

Graduate Study in Philosophy

Is Graduate Study in Philosophy Right for You?

Philosophy is not the most secure route to wealth and fame. But if you are philosophically curious, have demonstrated talent for philosophy, and think you might like to teach, you might want to consider graduate study in philosophy and an academic career. Academics get to pursue their intellectual passions professionally, often with considerable autonomy, and have comparatively flexible schedules. But you also need to be realistic. Graduate school is no picnic and takes many years, and academic jobs, especially good academic jobs, are scarce and getting scarcer. Here are some things you ought to know.

- An Academic Career.
 - Though those with graduate degrees in philosophy can and do find non-academic jobs (<http://www.apaonline.org/?page=nonacademic>; <http://www.philosophersmag.com/index.php/tpm-mag-articles/11-essays/68-philosophers-who-have-found-success-outside-academia>), most PhD programs in philosophy are geared toward training future academics.
 - The main responsibilities of any academic are research, teaching, and, to a lesser extent, service (departmental, university, and professional).
 - There are three main kinds of academic jobs in philosophy: (1) positions at research universities, (2) positions at liberal arts colleges or state universities that do not have graduate programs, and (3) positions at community colleges. Though all three kinds of positions involve research, teaching, and service, these responsibilities are mixed in different ratios at different kinds of jobs (e.g. research predominates at research universities and teaching and service predominate at community colleges).
 - A PhD is necessary for (1) and (2) and, for the most part, for (3) as well. There are two routes to the PhD — going directly to a PhD program from an undergraduate degree and getting a terminal MA prior to applying to PhD programs. I focus on PhD programs and address the two routes at the end of this document.
- Be Realistic.
 - Getting In. Top PhD programs receive approximately 150-250 applications and admit between 5-10%.
 - Finishing. Anywhere from one quarter to one half of those who start PhD programs do not complete the degree, changing their minds about the PhD or not succeeding in graduate school.
- Getting a Job. Despite increased enrollments at the university level, there are still many more PhDs than there are academic positions. Jobs are scarcer today than they were just a few years ago, and there is a backlog of promising PhDs looking for jobs. Especially if you are interested in a position in a research program, there is enormous competition for these jobs. Most of the better students at top programs (the top 25 or so programs) eventually get tenure-track jobs of some kind, though not necessarily at research universities, and these tenure-track jobs often come only after one or more one-year jobs at different institutions in post-doctoral or visiting assistant professor positions. The success rates at lower-ranked programs tend to be lower.
 - Be Flexible. While the very best students from the very best programs may receive multiple job offers, many highly qualified PhDs have more limited options. You must be flexible geographically and willing to move, for instance, taking one or more temporary jobs (post-docs or VAPs) before finding a tenure-track position.
- Qualifications.
 - It's not enough to have been a successful undergraduate philosophy major, who enjoyed her classes and got good grades. Very few majors in any discipline go on to graduate work and a career as an academic. You need to be passionate about philosophy and have potential for original philosophical thought. Talk to your mentors to get a sense of your readiness for graduate study.
 - Good philosophers are both reliable consumers of existing philosophical traditions and ideas and producers of original philosophical contributions. The ratio of production to consumption grows over time. Good undergraduates tend to be mostly consumers, with flickers of production, but successful academics are regular producers, as well as consumers, of philosophical ideas. Graduate school is

where students are expected to start doing more independent and creative philosophical work, and your application will be assessed partly on your promise in this respect.

What to Expect in Graduate School

- 5-8 years for the PhD
- 2-3 years of coursework
- Various distribution requirements
- Qualifying and/or candidacy exams
- Writing a thesis
- Financials: Some combination of fellowship and TA support. Don't go to graduate school without some such financial aid package. Most programs don't offer admission without such support. The prospects of academic employment are too uncertain and the salaries for academics are too modest to justify going into significant debt in pursuit of the PhD.

