualified applicants. If you applied directly to Ph.D. programs but didn't get in, you should apply to Master's programs the following year.

Last updated January 2014