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Tips for Applying to and Completing a Doctoral Program

Introduction

Gaining acceptance to a doctoral program requires skill, discipline, preparation and perseverance—the same skills necessary to make it through a doctoral program. The purpose of *Éxito! Latino Cancer Research Leadership Training* and its annual Summer Institute is to expose participants to the opportunities and need for minority researchers in the field of Latino cancer health disparities research as well as provide them with the motivation, skills, and resources to apply to a doctoral program.

This document provides tips and ideas to help you succeed in getting into and through a doctoral program. We focus on the “other stuff” — the certain *je ne sais quois* — distinguishing you as a star graduate student. Because everyone comes from different disciplinary backgrounds and may pursue diverse doctoral foci, this guide applies to students in many fields.

The doctoral path has many broad stages, from making a decision, identifying a program and school, and applying, to surviving the various phases of doctoral studies, and eventually to finding a job after graduation. This document’s tips and tools correspond to these different stages of doctoral life.

Deciding to Apply

Seen within the context of your personal goals, common considerations for every doctoral student include:

- Program fit
- Faculty
- Funding
- Availability of support within the school and larger community



Program Fit

Deciding how well a doctoral program fits your needs is also a wonderful opportunity for you to reach out to faculty, current students, and alumni from that program. This effort can uncover a wealth of vital information not available on a website or

in a brochure, and it offers a great opportunity to meet individuals who may be a part of the doctoral admissions committee. Meeting these individuals before applying means they will probably remember your name when they evaluate your application.

The following questions can help you begin a dialogue with those “in the know”:

- What courses offered by this program interest me?
- What are the requirements for the degree?
- What is the average number of years to a degree?
- Who are the faculty interested in my area of focus?
- Does the curriculum focus on theory or practice?
- How many students are enrolled in or graduated from this program?
- What kinds of work are graduates involved in and where?

Faculty

How well does a program fit you? (not the other way around!)

Identify and inquire about faculty you may want to work with. A simple web search can help you identify faculty members in the department of question doing work that is interesting, stimulating and/or relevant to you.

Connecting directly with faculty will not guarantee acceptance into a program, but acceptance is not as likely without these connections.



Some steps to take:

- Do a literature search on faculty you may be interested in working with.
- Do your homework and become conversant with a few salient articles in line with the research you would like to do.
- Schedule time to meet with faculty you would be most interested in working with.

Some questions to get you started include:

- Can their work/support help me finish my degree faster?
- Is funding available on their grants?
- Will they commit such funds for my support?
- What is the faculty availability and does this differ for tenured and non-tenured faculty members?

Remember:

- Some schools actually require you have a faculty who is willing to work with you before you apply.
- Your application is strengthened if you have identified faculty who are interested in working with you.
- Finally, make sure you talk with the chair of the doctoral committee to make yourself and your interest known!



Funding

The ultimate funding goal is to complete your program debt-free and supported throughout, allowing you to concentrate on finishing as quickly and efficiently as possible.

At some schools, doctoral students are fully funded by the program. This is rare and usually occurs at larger private institutions. Generally, programs offer more support in the first years and later require students to seek their own funds. Some schools offer (or require) teaching or research assistantships in exchange for pay and tuition remission. Because every program

determines financial aid packages differently, this can be one of the greatest challenges of a doctoral student's career.

Be prepared to live on a frugal budget! Because your income will provide for living and academic expenses, it is wise to reduce your living expenses to the bare minimum.

Utilize every available resource!

- Talk to faculty, current students and alumni from your programs of interest.
- If at all possible, finalize your first-year funding prior to committing to a given school.
- Keep financial information organized and readily available in a folder labeled "funding."
- Be sure to keep diligent records!

Entrance Exams

Standardized test scores are important, but they do not equal success in an academic program!

Standardized test scores give an admissions committee an idea of your scholastic aptitude, and the combination of your scores and GPA give a more holistic picture of who you are scholastically.

As such, you will need to perform reasonably well on the test and aim for a “competitive” score. “Competitive” means at least “within the ballpark” compared to how well other applications and admitted students of the program in question performed. You can find out the scores of admitted students on the school’s website or by asking the admission committee.

Consult the wealth of study guides and dedicate time — perhaps a few months — to studying for

the exam, but do not neglect other important aspects of your application.

Test preparation courses can provide the structure, practice, and confidence needed to get a competitive score. Although courses offered by private companies may be expensive, university extended learning departments and other academic groups can be more affordable.

Remember to consider your score in the context of other applicants and of your application as a whole. Thus, work as hard as you can to get a competitive score, but do not allow what you think is a low score to preclude you from applying to the program.

Gaining some perspective:

- A desirable score makes you a competitive applicant for admission to the program and for financial aid!
- Your score and GPA may competitively rank you for financial aid consideration.
- GRE scores are valid for up to five years, so you may want to re-take the exam if you feel you can get a better score, as a higher score may have important financial aid implications.
- Consult with admissions committee members with questions about test scores.

Campus Visits

Campus visits can be the deciding factor in selecting a doctoral program!

Campus visits provide a wonderful opportunity for you to assess the doctoral program and the school environment. At the very least, you should schedule an appointment with the faculty you want to work with and interviews with other

faculty members of interest. Meet with current students, tour the campus and explore the community. Keeping these things in mind, visits can give you a preview of what life will be like when you move to the area!

