

DSPT PhD Programs and Portfolio Workshop

Are you at all considering applying to a PhD program after you finish your M.A.? The following tips and suggestions will help you navigate the process and prepare yourself to put together a successful application.

by Elissa McCormack

Where is this information from?

- The experience of Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology (DSPT) alumni
- Robert Peters, *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a M.A. or a Ph.D.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997)

Part I: Choosing a School

1. Start early! The application process is time-consuming so the earlier you start the better. DSPT alumni suggest that you start trying to narrow your interests and focus your programs at least nine months to a year before the application deadlines. Since deadlines could be as early as December, you should begin thinking about possible PhD programs in December or March of the school year before you plan to apply. If you are doing a two-year M.A., this would be the spring semester of the first year of your program! Peters suggests that you should start looking at potential programs a year and a half before you apply—this would be as soon as you begin your M.A.!
2. Potential Advisors
 - a. You should look primarily for a *scholar*, only secondarily at an *institution*
 - b. How do you find an advisor?
 - i. Use the library to research your interests and then follow up and find out where the authors of papers that interest you teach.
 - ii. Read, read, read! Read books and articles by potential advisors carefully and decide whose research is interesting to you.
 - iii. Ask your professors for suggestions of programs or professors that fit your interests.
 - iv. Look online: Try contacting those scholars whose work you admire and looking at the schools they teach in as well as where they received their PhD. Also double check to make sure that the professors you are interested in are really in the departments that they are supposed to be in. Research other faculty members within the same department as potential advisors. You want to make sure that there is more than one person that you could work with in a department in case a professor moves!
 - c. Things to look for

- i. Career maturity/tenure: You don't want to attend a school to work with a particular person only to have that person leave to go to another school!
 - ii. Reputation: You want to also try to find out what the reputation of your potential advisor is. You should try, as much as possible, to ascertain if their work is respected by other scholars. One way to gauge their reputation is to check the number of publications that they have in respected journals.
 - iii. Personality: Another important factor is the personality of your potential advisor. This is, however, something that you might not be able to figure out unless you are able to visit the campus. You want to make sure that you can maintain a good relationship with this person for the duration of your PhD program. A good way to figure out how the potential advisor is with his or her graduate students is to interview other graduate students to find out how he or she is as an advisor.
- d. Contact potential advisors: Contacting potential advisors is often the best way to find out much of this information. Contacting potential advisors can be beneficial because they may be able to suggest other programs or scholars who would be a good fit with your interests. If you begin to contact professors well in advance of when you will apply, you will have time to build a relationship with them. However, most importantly, make sure that you can indicate a certain amount of familiarity with a professor's research before contacting them.
 - i. An easy way to contact professors is by email. However, when writing to professors, establish your credentials so that you are taken seriously, don't be afraid to praise his or her work, and, most importantly, *proofread your letter so you do not have spelling errors or typos.*
 - ii. Plan to visit the school: Even if you contact potential advisors by email, it is also a good idea to plan, if possible, to visit the schools in person. Shortly before applying is the best time to visit departments and meet with professors. You want this to be *before* the school starts evaluating applications, but not so early that the professor in question forgets who you are by the time they review your application. You should be sure to make these requests with the departments *early* before they get swamped by requests. When visiting you can talk with other professors and try to sense if the department matches your personality, sit in on classes, and ask graduate students about the department and the campus social life.

3. Department Prestige

- a. Connections in the field: Prestigious departments tend to have professors with good reputations and connections within your field, as well as the ability to help you make connections within your field.

- b. Future job prospects: There is a high correlation between department prestige and future job quality.
 - c. But remember to look at the reputation of the particular department that you are interested in, not just the overall reputation of the university. Also make sure that the particular department that you are interested in has a good reputation *in your area of interest*. If this is true, you are likely to have more faculty members who can assist you as potential replacement advisors or members of your committee.
4. Other Considerations: There are quite a few other considerations when choosing a school, some of which you can find out from the department's website and others which you may have to ask the department directly.
- a. Attrition
 - b. Time to completion (Most programs are listed on their websites as five-year programs, but the average time to completion of a PhD in the humanities is seven to eight years!)
 - c. Job placement success
 - d. Teaching requirements and financial support: Excessive teaching requirements are the number one reason for extending the time in a PhD program, but the amount of financial support you receive can also be a factor in this. For example, if you do not receive aid for writing your dissertation, you may be forced to take positions as an adjunct professor elsewhere, thus leaving less time to work on your dissertation.

