



University Career Center & The President's Promise

Thank you for attending the *Strategies to Gain Admission to Highly Competitive Graduate Programs* Monday evening. Mr. Asher has shared the following pages of handouts with us.

Graduate School Resources/Advising Options

- The [Pre-Law Professions Advising Office](#) serves all current and former students at the University of Maryland interested in law school and legal careers.
- The [Reed-Yorke Health Professionals Advising Office](#) is available to advise students on health related graduate school admission.
- The [University Career Center](#) meets with students individually to discuss strategies for choosing, applying to, and evaluating graduate school offers.
- [Writing Center](#) offers personal statement workshops- October 19th.
- Graduate School resources: University Career Center [graduate school resources](#).

Bound for Graduate School? Strategies to Gain Admission to Highly Competitive Graduate Programs!

Our guest speaker, Donald Asher, is amazing presenter as well as the author of the bestselling book, *Graduate Admission Essays*. Mr. Asher is one of the nation's foremost authorities on the graduate admissions process. He is the author of twelve books, a contributing writer to the Wall Street Journal's Career Journal (in addition to many other publications), and leads over 150 lectures a year. Donald Asher's [career biography](#).

Thank you to our event sponsors!



Why you need to apply early and maybe to several programs:

(these are actual cases)

- One student was rejected because her printed-out application portfolio was “accidentally placed on the wrong pile.” The graduate school discovered its mistake later in the season, but had already sent the student a rejection letter. Rather than admit what had happened, they let the decision stand.
- A student applying for a PhD in philosophy received a letter from a major university rejecting his application for a PhD in Germanic languages.
- A student was rejected by an internationally acclaimed architecture program after his portfolio was reviewed by Prof. X. When he called to inquire about the status of his application, Prof. Y picked up his portfolio, glanced through it while the student was on hold, and reversed the decision of Prof X. Thus was he admitted.
- One professor forgot to mail a wonderful letter of recommendation he had written for his favorite advisee, and she was rejected.
- Another professor was not granted tenure, and stopped performing all duties whatsoever that were not contractually required. This included writing letters of recommendation *that he had already agreed to write*. At least one of his advisees was not admitted to a graduate program because of this. The student never knew what happened.
- A student failed to send original transcripts from a community college she attended while in high school. The transfer grades from the community college appeared on her regular college transcript but, through a bizarre chain of events, an overzealous student employee and a 50 cent library fine from six years prior conspired to keep her out of graduate school.
- A student had a wonderful exchange of letters with a department chair, some of which included such statements as “We’re so delighted that you will be joining us next year.” Nevertheless, she was rejected by the graduate school office, which had more authority than the department.

Ten Things to Do if You Don't Get In

1. Apply earlier (avoid the last six weeks before the deadline).
2. Apply to more schools (six is usually considered a prudent minimum: two schools that are likely to admit you, two middle-of-the-road schools, two reach schools).
3. Apply to more safe schools (even 4.0 students can and do get rejected).
4. Visit and wow 'em (be sure to follow Asher's Law).
5. Go to summer school in the targeted subject and wow 'em (it's easy to get into summer school, even at Harvard).
6. Take one class at a time in the targeted subject and wow 'em (remember: your most recent grades count the most).
7. Get volunteer or internship experiences in the targeted field (even part-time, even unpaid).
8. Work in a "real job" in the targeted field (there's no substitute for actual experience, and recommendations from supervisors in the profession).
9. Get an intermediate degree (such as a master's or even just a credential).
10. Get older and try again (many times, that's all it takes).

Don't forget that the best time to apply is early in the fall
to start graduate school the following fall, so
be sure to plan ahead!

Asher's Law: Thou shalt not write, nor call, nor visit any graduate faculty member without having read some of his or her works first.

