BEST SOURCES TO LEARN ABOUT GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Professors

This is your best source. Professors know you, they know which programs favor students from your school, they know the relative quality of graduate programs in their fields, and they may even have personal friends at graduate programs where you might like to apply.

Other Students and Alumni

Students and alumni have similar information. Alumni currently at graduate programs will give you the most honest information about the quality of the program and the faculty.

GradTrek.com and Peterson's Guides, in abbreviated form at www.petersons.com

Gradtrek.com is in beta testing right now. Check it out. It's a search engine driven program to find the right grad program. Peterson's guides have every accredited program in the United States. They're a little dense and boring, but if you want to learn about programs there's no other complete resource.

Specialty Guides

Find specialty guides for your field, for example, *Graduate Programs in Neurosciences,* by asking professors for reference to them, by using the subject search engine at amazon.com, or by using the subject search engine for *Books in Print,* available from your university bookstore. Some associations also print guides to grad programs.

Academic Journals in Your Field

Top students should get grad school ideas directly from the academic journals. The best programs generate the best and the most articles, so look in the journals for writing and/or research that interest you. Then find out where the article writer teaches.

National Research Council data on Doctoral Programs (2011 release of 2005 data)

This study was highly controversial in terms of methodology, and the authors disavowed themselves of their own data, but released them anyway. Then, in spite of the fact that NRC said the data could not be used to create ordinal rankings, phds.org did so anyway. I think it is better than the alternatives, and a decent place to start building a list. See phds.org or a related data product, *A Data-Based Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States.*

Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index (FSPI)

No longer in use.

Educational Rankings Annual

An occasionally released compendium of other rankings, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Just as an interesting trivia item, it does not come out annually.

The University of Illinois Library – Grad School Rankings Page

http://www.library.illinois.edu/edx/rankings/rankgrad.html

The Business Magazine Rankings

Business magazines are in the business of selling business magazines. Their editors usually know less about higher education than they know about automobiles, which is not a lot. These "rankings" are not precise, but you can get ideas to investigate further. US News & World Report is the most widely cited ranking system, but is known to have a flawed methodology.

Online Searches

Online data are voluminous but shallow, and can be downright misleading (for example, some portals list schools in order of having paid a subscription fee). Always go online to investigate schools you're already interested in. Also, watch carefully for information on related labs and institutes, which might interest you more than the main department.

Grad Fairs

One of the only places to meet a lot of graduate professionals quickly, but don't fall in love on the first date! Check out other schools.

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, Skype, 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)
www.amazon.com
Donald Asher, Asher Associates, 415-543-7130, don@donaldasher.com

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.

Adapted from *Graduate Admissions Essays* by Donald Asher (Ten Speed Press), www.amazon.com.
Donald Asher, Asher Associates, 415-543-7130 or don@donaldasher.com.

Why you need to apply early
and 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 notice. 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 submit 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 emails 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.

Adapted from *Graduate Admissions Essays* by Donald Asher, don@donaldasher.com or www.amazon.com

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. Cenczynksy. 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, and 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, 2014.

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, 2013."

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

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*)

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 school s 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!

Provided by Donald Asher from a faculty example. Can be distributed at will to faculty, staff, and students. This handout is not copyrighted.

How to Shave a Year off a Ph.D.

(by Donald Asher, author of *Graduate Admissions Essays,* © 2008, used with permission)

1. **Follow your Program of Study. Your Program of Study is the sequence of classes, milestones, and events that leads to completion. You create your Program of Study with your advisor. In graduate school, the milestones and events are more important than the classes. E.g., if you miss a deadline to file a form, it can cost you a whole year. Update your Program of Study often, and post it over your desk. Look at it every day.**

2. **Come in the door with at least a vague dissertation idea, *but do not rigidly hang on to it.* Grad school is a transformative process, so your initial idea is a jump start, not a printed road map. Write all your papers for every class, as many as you can, on some aspect related to your dissertation interest.**

3. **Pick a mentor with a high completion rate. This is a professional relationship. It is irrelevant whether you are "buddies" with this person. Then, let your mentor suggest other people to serve on your committee. Start shopping, casually, for committee members right from the first day of grad school. Watch out for young professors out to make a name for themselves; they can be hardasses. Watch out for old profs that might not survive your dissertation. Keep an eye out for your external reviewer; they are hard to find and hard to recruit, and be sure to check to see whether they dislike your mentor, school, topic, methodology, epistemology, or politics. In fact, check all members of your committee for reservations like this.**

4. **An appropriate dissertation topic is very narrow. Think up a very narrow question that can be definitely answered with your methodology, within your budget, in your lifetime. Most research has these three components: population, problem, theory (or topic, problem, theory). Remember, a dissertation is a training process. This is not supposed to be the most important work you will ever do. What's better: A perfect dissertation or a done dissertation? Duh. Do smart, good work, but most of all, get it done. *It's nice if there are clever implications to your research, but the research itself can be simple and elegant.***

5. **Write a paper that is a dry run of your dissertation idea in the first two years. Ask a professor for (a) permission to do this, and (b) feedback on your idea, research question, methodology, etc.**

6. **Students who finish theses have higher completion rates for completing dissertations. If your program offers a thesis as a master's option, take it.**

It may slow you down for a bit at the time, but when you get to the dissertation you'll go faster. A master's thesis like this should be a one-semester project. One question, one method, one answer. Don't go overboard.

