

How to Apply to Our Doctoral Program and to Doctoral Programs Generally

Having applied to graduate school and spent two years as Director of Graduate Studies here in the Department of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I thought it would be helpful to share some of what I have learned with anyone considering applying to graduate school. While this information could be useful to a variety of people, it is the result of my own experiences and will not apply in all situations. This is geared toward doctoral applicants but might be useful for MA applicants, too.

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DGS as of 2022

Your Process: In American Studies, we get applications from students with a wide variety of interests and experiences. Our applicant pools include students interested in food studies, critical ethnic studies, material culture, oral history, carceral studies, regional identity, music, environmental humanities, digital humanities, and more. Here's what you should do to apply to our program:

1. Identify your research project and/or your research question or questions. Your personal statement should be able to describe in some detail what your dissertation or thesis project will be about, the questions it might answer, and how. This will undoubtedly change, but you need to demonstrate that you are capable of conceiving a rigorous and creative project that will speak to existing work in the field. Most dissertations are still long papers but we support and encourage students to develop alternatives, including but not limited to digital projects, non-linear hybrid projects, and projects including performance or curation.
2. With that project in mind, identify faculty members you want to work with. You are applying to the program to work with a faculty mentor, not applying to a program that will later assign you a mentor. While fixed term faculty will undoubtedly be helpful to you, program regulations stipulate that your advisor be tenure-track or tenured faculty. (A fixed-term faculty person is just as qualified as someone on the tenure-track but they lack many of the privileges. They will sometimes be titled as a teaching professor or professor of the practice.) Note: we have a list of "affiliate" and "adjunct" faculty on our faculty page. These people might end up working with you, but they are not full-time American Studies faculty and cannot be the primary advisor for your dissertation.
3. Contact that faculty person, briefly introduce yourself, and ask if they are accepting new student mentees in the coming academic year. If they are, request a phone call and use that call to learn more about them and their work. While it is useful for them to learn something about you, this call is more about you learning from them about their mentorship style, their expectations for students, and their future work. They will have a chance to learn about you from your application materials.
4. If you have questions about the program more broadly, contact the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). If you have questions about the application process, contact the Graduate School.

5. If you want to learn more about day-to-day life in the program, contact current graduate students. These students are often named at the department website, but if they are not you can ask the DGS or another faculty member to put you in touch with a willing party.
6. Submit your application! (More on this below.)

Elements of the Application

Letters: These are important as they assess your work qualitatively and quantitatively (reviewers are asked to rate you as exceptional (the best), outstanding, etc.). The best letters are a mixture of praise for your scholarship and potential as a scholar, identify how your work would complement existing work in the department, and praise you as a human being and future colleague. We expect that at least two of these will assess your academic performance and potential. A third could address another area of contribution, such as a curator at a museum where you worked or a supervisor at a school where you taught.

Since you should always waive access to these letters--this helps readers see them as honest--how can you be sure the letters will be helpful? First, only ask people to write for you who you are certain will write a strong letter. Second, ask them if they will write a strong letter for you and if they can't say yes, ask someone else. Third, provide them with as much information as possible to help them write: your CV, your personal statement, reminders about who you are and what you've done, and more. (And don't forget to say thank you afterward!)

Personal statement: Your personal statement introduces you as a human and a scholar and explains why you will be a successful student and a good fit in the department you are applying to. It should mention by name scholars who you would like to work with (you having contacted these scholars) and why. It should also describe your plan for your post-graduate career: a faculty job at four-year college? Working at a cultural heritage institution? The letter does not need to be scholarly or footnoted--your writing sample(s) will cover that ground--but it should convey your scholarly interests and trajectory, including your planned dissertation or thesis. It is also an opportunity to make sure readers know things they should know about you: don't be shy about self-identifying as a first-generation college student, for instance, or disclosing that you are bilingual, or that you raised your siblings while your parents worked. These kinds of disclosures reveal not your victimhood but your persistence and dedication to your education. Your statement should not be overlong but do not waste the chance to give the department everything they need to evaluate you. About three pages single-spaced is fairly normal. One page is too short; five is probably pushing it. Proofread your personal statement (and all elements of the application--don't spell your own name wrong (this has happened!)).

Use the personal statement to name faculty you would like to work with and explain why. This demonstrates your fit with the program. If you are an exceptional student working in a field that we do not have faculty working in, you are unlikely to be accepted. This is not a measure of your capacity but rather a measure of how well we are able to support you. We do not want to admit students we cannot support; that doesn't work out well for anyone. Furthermore, it is important that you identify and make contact with potential mentors. Our department defers to faculty to

make decisions about who to work with, so you should take the opportunity to introduce yourself before that person reads your application. If you indicate that you are planning on working with someone who is retiring, who is not taking new students, or who does not teach at UNC (this has happened!), it becomes more difficult to imagine your place in the department.

Show your personal statement to trusted peers and mentors and revise as suggested!

Writing Sample: Your writing sample should, if possible, be the best thing you wrote as an undergraduate or MA student. Make sure you give it an extra proofread before submission and if you need to, add a short introduction to explain the genesis of the paper and why you selected it. If you completed previous work many years ago, or if you have since leaving college produced other writing that you feel better represents you and your potential, include that instead. Just be sure that if you are including something unusual, you explain it. Even if much or all of your work takes forms other than academic writing (e.g. multimedia presentations, curated exhibitions), it is a good idea to include something written because a) it's familiar to readers and b) much of your success in coursework will depend on paper-writing. Despite the rhetoric about new modes of academic production, the written word remains regent.