Statement of Purpose Pre-Writing Exercise: Build a Table of Undergraduate Research Projects

Suggestions:

- list projects in order of interest to your targeted reader
- use working titles to describe your research projects
- name your professor/advisor/supervisor

Sample Undergraduate Research Projects

- Designed original research into the ultrafiltration of proteins, including developing a theoretical model for design, design and actual prototyping of cross-flow ultrafiltration unit, and experimentation to determine optimal settings for maximal permeate flux. A Biochemical Engineering Laboratory senior project under the direction of Prof. L. Hintzer.
- Designed a stream remediation project involving liquid-liquid extraction to remove *m*-xylene from contaminated water; also used EPA QUAL2E to model the effects of DO, BOD, and Nitrogen cycle, under the guidance of Prof. L. Hintzer.
- Conducted research into mathematical models of potential use for codifying chaotic systems such as watersheds, an independent study under NSF grant supervised by Prof. P. Cenczynsky. Abstract and draft findings available at <http://www.HarveyMudd.edu/~czynsky/models2.html>.
- Designed and conducted original research into quantitative and qualitative properties of a meteorite sample using atomic absorption spectrophotometry, emission spectrophotometry, induction coupled plasma and laser spectrophotometry under the direction of Prof. R. Hull-Wallace. Results presented at the Argonne National Laboratory during annual meeting of the International Association of Amateur Astronomers, 2015.

This is not just for science students! Similar descriptions can be written about papers and projects in the liberal arts and other fields, e.g., “Designed and conducted an in-depth analysis of the use of lightness and darkness to convey moral authority in Elizabethan poetry of Smyth, Hallbeck, and Colbin, resulting in a 28-page paper presented in summary to the Anderson College English Department Colloquium, Nov. 1st, 2015.”

Adapted from *Graduate Admissions Essays* by Donald Asher (Ten Speed Press, 2015)
don@donaldasher.com or www.amazon.com

Writing Exercises

for the
Graduate Admissions Essay, Statement of Purpose, or Letter of Intent

Answer each question with a narrative essay of any length, from a paragraph to several pages, whatever feels right.

1. How did you first get interested in this field of study? Can you remember the very first time you had this interest?
2. What has influenced this interest over time? What professors, classes, labs, papers, research projects, books or ideas have influenced you? What out-of-class experiences have influenced you?
3. If your interest has changed over time, how has your prior interest contributed to your understanding of/approach to your current interest?
4. Make a list of all your undergraduate papers, labs, and research projects. If you cannot remember their exact names, approximate or paraphrase.
5. Do you have any publications or presentations at academic conferences? Are there publications you can submit or any academic conferences you can attend (in any capacity) between now and when you would begin your graduate studies?
6. What will you do between now and when you will arrive at your graduate institution? Which classes will you take? What skills will you acquire? What internship, work or community service experiences will you complete?
7. How have you researched your graduate school options to date? Have you visited schools, researched them on Web sites, written to professors, attended conferences?
8. Can you remember encouraging words you have received from professors, employers, coaches, or peers? If others have encouraged you to pursue your goals, can you remember, as exactly as you can, what they said to you? If so, make a list of quotes.
9. What is your GPA in the following categories: overall, year by year, over the last four completed semesters, in your major, since you declared your current major, in math and sciences, not counting math and sciences, not counting semesters abroad, etc.? Look at your transcripts and see if there are other ways of analyzing your GPA that might be of interest to admissions readers.
10. How have you prepared yourself for success in graduate school? What body of relevant knowledge will you take with you? What study or laboratory skills will help you succeed? What personal attributes will help you?
11. Have you overcome adversity to get where you are? (Be brief.)
12. What makes you unique or unusual? List several things.
13. What are your leisure activities? What do you do when you are not being a student? What do you do to relieve stress?
14. How might you contribute to the academic community you intend to join? How will that community be benefited by association with you?
15. Can you name specific professors of interest at your top three graduate programs? If so, list them along with their research/academic specialties.
16. What will you do with this degree? Will you teach, do research, work in industry or government? All of the above? (If you don't know, don't invent.)

This handout courtesy of Donald Asher, adapted from *Graduate Admissions Essays* (Ten Speed Press), the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process. See *Graduate Admissions Essays* for sample essays in all fields.

