SO YOU WANT TO GO TO GRAD SCHOOL

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NOTE: This document contains information, and a personal viewpoint, for undergraduate students who are considering attending graduate school in (Biological) Anthropology with a goal to obtaining a Ph.D.

So, you want to go to grad school...

Here's the most important question you can ask yourself: Why? This is a much more complex question than it appears. Given that graduate school requires an additional 5-8 years of academic work (in the USA, that is; European/UK programs are much shorter in duration), it is important that you honestly assess the reasons you want to go to grad school.

Here is the only good reason to go to grad school:
--I am intellectually curious about a particular academic topic; I enjoy reading, thinking, writing, and researching about this topic and my motivation for studying this topic comes entirely from within. I understand that in order to gain further expertise in my chosen topic I need to pursue a post-graduate degree. I hope to use this degree in order to land a job in an academic (e.g., University or museum) or applied (e.g., conservation organization or non-profit agency) environment that takes advantage of my educational expertise.

Here are some terrifically bad reasons to go to grad school:

--I don't know what else to do with my life so I'll just go to grad school
--I think it'd be really cool to have a Ph.D. in something
--My parents have high expectations for me and I don't want to let them down.
--I *think* that I *kinda* like Anthropology I guess, so I'll just apply to grad school
--I got mostly A's in college and I got a great GRE score so therefore I'm smart. Since grad school is just like undergrad, I'm certain I'll succeed in grad school.

Here's some advice. If you think you want to go to grad school then get the opinion from many different individuals who have gone to grad school or are currently in grad school. If possible, don't just talk to your professors—the fact that they are professors means they have found good jobs—you're talking to graduate school success stories. For every employed professor out there, there are likely 4-6 times that many folks out there who are either unemployed Ph.D.s or are not involved in a job that is related to their Ph.D. research because they cannot find a desirable job related to their expertise. Be sure to talk to current graduate students who are in graduate programs. Get their perspective. If you talk to enough current grad students you'll find that most feel that graduate school is a rewarding experience while also stating that graduate school is a difficult, lonely, and economically barren experience. If this sounds paradoxical, it is: graduate school is personally, economically, and academically challenging and often emotionally-draining, but at the same time it is intellectually fulfilling.

Here are two equally valid but different perspectives on grad school by fictitious grad students:

The cynic: *So far grad school has eaten up about 7 years of my life. I am overworked and horrifically underpaid and what's worse, at various times, it seems that no one—including my own advisor—cares about my research. My work follows me home and I find myself working late into the evening as well as on weekends. Meanwhile, all my friends have found full-time jobs that pay up to 6X what I make a year, and their jobs end at 5pm sharp—they rarely take their work home with them. Even if I do finish my dissertation, I'll probably end up not getting a job.*

The optimist: *Man-o-man do I love grad school! Sure, I don't make that much money but if you think about it, the hardest thing I have to do each day is read, write, research and think about a topic that I find really interesting. Heck I'd do this for free. I love what I do, and I work hard at it. If I'm lucky, I'll get a job at a museum or university when I graduate.*

It is really important you recognize the benefits and drawbacks of graduate school. Get as much information as you can from lots of individuals. It is important that you make an informed decision about graduate school because it will occupy the next 5-8 years of your life; your success in graduate school will help determine whether you get a job after you finish your Ph.D.

Strategies for getting into grad school.

Here are things you can do during your undergraduate years.

--You need to have a competitive GPA and you need to score well on the GRE's. While these two measures of performance do not necessarily predict your success in grad school, they do matter! (Though there is a recent trend of some universities no longer requiring GRE scores). They matter in terms of where you will be accepted to school and they are often used to determine if the school to which you are accepted will give you any funding. Think of your college grades and your score on the GRE as a "first impression". This is what grad schools initially judge you on. You should practice taking the GRE exam either on your own, with friends, or through a class. And if you blew your GPA in your first two years of undergrad, don't worry, not all is lost. Work hard to get A's within your major in your last two years. This will be reflected on your transcript and can be viewed as you "finding yourself" in your last two years of school in terms of what interests you; some applications have a section in which you can explain any inconsistencies in your transcript.

