

Adapted from
“Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School”
by Phil Agre (October 1996)

THE BASIC QUESTIONS:

WHAT is the PhD in Sociology?

Obtaining your PhD in Sociology consists of training in research. The format of graduate schools varies widely. Students usually engage in courses and a large amount of structured reading, and they must pass “comprehensive exams.” Then they conduct more focused and sustained work (research and writing) to complete their dissertation.

WHO should go?

People who love the intellectual life; who love research, scholarship, and teaching for their own sake and for the difference they can sometimes make in the world. The eventual goal of many doctoral students is to get a job as a college professor, or perhaps in industrial or government research.

WHO should not go?

Graduate school is not for everyone. People who simply want more undergraduate courses should not go. It is also not for people who are in a hurry to get a real job or who want to put off going out into the “real” world.

HOW LONG does it take?

The PhD in Sociology is typically a five to eight year program (in the U.S.) of study and research organized by a single department or interdisciplinary program of some university which culminates in a doctoral degree.

HOW TO DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO GET YOUR PHD IN SOCIOLOGY:

GET advice

Your undergraduate education will not enable you to decide whether to go to graduate school. Ask advice from your professors and actively explore the possibility of graduate school. Get advice from different people. Make a guess at the field/topic that you might want to study in graduate school and pick a professor who might know something about that topic. Then, talk to that professor and ask questions.

TRY your hand at research

You should start getting involved in research as an undergraduate so that you can make a well-informed decision about continuing research in graduate school. Undergraduate research projects can take a wide variety of forms. Once you have defined a project and found a supervisor, you can arrange for independent study credit; sign up for some official program at your university and/or in your major (e.g., the honors track); or get a research grant.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS:

Choosing the appropriate school/program

If you have been getting advice and doing research you should know where the good graduate programs for your interests are. You may even know which professors you want to study with. Make sure to look at faculty and their research areas. You should also consider possible fellowships/scholarships and the location of the school. You should expect to apply to five or six schools, depending on the level of competition in your area.

Deadlines

Applications for most PhD programs in Sociology are typically due in December or January. You should start application forms by September of your senior year. You should also apply for fellowships and scholarships at the same time. Deadlines typically fall between November and January. Ask people in the department about the major fellowships in your area and look at fellowships lists on the Web. GREs are also necessary for most PhD Sociology programs. You often need to apply to take these before you apply to graduate school.

The “Statement of Purpose”

You will need to explain why you want to go to graduate school and include some idea about what sort of research you would like to conduct. You should write about a page and half on the subject and take it to the professors you have been getting advice from. Do not be surprised if it takes three to four tries to get it right. Your statement should demonstrate that you know what research is. Try to be concrete and avoid inconsequential details. Tailor your statement to fit the particular departments you’re applying to; show the admissions committee that you’ve done your homework.

Letters of Recommendation

The application to graduate school involves letters of recommendation, usually three or four. Most of these letters will be from professors in the department where you got your undergraduate degree. It helps to get letters from famous professors as opposed to junior ones. In order to get good letters of recommendation it is important to get to know the professors who teach the classes you particularly like so they can write letters for you in the future.

REFERENCE

Agre, Phil. 1996/2001. “Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School.” Retrieved 10/06/08 at <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/grad-school.html>. PDF version available at: <http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/grad-school.pdf>