

GRADUATE STUDY IN SOCIOLOGY

A Guide for Emory Sociology Majors

Over the last few years, more and more sociology majors have expressed an interest in pursuing an advanced degree in the field. The Emory Sociology department in fact has placed graduating majors in many of the top graduate programs around the country, including those at Wisconsin, UCLA, Arizona, and Johns Hopkins. In order to assist majors contemplating further study in sociology or a related field, we try to answer the most commonly asked questions about graduate study below.

Is Graduate Study for Me?

If you are excited by the prospect of doing independent research on sociological issues, or if you hope to become a teacher in social science at the college level, or if you hope to reach a position in which sociological expertise is desirable, then the answer is yes. Your goals should determine the kind of graduate program you choose.

As in many fields, there are two graduate degrees in sociology, the MA and the PhD. The PhD is for students who are primarily interested in research and teaching. Graduate students are like apprentice faculty. They teach, do research and publish. About 75% of sociology PhDs go into academia and the other 25% become full-time researchers. Even those primarily interested in teaching will continually have to update their understanding of the world. Graduate students in sociology should be interested in doing social research--investigating social issues and problems whose questions can be answered through studying facts about people.

The Master's degree is often a step on the way to a PhD. But there are also MA programs in sociology that specialize in training researchers in a variety of nonacademic fields, such as marketing, evaluation, and survey research. Such programs often offer the MA as a terminal degree. If you are primarily interested in applying sociological knowledge, these may be your best choice. If your interest in social issues focuses mainly on working with people to solve their problems, applying research, administering programs, counseling, and the like, then your best bet may be a program in a field related to sociology. Some post-graduate programs in these areas are Public Health, Public Administration, and Social Work. The academic background needed for these programs is similar to what one needs for a graduate degree in sociology. Check with the appropriate programs for additional requirements.

How Can I Best Prepare for Graduate School?

From the point of view of professionals in the field, the major in sociology covers the basics, but only the basics. To prepare yourself well for graduate study, you should go beyond the basics. The single most important thing you can do is to take advanced courses in methods and statistics, such as **Social Research II (Soc 356)** (or similar courses in other social sciences). This course is designed to introduce students to doing research. Completing a research paper, especially an **Honors thesis** or independent study project, is also important. Such work will give you a taste of what graduate school may be like, and the product may help to show prospective programs that you are serious about doing research. Junior and senior students may also take a graduate course (with permission). This introduces

you to actual graduate education and often requires a research paper. An internship that involves research is another good option. We also offer a limited number of **teaching internships**, in which you would assist a professor in the department with teaching. This must be set up with the professor in advance. Finally, the BA/MA program includes all these aspects and provides an MA degree during your senior year. Information on the BA/MA is available from the department.

Apart from course work and research, you should get involved in activities that enable you to learn more about society and about sociology. The best sociologists know much more than their own specialty. Broad knowledge and experience will stimulate your sociological imagination. By way of preparation, then, wide reading in social science, history, and current public issues will help a great deal. Volunteer work with a social service organization is useful and gratifying. At Emory, you are welcome to attend the regular Friday department seminar, in which faculty and graduate students present their research (contact Dr. Lechner for information). You should also participate in the Southeastern Undergraduate Sociology Symposium, held alternately at Emory and UGA each Spring (Contact Dr. Boli for information).

What Do Applications Involve?

In most cases, you can expect to submit transcripts, GRE scores (most schools require the verbal/quantitative/analytical general exam; some also require the specialized sociology exam), background information on yourself, and letters of reference. The background information details your educational history, honors, and extracurricular activities, as well as some demographic characteristics. You normally should add three faculty members to write a letter of recommendation. Provide these references with all the information they need: your GPA, scholarly activities, extracurricular activities, jobs related to academic goals, and reasons for going to graduate school.

Your main task will be to prepare a thoughtful, professional, and succinct **statement of purpose**. In this statement, you should explain why you want to go to graduate school, which areas of research interest you most, what you hope to achieve, and what kind of position you hope to attain (refer to a nonacademic job only if you know that the department provides for this track). Describing areas of interest does not keep you from changing direction once you are in graduate school, but departments will want to know if your interest is serious and if you have some sense of direction. Mention of particular strengths of the department to which you are applying, or of particular faculty members with whom you would like to work, is likely to impress admissions committees. The statement should not be more than two pages. To make sure your statement meets professional expectations, ask your adviser to review your statement before you submit it.