--Make connections with your professors during your undergraduate years. Getting an A in a class is fine and good, but actually talking to your professors is better. This will matter with respect to recommendation letters—and you'll need at least three recommendation letters. Talking to your professors about your graduate school interests and potential research topics will give them an idea of how serious you are regarding graduate school. They can then convey this information about you in their recommendation letter.

A mediocre rec-letter would contain sentences such as

> "*XXX is a good student who got an A in my course, however, I have no real sense of whether they are interested in the subject or just studious...they never asked me any questions or gave me any indication that this subject matter truly piqued their interests.*"

A strong rec-letter would say things like,

> "*XXX is a very enthusiastic and bright student. Not only did they get an A in my course, they contributed substantively to class discussions and on various occasions they came to my office hours to follow-up on the class material. XXX is truly hungry for the subject matter…XXX is both bright and motivated—the perfect combination for graduate school research.*"

--Get involved in the primary literature of the field. Go to the library and read books and journal articles about topics that interest you. Even if you spend an hour a day reading abstracts of journal articles this will help give you a sense of the types of research questions that are pursued in the area that interests you. It will also allow you to determine what you find interesting and what you might find less interesting. Books and journal articles are the key products of academic research. Both in graduate school and especially as a professor, your academic success will, in part, be measured by your ability to write books and journal articles. To be an academic is to be a writer. The sooner you get familiar with the style and content of academic books and articles, the better.

--If possible, get involved in research. Talk to various professors both within your department and in other departments about research opportunities. It doesn't necessarily matter what type of research you pursue (e.g., you do fruit-fly research in a biology lab or child-development research in a psychology lab, or an honors thesis mentored by a philosophy professor), what matters more is how seriously you pursue this research. Doing research is one way to really get to know a professor and prove to them that you are "graduate school worthy." This is something they can convey in a rec-letter.

--Consider volunteering as a student helper for research conferences. Numerous professional organizations have annual meetings, usually hosted by different universities across the country. If your university (or one close to you) is hosting a conference you might ask the organizers if you can help out with the conference. Your assigned tasks might be menial, but volunteering is a good way to gain entry to a conference and interact with researchers.

--If possible, consider a field school or research experience away from your home university. Field schools are often held during the summer and various field schools are offered for biological anthropology, archaeology, and even for cultural anthropology. These schools give you the opportunity to learn and conduct research in the field. They also allow you to make additional connections with professors outside of the university who teach the field schools. One downside to field schools is that some are better run than others. Do your

homework about finding the right field school by asking your professors and/or contacting students who have completed the school; find one that is well-organized and that challenges the students. The other downside to field schools is that they cost money. Depending on where the schools are located, this cost can be substantial and usually does not include airfare/transportation costs. Field school experience can greatly strengthen your application. Also consider contract archaeology, which can give you field experience and you might even get paid for doing it!

In doing all of these things, particularly reading journal articles and books, you should slowly hone-in on a few different topics that interest you. By honing your interests to a particular topic (e.g., historical archaeology of the southwest U.S.; religious syncretism in the Caribbean; feeding strategies in howler monkeys), this will make choosing a graduate school easier. If you have a general and broad interest in, say, biological anthropology but not a specific research topic within biological anthropology, it will be difficult to choose a school that is best for you. This is because different anthropology departments specialize in different research areas; for example, some departments might focus on primate behavior but not human evolution, or some might focus on middle eastern archaeology but not the archaeology of central America, etc.

Preparing to apply and the application process.

By reading journal articles and books, you should get sense of different professors that you might want to study under in graduate school. The next step is to get online and go to the department webpages of where these professors work.