7. **Do your own research before you get to the proposal stage. This sounds obvious, but a lot of students don't do this. They work on other people's projects, and don't get their feet wet as the director of a project. Design, conduct, report, including IRB if needed (see next).**

8. **Go through the IRB (Institutional Review Board) process before you get to your dissertation project. Same reasons. IRB is like learning a new language, and you want to get through unscathed and with minimum delays. (A smart student *expects* IRB delays, by the way.)**

9. **Take an independent study and use it to do the entire literature review for your proposal *before* you submit your proposal. (Some proposals require lit review and methodology chapters anyway, but you'll have the whole lit review done rather than a prelim version.) You'll probably have to rewrite your proposal (this is normal), but if you're prudent you'll be able to salvage almost all of your lit review even if you have to refine your question or methods.**

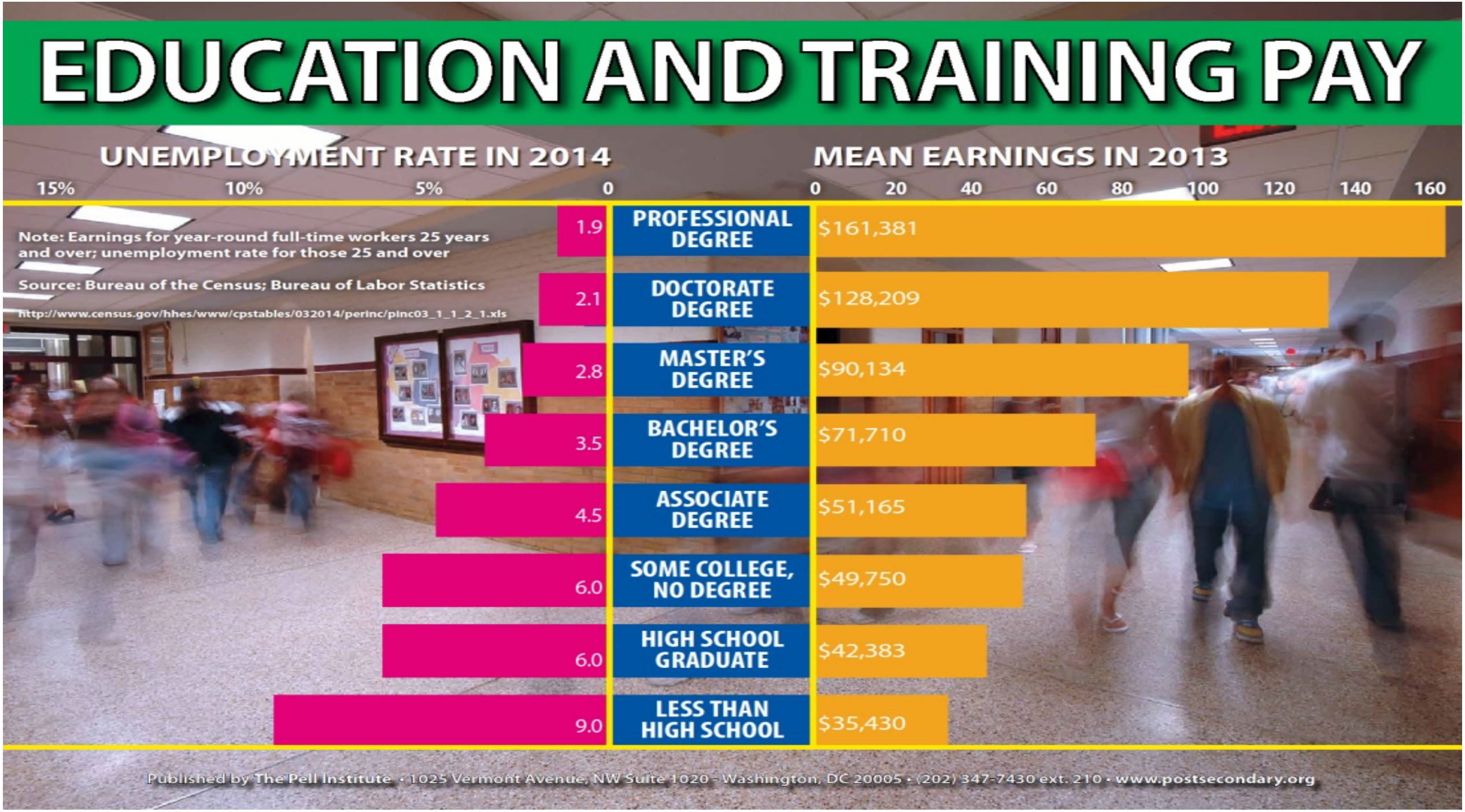
10. **Write your proposal before you take your comps. Most places you cannot submit the proposal before passing comps, but this allows you to drop the proposal the day you receive notice of passing comprehensive exams. This, alone, saves as much as six months.**

11. **Stay on campus! If you stay on campus through your research and writing stages, you have a much higher chance of finishing in a timely manner, and you'll have access to your committee, campus resources, etc. It may be tempting to go get "a real job" and do your dissertation while you work, but that's a much higher risk factor for completing. You *don't* want to live a long life as an ABD.**

12. **Keep your eyes on the prize! Have a life plan that requires the Ph.D. to be behind you. If you lust for that future, you will finish the Ph.D. If grad school is more attractive to you than that vision, or if you don't have that vision, you're at greater risk of not finishing.**

These tips could shave a year, or more, off your process.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING PAY



Published by The Pell Institute • 1025 Vermont Avenue, NW Suite 1020 - Washington, DC 20005 • (202) 347-7430 ext. 210 • www.postsecondary.org