



democratising access to higher education

Applying for PhDs in the US  
Sunday, 9 October 2022



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# Project EduAccess

Access to higher education is a privilege most people from marginalised communities are systematically denied through cost, information and dispositional barriers.

**Project EduAccess** is a modest attempt to improve inclusivity in HEIs by removing these barriers for marginalized communities in South Asia.

We hope to achieve this by providing expert mentorship, support and guidance to learners in South Asia.

# Meet your panelists



Syed Taha Kaleem

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PhD Student

Anthropology

Brandeis University,  
Massachusetts



Tapaswinee Mitra

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PhD Student

Harriet Tubman  
Department of Women's  
Gender and Sexuality  
Studies

University of Maryland-  
College Park



Sharik Laliwala

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PhD Student

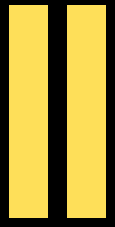
Political Science

University of California,  
Berkeley



# Timeline of a Doctoral Degree in the US

- Usually PhD in any discipline in the US takes a minimum of 5 years
- Social Sciences and Humanities PhDs take 5-7 years
- The first two-three years of the PhD usually involves taking courses and TA-ing for undergraduate/graduate courses.
- Look for the requirements you need to meet while pursuing your degree, or the expected goals each department has set for each year.
- Look at Job Placements of international alumni students.
- Your actual research begins Year 3 onwards



# Finances

- Contact the Graduate School Administrators to request for a Fee Waiver.
- Expenditure while applying- TOEFL, GRE, Application Fee, Score sending fees
- Financial support from the University- 5 years minimum
- What else can they pay you: Relocation Cost, Travel Expenses, Health Insurance, Summer Funding, Conference expenses, Technology Funds?
- Look for their expectations from a TA- workload, class size, job profile, duties, etc.
- Look at university fellowships you can apply for while pursuing your PhD



# Contacting the Supervisors / Departmental “Fit”

- It is not typical to contact your potential supervisor at a school you are applying to. However, it is necessary to check the department website for people who could potentially mentor you.
- It is important to have two or more people in the department, who could mentor you.
- Contacting your supervisor can be a great way to gauge whether you are a right fit for the department.
- **“Fit” is the most important factor of the PhD process in the US.**



# The “GRE” Question?

- GRE has been made “optional” or discarded by several departments across various schools in the wake of COVID-19 Pandemic
- Strongly encouraged to take GRE IF:
  - a. Applying to Economics or Political Science Departments
  - b. If your program required Quantitative skills





# Living with Disabilities

- Know your Disabilities- Mental/Physical
- Research Health Insurances/Disability Resources
- Weather induced medical conditions
- Medicines/Accessibility to the same



# Preparing for a PhD – Building your Profile

- A doctoral degree requires you to undertake rigorous, independent research in your field of study. Therefore, you should be able to show that you have good research skills. Good academic grades sometimes matter when it comes to a PhD programme, especially in Ivys. However, what will give you an edge over other applicants is your ability to undertake quality research.
- You can build your profile for a PhD by:
  - Pursuing research assistantships with professors in your field of study
  - Pursuing research internships/ projects at various organisations
  - Publishing articles/ blogs
  - Pursuing a research degree
  - Writing original dissertations in your undergraduate/Master's degrees
  - Having work experience in your relevant field of study
  - Applying for teaching/ tutoring roles



# Preparing for a PhD – Statement of Purpose

- Statement of Purpose is the most crucial document in the whole application.
- It takes over 3-4 months to come up with a succinct and lucid statement.
- It is always helpful to have your letter writers and people you trust read the statement
- You can even ask your potential supervisors to read your SoP
- It is best to stay within the prescribed word limit
- List the names of the faculty with whom you want to work with, and how their work aligns with yours
- Two Important questions to keep in your mind when writing your SoP
  - Why you are the best person to pursue this project? And So What?



# The Role of Doctoral Committee

- A Doctoral Committee usually comprised of three people; two faculty members are from the department and then you can one or more from outside your department and university.
- The role of a doctoral committee in a PhD student's life is threefold: to advise the student, to monitor their academic progress, and to act as a mentor. Supervisors are responsible for fostering the intellectual and scholarly development of their students. They also play an important role in providing advice about professional development and both academic and non-academic career opportunities.
- For most PhD students, the desire to work with particular people is what determines their choice of university/ choice of PhD programme.



# Approaching a Supervisor

- For most PhD programmes, you are expected to first reach out to a potential supervisor you think can best guide you and run your research ideas past them, though it differs each department and university-wise.
- This process of approaching potential supervisors can be daunting! It involves cold-emailing several professors and hoping for a reply!
- You are likely to hear from a potential supervisor if in your first email to them:
  - Explain your research topic in two lines and then demonstrate how it aligns with the area of work of the supervisor or why you are interested to work with them
  - Your academic CV (containing a profile of all your research experience)
  - Ask for feedback on your proposal.



# General Tips

- Before you start drafting your research proposal, research various universities carefully to confirm that they have PhD programmes and supervisors that align with your research interests.
- Make sure you address why your research question is worth pursuing. Don't just assume that a potential supervisor or admissions committee will agree with you that it is worth pursuing.
- Remember that it is more impressive to meaningfully explore a narrower research question than to superficially explore multiple research questions or a broad research question.
- Adopt a clear and easy-to-read structure, with appropriate headings. Ensure that your proposal is clear, concise and coherent.
- Refine and edit your proposal a number of times before it is submitted. Ensure that your research proposal has been proofread by someone familiar with your field of study (to confirm that it conforms to academic standards). Run a grammar and spelling check before submitting your proposal!
- Check each university's website for guidance on points to cover in your proposal, word/ character limits, formatting and citations, submission guidelines, deadlines, and additional documents or evidence.



# Stay Connected

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