Letters of Recommendation

A missing persons report does not make a good letter of recommendation! That is, a letter that says you came to class at the appointed time, seemed interested in the subject matter, and turned in all of your assignments, is not what you are after. A letter that does not elaborate upon your strengths, weaknesses, interest, and your potential to be an academician will not adequately inform an admissions committee on your behalf, even if it is written by a high-ranking individual (who may not know you that well or hold you in a high regard)!

Asking for (and getting) strong letters of recommendation is an art!

As much as *Éxito!* faculty and staff would love to write you letters, these would not support your case because we have not actually worked with you. You really need letters from people who know you well.

Ask academic faculty who have known or worked with you for a significant period of time. However, if you have been out of school for several years and a former employer is in the exact field you want to focus on for your dissertation, then you may request a letter from this person. Check the application requirements to see whether letters may be from non-faculty and, if so, how many letters.

Do not hesitate to ask prospective letter-writers: "Do you feel you can write me a very strong letter of recommendation? If not, I will understand and ask someone else."

To help you get a strong letter, make it as easy as possible for the individual to write it! Give your references at least a month, if not more time, to write the letter. Send them gentle email reminders beginning a couple of weeks before it is due.

Checklist for receiving the best possible letter!

Provide the letter-writer with a packet including:

- A cover letter chronologically listing application/letter of recommendation due dates. Be sure to highlight the dates!
- A brief summary of programs you're applying to and the programs' relationships to your study interest.
- Resume or curriculum vitae
- Personal statement draft
- Recent transcript with the class(es) you took with your letter-writer (highlight the classes)
- Stamped, addressed envelopes for each of the letters required and instructions on how to send letters (sealed envelope, send directly to school electronically, etc.).
- Place all materials in a colored envelope or folder. Faculty members get many requests for support materials, and if yours is well-organized and noticeable among other piles of paper, you may accrue psychological benefit for you effort!



Personal Statement

Personal statement = literary origami

Personal statements provide an opportunity for you to “come alive” through an otherwise typical application by telling a story about your life that relates to your desire to obtain a doctoral degree in a chosen field of study. Almost like origami, a graceful statement takes a small piece of paper and folds it in such a way that it takes shape as a swan. Your desire to enter a doctoral program in a certain field should be explored in as many ways as possible within the page limitations to create the swan that represents you, your preparation, drive, focus, and potential. Remember, the admissions

committee is looking for your potential as a student and scientist. Provide them this vision of what and how you want to contribute to the field.

Many books exist on the subject of writing personal statements. Consult them to write your statement of purpose and be prepared to revise continuously until a final draft is ready. People who know you well will serve as good statement reviewers. Have as many different pairs of eyes give your statement a gander before submitting the final draft. It will also be helpful to have a professor in your chosen field give you feedback.

Application Form

Submit on time and error-free!!

Be aware of early deadlines, which may make you eligible for additional financial aid consideration.

Many online application programs do not offer spell check! You can compose your responses in a word processor program and conduct the spelling and grammar checks there. Then, copy and paste into the blank text fields.



Getting Through a Doctoral Program

The business of academia

Possessing good technical skills are not the only factors determining success in graduate school. Thus, before entering, you should understand the business of academia.

While not exactly like the corporate world, academia is a place where input and resources must always equal a product (i.e., research and ideas) and is rife with politics. In general, identifying the undercurrent — the people, procedures, places and things that really make your program run — can make a world

of difference in the time it takes to get what you need. The key to utilizing politics to your advantage is good people skills!

There are different rules in the political game for minority doctoral students who often have less representation in the faculty, administration, and student bodies. Ethnic identity politics vary among programs. One helpful tip is to thoroughly research the university, program, and department.

Things to research:

- What is the racial/ethnic distribution of doctoral students in the program and department?
- How many minority students have completed the doctoral program you are interested in since its inception?
- What is the average time span it takes minority students to complete the doctorate?
- What strategies do the university, program, and/or department have to improve diversity among its student population and faculty?
- How many minority faculty members are in the program/department?
- How many of those faculty members are tenured?
- What types of support resources are available to minority students (learning groups, mentoring, individual counseling, student organizations, etc.)

Getting Out of Graduate School

Doctoral degree = ticket to success!

With a doctoral degree there are many paths to get to the career of your choice. The private or non-profit sector becomes available to you after you have proven your salt. A post-doctoral fellowship or research assistant position improves your competitiveness for future tenure-track positions or big research dollars to lead solo projects and studies.

The job hunt. Contact professionals who are working in the position you desire and research the institution or organization to ensure that its mission is in line with your personal interest and goals.

Surely, the skills and network contacts that you gained throughout your doctoral pursuits will help you for the rest of your career.



Some questions to consider when talking to program recruiters and faculty:

- Where do program graduates go after receiving their degree? Academia? The public sector? The private sector?
- What is the average time between finishing the degree and finding employment?
- What are the average salaries for graduates?
- Does the program provide support for students to attend conferences and other networking/professional opportunities?

Notes



Latino Cancer Research Leadership Training • Resource Guide

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