-- First, look at what other faculty members are in the department; is there more than one biological anthropologist (or archaeologist, or cultural anthropologst) in the departement? Usually, you want to pick a department in which there are a good number of researchers within the same anthropological subdiscipline (e.g., if you're interested in biological anthropology, it's generally better to attend a school in which there are more biological anthropology faculty rather than less).
-- Second, it is VERY important to get some sense of the graduate curriculum requirements, funding opportunities, and research opportunities. This information will be listed online. Questions you should ask yourself when viewing a department's webpage include:

-- How many courses, if any, are required for Ph.D. research?
-- Are you expected to be a Teaching Assistant every year you are in grad school?
-- Does the department expect you to take graduate level courses in all four subfields of anthropology or can you just take courses in your chosen subfield?
-- What about qualifying exams (these are rigorous exams usually taken at the end of your second year that test your competence within your subdiscipline) …do you get kicked out if you fail them?
-- Are there opportunities for summer research?
-- Does the graduate school provide you with a stipend (e.g., money) to live while you are in school? One of the biggest frustrations in graduate school is funding. BE SURE TO GET INFORMATION ON FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AND FINANCIAL AID!

-- Is the university located in a geographic area with a high cost of living (e.g., New York City) or a rural area (e.g., western Virginia)?
-- If the department is going to provide you a stipend ($$), can you envision living off of this amount for the next 5-8 years? Your ability to economically sustain yourself will have a greater impact on your graduate school success than you can possibly imagine. Make sure to gather information on how your graduate career will be funded.
--Talk to your professors about the National Science Foundation graduate research fellowship program (GRFP), as this is a source of funding that can be applied for during your senior year.

In short, it is equally important to gather information about the requirements/funding/curriculum of a given department as it is to gather information about the particular research expertise of the faculty in that department.

As a rule, try not to pick a school based on geographic convenience (e.g., I want to go to University of so-and-so because my spouse/partner/boyfriend/girlfriend will only be two hours away…). Pick a school that offers the following: 1) it has faculty that match your interests as well as faculty who mentor a diversity of projects; 2) it has an active graduate program with lots of other students; 3) it has good funding opportunities and financial aid; and, 4) it has a good reputation for training successful graduate students. Be sure and ask your professors to give you their impressions of particular programs/universities.

Say you've found a few schools that have faculty members that you'd like to work with. Here's something you should do: email those professors to see if they are taking graduate students. It doesn't have to be a long, detailed email, just a quick informative query. Here's an example:

Dear Dr. So-n-so,

My name is Phil Jagielka and I'm currently a senior at James Madison University. I am very interested in biological anthropology and specifically in the functional anatomy of bipedal traits. Through classes and independent reading I have become familiar with your research. I am hoping to attend graduate school in the Fall of 2021 and your research program sounds very appealing.

I am wondering if you anticipate taking new graduate students for the Fall of 2021? I would love to have the opportunity to learn from your expertise. I've attached a recent C.V. to this email.

Thanks for your time,
Sincerely,
Phil Jagielka

The strategies for writing this quick email are the following 1) you are conveying to a professor that you are aware of their research program, 2) you are conveying that you are motivated and interested in pursuing a graduate degree, and 3) that you have been in contact with some of the faculty at that school, which is important to note on your

application. (Note: you don't have to attach a C.V. or Resume to the email, but it can't hurt).

It's important to understand that not all professors will respond to these types of emails. Some professors are just busy, some might be in the field, and some just don't care to respond. The beauty of email is that it is relatively effortless to write a quick note of inquiry and often you will hear back from the professor.

Note that most schools have application deadlines ranging from December through February with January 1st or January 15th being a common deadline. So, a general timeline would be the following: With, say, a January 15th application deadline, contact potential professors at the graduate program via email in the Summer or Fall. Then around October or so, contact professors in your own department (or another department) and ask if they will write a recommendation letters for you. You'll need (usually) three recommendation letters. Then, as detailed below, you need to think about your personal statement.

