

Graduate Study in Philosophy

Is Graduate Study in Philosophy Right for You?

Looking for a job that will give you wealth, power, fame, and sex appeal? While philosophers may live high on the hog compared to classicists and sales clerks, they are still comparatively low in the professional pecking order. You might want to consider something other than philosophy. But if you are philosophically curious, have demonstrated talent for philosophy, and think you might like to teach, you might want to consider graduate study in philosophy and an academic career. Academics get to pursue their intellectual passions professionally, often with considerable autonomy, and have comparatively flexible schedules. But you also need to be realistic. Graduate school is no picnic, and academic jobs, especially good academic jobs, are scarce. Here are some things you ought to know.

- You Need a Ph.D. There's not much you can do with an M.A. in philosophy, and most of the best graduate programs don't even offer a separate M.A. degree (though they may award a "terminal" M.A. to Ph.D. students who don't want to or aren't allowed to finish). There are some M.A. programs whose graduates go on to more elite Ph.D. programs elsewhere. Such M.A. programs are usually for students who were not philosophy majors or did not attend institutions with a strong, mainstream philosophy major, though it may be possible to be admitted to them with a weak background from a strong program, such as ours. It's worth emphasizing, however, that there is no guarantee that an M.A. at one of these programs will lead to admission at an elite Ph.D. program.
- Academia is the Destination. The main thing a Ph.D. in philosophy is good for is to get an academic job. There are three main kinds of academic jobs in philosophy: (1) positions at research universities, (2) positions at liberal arts or state universities that do not have graduate programs, and (3) positions at community colleges. A Ph.D. is necessary for all three sorts of academic jobs.
- What Philosophers Do. The main responsibilities of any academic are research, teaching, and, to a lesser extent, service (departmental, university, and professional). The importance of these three kinds of duties varies depending on the sort of program one is in (research tends to dominate at research programs, etc.).
- Be Realistic.
 - Getting In. Top programs receive approximately 150-250 applications and admit between 5-15%.
 - Finishing. Anywhere from one quarter to one half of those who start Ph.D. programs fail to complete the degree.
 - Getting a Job. Despite increased enrollments due to the Baby Boomlet, there are still many more Ph.D.s than there are academic positions. Especially if you are interested in a position in a research program, there is enormous competition for these jobs. Most of the better students at top programs (e.g. the top 25 programs) eventually get tenure-track jobs of some kind, though not necessarily at research universities, and these tenure-track jobs often come only after one or two one-year jobs at different institutions. The success rates at lower-ranked programs are lower.
 - Be Flexible. While the very best students from the very best programs often receive multiple job offers, many highly qualified Ph.D.s have more limited options. You must be flexible geographically and willing to move, for instance, taking one or more one-year jobs before finding a tenure-track position.
- Make Sure You Are Committed. It's not enough to have gotten decent grades as an undergraduate philosophy major. Very few majors in any discipline go on to graduate work and a career as an academic. Make sure you are passionate about philosophy and have some demonstrated talent.

What to Expect in Graduate School

- 5-8 years for the Ph.D.
- 2-3 years of coursework
- Various distributional requirements
- Qualifying and/or candidacy exams
- Writing a thesis
- Some combination of fellowship and TA support. Don't go to graduate school without some such financial aid package. The best programs offer them to those students they really want. The prospects of academic employment are too uncertain, and the salaries for academics are too modest, to justify going into significant debt in pursuit of the Ph.D. (Terminal M.A. programs often offer little or no financial support, though this may vary.)

Applying to Graduate School

- Identify the Programs to which You Want to Apply. Brian Leiter's *Philosophical Gourmet Report* (<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com>) provides useful rankings of programs and subspecialties and lots of useful information and advice about graduate study in philosophy, though you shouldn't attach too much significance to small differences in the rankings.
 - Strength of Program, General. Only consider programs in the top 50. If you really want a job at a research university, you probably shouldn't consider seriously programs outside of the top 25 or so.

- Strength of Program, Subspecialties. It's important to study in a reasonably well-rounded program, both for those who don't yet know what subfields interest them most (you need to be exposed to different areas of philosophy at the graduate level to make an informed decision about where to specialize) and for those who do (specialists in any field need a decent background in other areas of philosophy). Pay special attention to programs that are strong in your specialty area (if you have one).
- Realistic Choices. Try to have a realistic assessment of the strength of your application and submit most of your applications to places where you have a realistic prospect of admission. Add one or two "aspirational" applications and one or two "insurance" applications.
- Application Components. Often a first cut is made on the basis of objective data, such as your GPA, your GREs, and the status of your undergraduate institution. These factors can continue to play a role, but at this point references and writing sample will also become important.
 - Undergraduate Grades. Anything below a 3.5 at UCSD is going to be problematic at top programs.
 - GREs. Take them early enough so that if you don't do as well as you'd like, there's time to take them again.
 - Statement of Purpose. This will be part of each application. It need not be profound, but it should be thoughtful, mature, and well written. Try to tailor or adapt your statement at different programs to specific features of those programs, rather than submitting the same generic statement to each program.
 - Letters of Recommendation. You are typically asked for three letters of reference. These should all be academic references, and it's usually best if they are all from philosophers. Provide your references with work you did in their courses, transcripts, a rough draft of your statement of purpose, and a list of the programs to which you plan to apply. Try to get to know at least two philosophy professors reasonably well (take more than one course from them and have some personal contact with them), so that they can provide detailed and not merely formulaic references.
 - Writing Sample. Give the writing sample some thought and work hard on it. Don't just use an unrevised short paper that got you an A in some upper-division course. Use a more substantial paper that shows your best work (especially originality). *Revise and perhaps extend it, ideally with the help of feedback from your professor or others.*

Deciding Where to Go

If you get in at more than one program, collect more information to determine which one would be best for you. If possible, make campus visits, but much information can be collected at a distance.

- Strength of Program. All else being equal, choose the program that is ranked most highly (though you shouldn't attach much significance to small differences in rankings).
- Strength of Subspecialty. All else being equal, choose the program that is strongest in the areas in which you want to specialize (though you shouldn't attach much significance to small differences in rankings). Whose work most interests you? How many people does the program have in your subspecialty and related areas?
- Talk to Current Graduate Students. Contact current graduate students at the programs you are considering. Ask them about financial support, student morale, accessibility of faculty, things they like most about their program, and things they like least. Make a special point of talking to graduate students in your area, especially anyone working with faculty with whom you might like to work.
- Finding Congenial Faculty. Find a program with faculty in your subspecialty whose work especially interests you. Better to find a program with more than one such faculty member. You want to be exposed to different ideas. Also, you don't want to have all your eggs in one basket, in case that one faculty member leaves or you find you don't work that well with him or her.
- Compare the guaranteed and/or expected financial aid packages of programs. Which program offers more aid? Which program offers more fellowship aid?
- Compare the data about job placement of different programs