Note that both the materials to be submitted and the application procedures to be followed vary from school to school. Some schools want you to collect letters of reference, others have the references send the letter under separate cover. Follow the procedures carefully, and get your materials in before the deadline of each particular school. If your materials are late, your application might be rejected or you might not be considered for financial aid.

To Which Programs Should I Apply?

Before you start looking at specific programs, you should think carefully about your actual academic interests. Talking with your adviser may be helpful at this stage. You should then look for departments with faculty who work in your areas of interest and who have active research programs. Feel free to ask Emory faculty for suggestions. Two sources may be useful: *The ASA Guide to Graduate Programs* (which you may borrow from the department office) and *Peterson's Guide to Graduate Programs in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences* (in the reference section of the library). These publications describe the various programs and list faculty with their specialty areas. Feel free to write or email, or call directors of graduate studies at the schools that are of interest to you.

As you compare departments that would satisfy your basic academic interests, investigate the following: availability of financial aid (amount and number of years), size of the program (number of faculty and active graduate students), involvement of graduate students in faculty research (i.e. quality of mentoring), availability of teacher training programs and opportunities to teach within the department, availability of health insurance, support for graduate student research, (e.g. money to travel to professional meetings, pay for subjects or data sets), thesis or paper requirements for the MA degree, number of years it takes to get a PhD, and placement of recent graduates. Feel free to contact a current Emory graduate student to get a better sense of the kinds of questions you should ask of any program. In your assessments, the research interests and activity of the faculty generally should have priority, closely followed by financial support. You should aim to go to the best possible department that will enable you to focus on problems that interest you with the support of an active faculty, but without undue financial insecurity.

How Do Graduate Programs Select Students?

After you send in your application, a departmental admissions committee will review your materials. Such a committee looks at everything. It usually starts with the easy comparisons, using GRE scores and grades. Students with low scores but very high grades, and vice versa, will usually still be considered, but those low in both areas would do better to take the GRE again. They might also take some graduate courses to demonstrate their ability, then apply again. Next, the committee will look at letters of recommendation and the student's record and statement. These are not less important, just more time consuming and complicated.

Most professors will not write a letter unless it is positive. Thus, what the committee looks for is whether the letter writer really knows the student well and has taken the time to write a full professional letter. A short scribble at the bottom of a form hurts even if it says good things about the student. A letter should mention something special about the student, such as a research experience, a great paper he/she wrote, or another qualification. The committee also evaluates the letter writer. A recommendation from a well-respected professor who has taught many graduate students has greater credibility. Note that due to their scarcity, a negative letter stands out. You should make sure that your recommenders know your best qualities.

In evaluating a student's record, the committee will look for the type of course work and experience mentioned above--research experience, good grades in statistics and theory, graduate course work, teaching experience, and activities in sociology (like participating in the undergraduate symposium mentioned above). Your statement or letters should point out the most important experiences.

The student's personal statement is important for first determining if the student is a suitable candidate for the PhD program. If a student applies to a Sociology PhD program when her/his statement indicates an interest in social work or public health, the sociology admissions committee is likely to reject the application. The committee will look for an interest in research, especially the type of research done by the faculty. To prepare an effective statement, find out what research the faculty is doing and explain in your statement where your interests overlap.

Finally, the committee will try to determine what the student adds to the department. Students learn from each other, both by sharing skills and by offering different perspectives and backgrounds. The committee will look for backgrounds, skills and experiences that are under represented in the department. In particular, they will look for under represented ethnic groups and genders. Most also consider whether students have lived or studied abroad, know foreign languages, and have special math or computer skills.

All of the qualifications are considered in admitting and funding students, in roughly the order presented.

When Should I Take the GREs?

Take it as early as possible. October of your senior year is best. This leaves time to take it again, if necessary, and to get scores in time (submitting scores late will eliminate you from consideration). A December exam will not be ready in time for a January admission. Getting scores takes minimally 6, usually 8 weeks. The exception is the computerized exam. You should carefully decide which exam to take. The best way to prepare is to take practice exams in conditions that are as realistic as possible. Turn off the TV, unplug the phone, set up an alarm clock, and take the practice exam seriously. Then do it again with another practice exam. Then again. Not much else helps. Good luck!