You want to get working on the applications early so that 1) you will have ample time to work on your personal statement and 2) you give advance notice to the individual professors who will be writing your recommendation letters. And again, note that most schools have moved to an online system of recommendation letters. You fill out an online form with the recommending professor's information/email address and that professor then gets an email from the program to which you applied with an automated link to a webpage where they can upload your recommendation letter.

This is important. If you expect a professor to write you a letter then make sure they are aware of this. As the deadline for the application approaches, go to their office or send them an email (or two, or three) in order to remind them that they agreed to write you a recommendation letter. The information your professors will need to write you a recommendation letter is the following:

- The university you to which you are applying
- The program/department to which you are applying
- The address to send the letter (if the university requires a hard copy)
- The type of degree you are seeking (e.g., Ph.D. or M.A. or M.P.H. etc.).
- The letter due date
- A copy of your Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV), if you have one
- A copy of your personal statement
- Any "talking points" about yourself that might be highlighted in a letter

Importantly, if you have a Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV) and your personal statement is completed (see below) you should give these to your professor. This way, they can write a "personalized" recommendation letter that speaks directly to your accomplishments and future plans as laid out in your CV and personal statement. Professors forget things and they will often be writing multiple recommendation letters for their students. Their "reminder" should not be an automated weblink that appears in their inbox noting that Student X has applied to the University of Y and a recommendation letter is needed. In other words, the automated links often provide no information about the department or program or degree. Thus, if you failed to tell your professor the details of your application, there could be a mismatch between *your* application and

their letter. They might end up writing you a letter stating that you'd make a splendid Ph.D. student in the Anthropology Department at Boston University when in fact you're applying for a M.A. in Archaeology Department at Boston University. This won't look good.

Once you familiarize yourself with the application process, you'll notice that you have to write a personal statement. This is a 1-2 page essay that is should convey the reasons why you want to go to grad school, what you hope to study in graduate school, your academic and research background, and why you have chosen the particular university you are applying to over any other one. There is no magic formula for the personal statement but here are some general guidelines. Think of organizing the statement into three parts: 1) some information on your educational background and overall intellectual reasons for pursuing a Ph.D., 2) outline some specific research questions and/or a research area that you hope to pursue while in graduate school (in this section you want to sound focused and serious…you want to convey that you have thought about a research topic in a thoughtful and critical manner), and 3) why do you want to attend this particular university and not another one; in this section you want to talk about why this particular department is suited to your interests…you can bring up particular faculty members and their expertise as examples, you can also mention stuff about the structure of the curriculum, etc.—this will show that you have done your homework about this particular university.

Here are some obvious "do's" and "don'ts" regarding the personal statement:

Don't sound like a groupie—that is, do not write things like, "*I just loooove anthropology, it is so cool.*" Or "*The Maasai are so exotic, and I've always wanted to travel to Africa!"* Or "*I want to be the next Jane Goodall!*"***

Do sound like a serious scholar-in-waiting. Try to convey why you want to study a particular research topic in an informed manner. You need to convince the reader that you have some command over the anthropological literature and what makes for an interesting and relevant research topic.

Don't pick a school based on geography or prestige—that is, do not write things like "*I think that New York University is a good place for me because my [partner, spouse, family, girlfriend, boyfriend, etc.] will be attending Colombia in the fall*." Or "*I've always wanted a degree from an Ivy league school and Princeton is the one for me.*"

Do pick a school that bests matches your interests, and do pick a school in which you are familiar with the structure of the curriculum and financial aid options.

[*** There is nothing wrong with wanting to be the next Jane Goodall, but write something more specific]

It is advised that you apply to at least 4-7 different graduate schools. Yes, this will cost money, since schools have an application fee, but applying to many schools is a good strategy for keeping your options open.