Questions to ask any graduate program:

1. What are the strongest areas in the department? Which areas are experiencing growth in research success and publications?
2. What is the largest and the most typical class size for a graduate class? Are classes restricted to graduate students or are undergraduates common in your graduate classes?
3. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of going to grad school immediately after completing the undergraduate program? The advantages and disadvantages of waiting a few years? The best use of the interim time?
4. What are the criteria and process for selecting teaching assistants, research assistants, and fellows?
5. I will probably need financial assistance. Can you tell me how most students fund their studies here?
6. Will I get to develop my own topics, or will I be expected to work on a professor's ongoing research?
7. What is the mean time to complete (a) class work, (b) research, (c) thesis or dissertation (if required)? (I.e., what is the mean time to complete the entire program? Ask about the program as a whole, but perhaps more importantly, *by advisor/mentor/professor.*)
8. What is your attrition rate? Of those who don't finish, what are their reasons?
9. What kind of student thrives in your program?
10. How reliable is your financial support year to year? Is the first-year offer always sustained given attainment of academic goals?
11. What is the age, race, gender balance, ratio of married/single, and geographical origin of graduate students in the program? (In other words: Are there any other people like me?)
12. I have compiled bibliographies of publications by your faculty off their web sites and my own research, but can you tell me which have won awards and grants lately (and presumably need graduate assistants)?
13. Can you tell me about your placement rates and types of jobs obtained by recent graduates? (*Avoid relying on testimonials and anecdotal evidence.*)
14. May I meet some currently enrolled students (in person or via phone or email)? (Be sure to ask about their research topics and *be sure to take notes on specific profs mentioned.*)
15. How can I be a strong candidate for a program like this?

Adapted from *Graduate Admissions Essays* by Donald Asher (Ten Speed Press, 2015)

www.amazon.com

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Letters of Recommendation

This is a relationship, not a transaction. I prefer a month notice, and two weeks is a minimum. I have made exceptions in extraordinary cases (late decision or late discovery of a very attractive option).

I need a portfolio from you with the following contents:

1. A preliminary list of the graduate programs you are considering, and how you differentiate them. Most faculty recommend you apply to two safe schools, two reach schools, and two schools from the middle of the spectrum, more for law and medicine. If you are going to go to the trouble to apply to graduate school, please have a strategy to succeed at the process.
2. A printout of your transcripts.
3. Copies of two or three graded work projects, theses/papers/ labs/write ups that represent the quality of your work.
4. A rough draft or outline of your personal statement or statement of purpose. If you want help with this, see Donald Asher's *Graduate Admissions Essays* (the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process).
5. A C.V. or resume for me, including student activities, volunteer, and service experiences, etc. If you have a different C.V. or resume crafted for submission to graduate schools, I'd like to see that version also.
6. A brief list of what *you* think would be most important for a graduate program to know about you.
7. Clear instructions for submitting the letter. Web links and codes that work, or if there is a paper process, all forms or envelopes filled out in advance, and stamps (correct postage) for anything that I have to mail. The less secretarial work I have to do, the more effort I can put into your letter itself.
8. *A very clear indication of when you need the letters submitted.* Otherwise, I will assume that anything ahead of the deadline is satisfactory.

After I submit your recommendations, I need two more things:

1. You need to share with me any communiqués from the graduate programs about secondary inquiries, admission offers, wait list notices, funding/support/fellowship/assistantship offers, telephone contacts, meet-and-greet events, and so on. This helps me be a better advisor.
2. I need to know where you decide to go!

How to Pay for Your Graduate Education

By Donald Asher, author of *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate application process.

You'd love to go to graduate school, if only you could find a way to pay for it, right? Well, maybe you're thinking about it backwards. Maybe you have to decide to go first, and then you'll find the money.

For many types of grad schools, you'll have to apply to the program, simultaneously apply for several internal and external sources of funding, and wait for months to see how it's going to work for you. So step one is clearly to decide to go. Looking for money is just a part of the process.

Next, stop looking for "financial aid." That's an undergraduate term. You want to look for "funding" and "support." In graduate school most people who are called "financial aid officers" are in fact *loan* officers. They're great people, and you're probably going to need them, but they have no idea about all the sources for funding and support. That's what this article is about.

Let's start with **merit scholarships**. If you're brilliant, with the fantastic grades and scores to prove it, many graduate programs, including law and business, will give you a merit scholarship or a full waiver of tuition. Here's the secret: Tier 2 schools poach talent from Tier 1 schools by offering a free ride. So you get into Top Ten School of Law and the Pretty Good School of Law, but Top Ten wants you to pay full fare while Pretty Good gives you a free ride. All kinds of programs do this, but many don't talk about it.

Also, think about taking the plunge and going for the doctorate. Full-time doctoral students at many—but certainly not all—programs automatically get a full waiver of tuition. This is well known among academicians, but not well known by the general public.