Applying to Graduate School

- Identify the Programs to which You Want to Apply. *The Philosophical Gourmet Report* (<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com>) provides useful rankings of programs and subspecialties and lots of information about graduate study in philosophy, though you shouldn't attach too much significance to small differences in the rankings. Your current professors may also have helpful information and advice about different programs that might be suitable for you. Once you've identified potential programs, you can get more information about those programs and their faculty by studying their websites.
- Be selective.
 - If you want a job at a research university, you should focus on PhD programs in the top 25 or so.
 - Strength of Program, General. It's important to study in a reasonably well-rounded program, both for those who don't yet know what subfields interest them most (you need to be exposed to different areas of philosophy at the graduate level to make an informed decision about where to specialize) and for those who do (specialists in any field need a good background in other areas of philosophy).
 - Strength of Program, Subspecialties. Pay special attention to programs that are strong in your specialty area (if you have one).
 - Realistic Choices. Try to have a realistic assessment of the strength of your application (a candid discussion with your mentors would be helpful here) and submit most of your applications to places where you have a realistic prospect of admission. Add one or two "aspirational" applications and one or two "insurance" applications.
- Application Components. Often a first cut is made on the basis of objective data, such as your GPA, your GREs, and the quality of the applicant's undergraduate program. These factors can continue to play a role, but at this point references and writing sample will also become important.
 - Undergraduate Grades. A GPA below a 3.67 (A-) is likely to be problematic at top programs, and your Philosophy-specific GPA should be higher.
 - GREs. Take the GRE early enough so that if you don't do as well as you'd like, there's time to take it again.
 - Statement of Purpose. This will be part of each application. It need not be profound, but it should explain your philosophical interests and be thoughtful, mature, and well written. Try to tailor or adapt your statement at different programs to specific features (e.g. faculty) at those programs, rather than submitting the same generic statement to each program.
 - Letters of Recommendation. You are typically asked for three letters of reference. These should all be academic references, and it's usually best if they are all from philosophers, though students with genuinely interdisciplinary interests may want one letter from faculty in other disciplines. Provide your references with work you did in their courses, transcripts, a rough draft of your statement of purpose, and a list of the programs to which you plan to apply. Try to get to know at least two philosophy professors reasonably well (take more than one course from them and have some personal contact with them), so that they can provide detailed and not merely formulaic references.
 - Writing Sample. Give the writing sample some thought and work hard on it. Don't just use an unrevised short paper that got you an A in some upper-division course. Use a more substantial paper that shows your best and most original work. *Revise and extend it, ideally with the help of feedback from your professor or others.*

Deciding Where to Go

If you get in at more than one program, collect more information to determine which one would be best for you. If possible, make campus visits (e.g. at open houses for prospective students), but much information can be collected at a distance.

- **Strength of Program.** All else being equal, choose the program that is ranked most highly, though you shouldn't attach much significance to small differences in rankings.
- **Strength of Subspecialty.** All else being equal, choose the program that is strongest in the areas in which you want to specialize, though you shouldn't attach much significance to small differences in rankings. Whose work most interests you? How many people does the program have in your subspecialty and related areas?
- **Talk to Current Graduate Students.** Contact current graduate students at the programs you are considering. Ask them about financial support, student morale, accessibility of faculty, things they like most about their program, and things they like least. Make a special point of talking to graduate students in your area, especially anyone working with faculty with whom you might like to work.
- **Finding Congenial Faculty.** Find a program with faculty in your subspecialty whose work especially interests you. Better to find a program with more than one such faculty member. You want to be exposed to different ideas. Also, you don't want to have all your eggs in one basket, in case that one faculty member leaves or you find you don't work well with him or her.
- **Compare the guaranteed and/or expected financial aid packages of programs.** Which program offers more aid? Which program offers more fellowship aid (more fellowship aid can help you complete your thesis research faster)?
- **Compare the data about job placement of different programs.**

A Terminal MA Program?

- There are two routes to a PhD program: (1) going directly to the PhD program from your undergraduate degree and (2) getting a one-year or two-year terminal MA before applying to PhD programs.
- Though an MA degree could help you decide whether graduate study in philosophy is a good fit for you, it will add time to the already long process of getting the PhD, and financial aid for MA students is more variable than for PhD students. This means that a terminal MA degree is advisable primarily in circumstances in which it would enable you to attend a significantly stronger PhD program eventually. Given the competitive nature of the academic job market, it's important to get your PhD from a very strong program.
- If all your application credentials (GPA, GRE, undergraduate training, letters, and writing sample) are strong and you can get admitted to PhD programs in the top 20, there's probably little reason to consider doing a terminal MA first. But if you didn't major in philosophy as an undergraduate, your undergraduate institution did not provide you with a solid background in philosophy, or some elements of your application are weak, you may want to consider doing a terminal MA first and then applying to PhD programs with new and stronger credentials.
- It's possible to apply to both MA and PhD programs the same year and then choose an MA program if you are not admitted to PhD programs that you are satisfied with.
- Though a one-year MA program might strengthen your application to PhD programs, you won't have completed very much of it by the time you apply again, and so its marginal value might not be great. By contrast, if you apply in the second-year of a two-year MA degree, your PhD application can have a lot of value added.
- A two-year MA program is likely to consist of one year or more of coursework and a thesis. There will be distribution requirements and possibly qualifying exams.
- Some strong terminal MA programs include Tufts, Arizona State, Georgia State University, University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee, Brandeis University, Texas A&M, Northern Illinois University, and University of Houston.
- As with PhD programs, in choosing among MA programs pay attention to strength of program generally and in your subareas and the faculty with whom you might work.
- Financial-aid packages at terminal MA programs can be quite variable. Make sure you are clear about the financials at different programs, and do not go into significant debt to get an MA.
- Ask for information about the rate at which MA students are placed in PhD programs and the sort of programs to which they are admitted and attend.