Here is a generic description of how the applications are reviewed (not all universities will follow this scheme). First the applications go to the graduate school at the university; here they are examined for completeness and some graduate schools have their own minimal standards for GPAs and GRE scores—if you do not meet these standards your application will be rejected. Once your application has been vetted by the graduate school it is forwarded to the Anthropology department. The department will assemble a "graduate acceptance committee"

consisting of 3-5 professors who will carefully read your application. Keep in mind, however, that your application is one of about 40-100 applications, and the department is only likely to accept between 2 and 10 of these applicants. In pruning the applicant pool down to a manageable size, often the first cut is based on GPA and GRE scores. The second cut is generally based on wishy-washy personal statements and/or rec-letters that are fairly generic. Thus, to get noticed, you need to have all your ducks in order: a strong GPA, a strong GRE, rec-letters that are effusive, and a serious and thoughtful personal statement. It is a very competitive process. Also, at this point, if have gotten in touch with the faculty member you want to work with, then you might have someone "in your corner" supporting your application. This kind of support can go a long way.

If you get accepted to more than one school and you are having trouble deciding where to go, you should try and visit each school. Also, talk to your professors and get their opinion of each school.

Okay, so you didn't get into grad school.

More than likely, this will happen to you. Here are some possible reasons as to why you didn't get accepted into a particular grad program:

--your application wasn't competitive
--you have great grades and a strong GRE score but your personal statement was unfocused and/or the committee felt you did not have enough research experience
--you have great grades and a strong GRE but your rec-letters were mediocre
--you had a very strong application but you went up against a stronger applicant pool
--the professor you wanted to work with in grad school is not taking grad students for the next few years (did you email them in advance?...see above)
--you had a competitive application but the university didn't have any money to fund your admission and they don't accept applicants who attempt to "pay their own" way in grad school.

So, what should you do? If grad school is something you really want, then re-apply again next year, but this time cast a wider net and include additional schools that you might have overlooked or ruled out the first time. However, in the interim consider retaking the GREs if your scores are low. Also try to seek out opportunities for research or field experience.

Finally, consider a Master's degree program. That is, instead of going from a Bachelor's degree into a Ph.D. program, consider doing a stand-alone master's degree at a particular university. Most universities are phasing out their M.A. programs. However, a few schools still retain them. The benefits of an M.A. program are that usually these programs are less competitive to get into when compared to a Ph.D. program. Similarly, M.A. programs are helpful because they are a microcosm of the Ph.D. experience. You are taking graduate-level courses and often you are expected to write a thesis (usually, shorter than a dissertation) but the process usually lasts only 1-2 years, three at most. The drawbacks are that a separate M.A. program will extend the time it takes you to get a Ph.D. Most M.A. programs are 1-2 years, so this will add additional years onto the already-long process of getting a Ph.D. Also, most M.A. programs do not offer much financial aid—usually, the student is expected to pay their own way.

You made it into grad school, now what?

A few points regarding your success and experiences in grad school:

- Read, read, read – delve into the primary literature; that is the best way to understand your area of interest and to develop your own thesis questions
- Get involved in as much research as possible, even research not directly in your area of interest
- Stay focused on your ultimate goal—**the fundamental goal of grad school is to finish grad school with a Ph.D. and move on with your professional life!**
- Finally, don't be shocked if your area of interest changes from what it was when you entered graduate school. It happens frequently!

And good luck, you'll need it.

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Here is a weblink to two essays that give advice about how to be a successful graduate student:

The first is an essay by Stephen Stearns, an evolutionary biologist who currently teaches at Yale University; his essay is entitled "Some modest advice for graduate students."

The second is an essay by Raymond Huey, who wrote a follow-up to Stearns's essay; his essay is entitled, "Some acynical advice for graduate students."

Stearn's essay can be found here:
http://stearnslab.yale.edu/some-modest-advice-graduate-students

Huey's essay can be found here:
https://faculty.washington.edu/hueyrb/pdfs/reply.pdf

And a few other spin-offs/commentaries on the above:

http://www.dartmouth.edu/~bio125/Witz-1987.pdf

http://www.dartmouth.edu/~mpayres/teaching/gradprogram/Wisdom.EEB.htm