Next, look for assistantships. Assistantships are a weird animal. According to the IRS, they are jobs. According to most faculty, they are apprenticeship programs. According to some students, they are a form of modern indentured servitude. They are also an honor and a form of financial aid. The good news is that assistantships almost always include *a full or partial waiver of tuition plus a stipend*. Stipends vary from as little as \$8000 a year to more than \$30,000 per year, but the real value of an assistantship is the waiver of tuition. For ten to twenty hours a week of service to your department, you can go to school for free.

Obviously, if you are not paying tuition, public and private schools cost the same, and in-state and out-of-state tuition is also exactly the same. Because of this, it is frequently cheaper to go to an expensive school! They often have more money to give to students they want to recruit.

There are three types of assistantship. Most undergraduates know about **teaching assistantships**. To get a teaching assistantship, you have to have outstanding grades in the subject, maybe a strong GRE score, and maybe prior teaching or tutoring experience. Departments have stringent rules about who gets selected to be a teaching assistant.

Research assistantships are much easier to get than teaching assistantships. You don't have to have great grades and scores; you just have to have the same passion as a faculty member who needs an assistant. Prior research experience is more important than your grades or scores. All you have to do is convince one faculty member, not a whole department, that you'd be useful to have around. Start by saying, "Dr. Lee, I've read every article you've ever written. I think you're a genius...." Well, maybe not literally, but you get the idea. There are research assistantships all over any campus, including in areas where students might not think to look, for example, in English and education departments.

Graduate assistantships are the easiest to get, in terms of what credentials you need to possess. GA assignments are really just jobs, with less of an academic component. Jobs in administration, clerical, IT support, admissions and records, and program coordinator-type roles are run as graduate assistantships. Department and program heads dole these out.

Here's a secret assistantship often overlooked: If you are a native speaker of a foreign language, you can sometimes get a teaching assistantship in a foreign language department, leading a conversation group or even a whole class, while you are studying somewhere else, say engineering or business. If you speak a truly needed language, such as Arabic, you may find this an easy way to pay for your graduate education. Sometimes there are opportunities to be an instructor in areas where there are shortages, for example, an acquaintance of mine paid for his doctoral studies by teaching statistics in several departments.

One of the few ways to go to business and law school for free is by being a graduate assistant. They take GAs in only a few select areas, typically career placement, admissions, and IT roles. Interest alone won't win these assignments; some kind of prior experience is usually required.

If you want to get assistantships it helps to be a doctoral student, but all these assistantships are available for you as a master's degree student at all universities that do not offer the doctoral degree in your field of choice. Assistantships are common for full-time students at brick-and-mortar institutions, and pretty rare at online and distributed-model institutions and for all part-time students.

If you want to go to school for free part-time, one of the better ways is through some type of **employer-sponsored educational benefits** program. Many universities themselves have outstanding educational benefits for full-time employees, so making a career move to working for a university may be your best way to get additional degrees and credentials part-time without taking out any loans. Of course, other types of employers subsidize the educations of their employees. Watch out for complicated rules! For example, some employers only reimburse you for completed courses, or for courses directly related to your ongoing assignments, some cover books and fees and others only tuition, and you may have to pay back every dime if you subsequently leave the company within a specified time of using these benefits.

Suppose you have to pay for your own education. Wouldn't it be nice to have a scholarship for 25 to 30% or more of your tuition? You can! If you'll study something that helps you advance in the career you already have, your tuition is tax deductible. So the government in effect gives you a scholarship equal to your combined federal and state income tax rate. Be careful, though. If an auditor decides your investment in a part-time master's degree in poetry has no bearing on your career in corporate finance, it's not deductible at all. Consult a tax professional before trying to deduct any educational expenses.

Many people pay for their graduate educations through loans. If you stand to earn significantly more money upon completing a degree or credential program, it makes sense to borrow money and pay it back later through increased income. In fact, education is one of the best investments you'll ever make, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. People who complete a master's degree will earn \$400,000 more than people who stop at the bachelor's degree. A Ph.D. is worth \$1.3 million more, and doctors and lawyers earn \$2.3 million more. Individual results will vary, but on average, borrowing money for tuition does make sense.