Part II: Preparing to Apply

1. Plan to apply to at least ten programs of varying levels of competitiveness. Within these ten programs, you want to give top priority to the applications to schools where you have identified possible advisors. Be sure to look at your application as a whole package. You want to portray yourself in your application as a brilliant, well-adjusted, focused, and dedicated scholar in your field.
2. Grades and GRE scores: Many departments have cutoff points based on GPA or GRE scores. You can contact the department or the dean's office of the graduate school directly to find out this sort of data on the percentage of students admitted and the minimum and average qualifications of admitted students. Note that because graduate-level grades are often viewed as being inflated, the admissions committee will probably look more closely at your undergraduate GPA. If you're not entirely happy with your GRE score, retake the GRE the summer before you plan to apply so that you can get it out of the way before you have to deal with the other aspects of your application.
3. Letters of Recommendation: You want to find good recommenders. Don't be afraid about asking nicely whether or not your professor can write an outstanding letter of recommendation for you. You can always phrase it something like, "Do you think that you know me well enough to write a good letter of

recommendation?” Consider taking a doctoral level GTU course so you can get a letter of recommendation saying that you are able to do doctoral level work. Also, if the professor writing your letter of recommendation knows someone who is in the department you’re applying to or is themselves a graduate of that department, this is a bonus! Here again we see the importance of networking and making connections in academia. A good suggestion for actually sending out recommendations is to give each recommender:

- a. Postage-paid envelope addressed to the school
- b. Unofficial transcripts
- c. Copy of your CV
- d. Memo from you to your recommender reminding him or her about important things to put in the letter
- e. Also consider including a stamped postcard addressed to you saying that the department to which you’re applying has received the letter of recommendation from your recommender.

4. Statement of Purpose

- a. The statement of purpose is your opportunity to appear unique in your application and so is crucial for a successful application. Work closely with a faculty member in writing drafts of your statement of purpose. It’s important in that statement to be able to articulate your interests and goals as well as to spell out the reasons why a particular academic institution with its professors and their areas of interest is a “fit” with your own academic interests even if you are applying to multiple institutions! Mention important scholars who have influenced you and researchers at the school whose work you admire. Mention your preferred advisor if you have been successful in establishing contact with him or her. Also mention important research experiences you have had.
- b. Write in a straightforward style. Avoid stylistic flourishes, slang, and the temptation to make yourself sound more sensitive than everyone else, like by referencing childhood formative experiences. Avoid attempts at the profound or humor. Also avoid mentioning any problems you have had and keep the tone positive! If there is some weakness in your history that you must address, attach a short addendum to your application in which you *very briefly* explain the mitigating circumstances rather than destroying a strong statement of purpose by mentioning it there.
- c. The GTU offers a “Writing the Academic Statement of Purpose” workshop in the fall semester. Check the GTU calendar and/or contact Kathleen Kook (kkook@gtu.edu) or the GTU admissions office (gtuadm@gtu.edu) for more information.

Part III: So What Can You Do Now?

- Language requirements are one of the most common ways to add time to your PhD program. If you know what the requirements will be for programs that you

are interested in, you can begin studying those languages while completing your M.A.

- Conferences/publications: consider participating in conferences or submitting articles for publication, but don't feel pressured to do either! Some DSPT alumni either participated in conferences, which is also a good opportunity for networking, or had publications in process when they applied to PhD programs, but others did not feel that it was necessary. You want to do these things when you feel ready, not just because you feel you have to. If you are interested in these things, check the national and regional American Academy of Religion conferences. You might consider attending even if you do not present, so you can get a feel for what a conference is like. If you are interested in publishing, discuss it with your professor before you begin research for his or her class and ask him or her to help you plan your research so it will be of publishable quality.
- M.A. Program/Portfolio: Look carefully at your M.A. program as soon as you can. You want your transcript, as much as possible, to reflect some sort of focus.

Above all: Don't stress out too much over getting into PhD programs right away. Part of preparing to apply is succeeding in your M.A. program and acquiring necessary skills. If you don't think you can do both at the same time, consider taking a year off before applying to PhD programs. A PhD is a *big* investment, so you want to take your time in deciding on a program.