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Five tips for nailing your US-based graduate-school applications

Cristian Román-Palacios discusses how to deal with the bureaucracy and make a great case for yourself.

[Cristian Román-Palacios](#) 





Credit: Irina Strelnikova/Getty

The process of applying to a graduate programme in the United States can be confusing – especially for international applicants who might not get adequate guidance.

I am a Colombian graduate student at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Here, I summarize several aspects that I found relevant when I was applying to programmes. This is what I wish somebody had told me when I started.

1. Define your timeline. Building a great application is a long process, so invest some time to define deadlines. Most graduate-school application deadlines fall in either December/January or February/March, so take these dates into account and work backwards from them when developing your application plan.

2. Get to know the paperwork. Application requirements are fairly standard across institutions. You will usually be required to submit a CV, sample essays, recommendation letters, official bachelor's (or master's) transcripts, and scores for tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE; originally designed to measure qualifications and preparedness for graduate-level work). Note that [some programmes no longer require GRE scores](#).

3. Improve your application. Here is what I found useful when preparing my applications:

- **Use CVs from current postdocs or academics as a guideline to structure yours.** You can often find examples on institutional or laboratory websites. This will help you to include only the necessary information and make your application look more professional.

- **Make your personal statement sing.** Include life experiences that influenced your professional decisions. Explain what makes you a strong applicant, and why the programme is a good fit for you. You might also want to make explicit reference to professors with whom you'd like to work.

- **Your budget will ultimately define the number of applications you send.** Applying to graduate programmes is not especially cheap for anyone. Graduate-admission tests alone (the TOEFL and the GRE, among others) usually cost around US\$200. There are also extra fees if you want to send official reports to more than four programmes (US\$20–27 per score report). Finally, most graduate schools in the United States charge a US\$70–100 fee per application. Keep in mind, however, that some programmes might waive application fees, depending on your personal situation.

4. Some dos and don'ts. Here are four suggestions for ways to keep your application from sinking to the bottom of the pile and, even more importantly, to keep you from joining a lab with an unhealthy work environment:

- **Prioritize programmes whose professors have shown that they're interested in your application.** [E-mail](#) or Skype with prospective advisers to get a sense of how much interest they have in your application before you send it – this will save you time and help you to focus on places where you have a reasonable chance of acceptance.

- **Increase your visibility.** Create accounts on Twitter, Google Scholar, ResearchGate or LinkedIn, or make a personal website.

• **Do not rush into applying without knowing details of the place, people, funding and research opportunities.** “To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.” Get in touch with past and current students and [ask as many questions](#) as possible.

• **Find professors who are willing to publish with you.** Only consider labs where potential collaborations are feasible.

5. Find funding. In addition to scholarships and fellowships, professors can provide financial support through research assistantships, and departments usually hire graduate students to teach undergraduate-level courses. Although many professors advertise graduate positions on Twitter, or in databases (for example, [Find A PhD](#), [EvolDir](#), [Ecolog](#)), do not hesitate to ask prospective mentors about funding options.

These recommendations might increase the likelihood of your application being considered by graduate-admission committees. However, because acceptance criteria can be idiosyncratic, and the [number of applicants high](#), the outcome is often unpredictable. My ultimate recommendation is to focus on positions in healthy environments with the potential to fulfil your expectations, provide integral support and allow you to grow both personally and professionally.

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