Raul Aldama, financial aid officer for Fielding Graduate University, says "Seventy-five to 80% of our students take out loans, depending on the academic program." His school uses a distributed learning format, and has students all over the country. Faculty and deans manage the fellowships, but true to his title, Mr. Aldama focuses only on student borrowing. "You're allowed \$20,500 per year through the federally funded Stafford Loan Program, and additional monies up to the total cost of attendance through the Graduate Plus Program." Even if you have a high income and tons of assets, you can qualify for these programs if you are a U.S. citizen and not in active default on a prior student loan. The terms will vary by your circumstances. You start by

contacting the financial aid office of the program of your choice, and it's a good idea to consult with them *before you even apply*.

To learn about third-party scholarships, grants, and fellowships, check out these sites:

www.finaid.org

www.fastweb.com

www.blackexcel.org

www.cos.com

www.hsf.net

There are some other good sites, but be sure never to pay for a scholarship search. If it's not free, you're in the wrong place.

I like these books better than the web sites, because you can browse your way to money:

The Best Scholarships for the Best Students

Foundation Grants to Individuals

Annual Register of Grant Support

Dan Cassidy's Worldwide Graduate Scholarship Directory

In these books you can learn about weird money specifically reserved for women over 5'9" tall, for people with a certain Italian last name, and for people with bad grades. There's a *lot* of weird money out there.

In the sciences it's expected that you will apply for three or four third-party funding sources and, frankly, that's a good practice for everybody. Just make it part of your application process.

My final piece of advice is to remember how to be poor. You'll need a lot less money for your graduate studies if you'll give up vacations in Europe, new cars, premium cable, and eating out all the time. If you want it bad enough, there are myriad ways to put together the money you need for graduate study.

BIO:

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of 12 books, including *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent*, *Self-Directed*, *Late Blooming*, and *Just Plain Different*; *How to Get Any Job with Any Major*; and *Who Gets Promoted*, *Who Doesn't*, and *Why*.

Funding Graduate Study

A Primer

This is a free, open-source resource by Donald Asher, author of the best-selling guide to getting into graduate school, *Graduate Admissions Essays*, 4th ed., 2012. You are welcome to share this with all your friends, students, faculty, staff, etc., and you may post this anywhere in any format in any medium. Also, alert me to cool resources (email below).

* * *

Email me and I will send you an article on how to fund your graduate studies: don@donaldasher.com

Use my book, *The Best Scholarships for the Best Students*, by Donald Asher, Jason Morris, and Nichole Fazio-Veigel (which includes elite internships and lab opportunities in addition to funding, all the way to postdoc)

Avoid using the term “financial aid,” but instead inquire about “funding and support.” Many (but not all) programs have teaching, research, and graduate assistantships, so you can ask them some version of this: “When and how do you choose your TAs, RAs, and GAs, and can you help me understand *all* the forms of funding and support available to students in your program?” They may say, “It’s all on our web site,” *so you’d better have looked carefully on the web site first.*

Also, check out these books & web sites:

UCLA’s *Graduate & Postdoctoral Extramural Support (GRAPES) Database*, available at www.grad.ucla.edu/grpinst.htm (fantastic open resource; yay, UCLA!)

University of California-Santa Cruz (UCSC): *Fellowships & Funding Guide for Graduate Students*, available at <http://careers.ucsc.edu/grad/fellowships.html>

Funding the Humanities PhD: The Grad Student's Guide to Grants & Fellowships [Kindle Edition], by J. Martin, PhD, available from amazon.com for \$3.99 (this is an excellent guide in an area that doesn’t get enough attention, i.e., funding for humanities; highly recommended)

Foundation Grants to Individuals, by Foundation Center (various authors; annual)

Annual Register of Grant Support, by Beverley McDonough and Daniel Bazikian (annual, obviously, hence the name)

Finaid.org

Fastweb.com

FAFSA: **www.fafsa.com**

Grants.gov (\$500 billion in funding)

NIH: **grants.nih.gov/grants/oer.htm**

NSF: **nsf.gov/funding**

NASA: **intern.nasa.gov/solar/web/public/main** (SOLAR is Student On-Line Application for Recruiting)

COS: **pivot.cos.com** (Community of Science)

(these are just the most important; for hundreds of specialized sites, for underrepresented students, for international students, STEM only, etc., see *The Best Scholarships for the Best Students*)