We have a fifteen-page limit so you may need to excerpt a portion. You can add a little bit of explanation ("this is an excerpt of a longer paper about...") if you feel you need to.

GRE: We do not consider GRE scores. Some students continue to submit them but we do not look at them.

Our Process: Here in the Department of American Studies, the admissions process works as follows. Members of the Graduate Studies Committee (the DGS and two or three other tenure-track faculty) read all applications and rank them according to past performance, potential for future success, fit with the program, past dedication to their education, and commitment to diversity. The committee then brings top candidates to the full faculty, who collectively create a final roster of admitted students. We usually admit about six students in hopes that four will enroll. A similar number often enrolls in our MA program in Folklore. The cohorts remain loosely connected during the two years of the MA program.

On Being Admitted: Once you are admitted, you should receive a phone call from your preliminary advisor (the person who will be your advisor, assuming things work out in your first year) and then a letter, on letterhead, from the Director of Graduate Studies. The letter should lay out your acceptance and your offer package, which should include full tuition, a stipend, and access to health insurance in exchange for your work as a TA or RA. When we accept you, we also apply for university fellowships that will add to your stipend, but we don't learn about those until later in the admissions process. You might notice two little bits of strangeness in the offer letter. First, as your admission is technically coming from the Graduate School, we write to "recommend" you for admission. Don't worry, this means you are accepted but technically, the Graduate School could step in if people there are concerned about your application. Second, when we write up the financials (like the value of your tuition) we refer to the previous year's

numbers. That's because the state legislature sets some of these rates and is often operating behind us. But small variations in those numbers won't matter all that much to you, because you are being paid to attend Carolina and not the other way around.

On the faculty side, the admissions process can be exciting, as we consider all of the scholars we can welcome into our program. But it can also be depressing, since we can admit so few students. We must turn away many, many highly qualified applicants. Of course most applicants are not accepted; though this number varies from year to year, in the 2021 admissions cycle, we had a 5-7% acceptance rate.

Some students who are not admitted will be waitlisted, which means that everyone on the faculty agreed that they wanted you to come, but the fit was slightly better with another student. This means that you may well be admitted, but not until admitted students make their final decisions about school, as late as April. It will undoubtedly be disappointing to be waitlisted, but it is not the end of your story and many exceptional students have been waitlisted and later accepted and had successful graduate careers.

It is of course also disappointing to not be accepted. Almost always, people who are not accepted are talented, accomplished, hard-working students with strong statements and letters, but who for one reason or another are not a good fit with our program or simply were just slightly less compatible than a handful of others that year. Maybe they wanted to work with someone going into retirement. Maybe we do not have faculty to pair with them. Maybe we know another program they are applying to will meet their needs better.

On Money: Graduate programs in general do not pay students very well, but as a state school in the south, we are particularly disadvantaged. The stipend that all our doctoral students receive is set by the Graduate School. Happily, we were able to secure an increase in our graduate student stipends, and doctoral students now make more than their peers in the College of Arts and Sciences: an annual salary of \$17,000. This is well below the poverty line in North Carolina, so you may find yourself seeking other kinds of work. While you are not allowed to work more than an additional ten hours a week inside Carolina, you can take what you can get outside the university. Many students find, in addition to small jobs on campus, part time or other gig work to supplement their income.

The Department of American Studies does not admit students we are not prepared to pay. It is my feeling that you, future graduate student, should not attend any program that asks you to pay tuition and/or take on debt.

On Graduate School: Being a graduate student means that you are both a student (attending classes, reading, writing papers) and an employee (attending class as a TA, grading papers, working as a research assistant). The former will be familiar but the latter may not be. As a graduate student, you are part of a workplace. This places an unusual set of demands on graduate students. Being a worker in this space requires a different kind of professionalism, attention to detail, and organization than being only a student. You need to do things like

respond to emails on time; interact with faculty, staff, and students respectfully; and submit work like grading on time. Of course you should also expect to be treated respectfully; to work under conditions free from undue stress, intimidation, and harassment of any kind; and to enjoy the support of the department.

Your department is a workplace and your fellow students are coworkers. They are also, ideally, friends, allies, generous intellectual peers interested in your development and your future career. Just as in any other workplace, there will be people you get along with well and people you do not always gel with; there will be rumors and misinformation; and personal and professional lives will inevitably become entangled.

Undoubtedly, every academic department is different, and can change from semester to semester based on who is or isn't on leave, who is teaching what, and which students enter and graduate. Department leaders (in our department, the "Executive Committee," which is the Chair, Associate Chair, Director of Graduate Studies, and Director of Undergraduate Studies) serve fixed terms, sometimes from three to five years, after which new people have to swoop in and learn new jobs. Committees are formed and dissolved, or their membership changes. In this kind of fluid environment, and with their worker/student status what is is, it is essential that graduate students be effective self-advocates, that they ask questions when they need information, and that they keep their eyes on deadlines. When you are in a stressful situation--worrying about how your mentor will receive your paper, wondering if you'll get a summer job, feeling nervous about exams--it can be difficult to send that email or make that call but this is when such action is most important.

I hope this has been useful and I wish all our applicants lots of luck in their admissions process.