

So You Want to get a PhD in Economics...

Very informal, very subjective, advice for applicants to US programs

Jessica Goldberg

Disclaimers

- These are my own reflections and opinions
- They are not UMD's admissions policies
- Following my advice does not guarantee that you will be admitted to UMD or any other program!

Demonstrating preparation

- Your application must convince the admissions committee of two things:
 1. that you can pass first year classes and comprehensive exams
 2. that you can do good research
- Everything in your application should demonstrate one or both of these competencies

Structure of US PhD programs

- 1st year: micro, macro, metrics – followed by comps at most departments
- 2nd year: field courses – followed by field paper or field exam
- 3rd-5th or 6th year – research (3rd year paper, proposal defense at the end of year 4)
- Most students are teaching assistants (\approx 20 hours a week) in return for stipend and tuition
- Students match with advisors after coursework is complete

Preparation for course work

- What we care about: that you have the preparation to pass first year courses and comprehensive exams
- What that requires: proof-based math, prior training in economics
- How to convince the admissions committee:
 1. good grades in math classes (multivar calc, linear algebra, differential equations, real analysis)
 2. good grades in econ classes (intermediate micro/macro, econometrics, field courses)
 3. training from programs that have a track record of sending students to PhD programs in the US
 4. high score on the quant section of the GRE is necessary but not sufficient (for programs that use GREs)

Preparation for research

- What we care about: that you have the skills and aptitude to conduct research in your chosen field
- What that requires: experience
- How to convince the admissions committee
 1. prior experience (US students often have full time research experience as RAs or pre docs)
 2. master's thesis with clear identification strategy (if empirical) or well-framed model
 3. letters of recommendation from people with PhDs in economics
 4. SOP that concisely states research interests and describes specific skills and experiences

Considerations for international applicants

- Transcript may not include all of the specific courses expected of students who studied in the US
 - ex: math may be included in econ courses – explain in SOP
 - can help to report textbooks used in specific courses
- Letters should be from people who know *you* and know *the sorts of programs to which you are applying*
 - not useful: letters from famous people who don't know you
 - useful: letters from people who have sent other students to comparable PhD programs
- Grade inflation is rampant in the US; if it is not in your university, make sure to establish that (class rank or median grade on transcript; statement from advisors in LORs)

Advice on the SOP

- Goal: convince the committee that you are prepared to do well in the program
 1. you understand the structure and requirements (main goal – to learn to produce academic research) – one sentence
 2. you are prepared for first year classes and comps \approx 1 page
 - describe course work that has prepared you for classes, and explain circumstances around any poor grades in key courses
 3. you are prepared for research \approx 1 page
 - describe prior experience – your specific contributions to co-authored or RA work (analysis in Stata, solving dynamic model, running simulations, writing up results, etc.)
 - explain future research interests – can be a specific question of interest or a topic + motivating background; should not be a literature review
- Does NOT need to include a long description of the strengths of the program or discussion of specific members of the faculty
- SOP is also a writing sample – edit carefully

Other advice

- You are applying to the department and not to an advisor
 - contacting potential advisors is *not* part of the process, and you should not email faculty at the departments you apply to
- Most people apply to 10-15 programs
 - the process can be idiosyncratic
 - consider applying to schools where alum of your university have been successful in the past
- All of your LORs should be from people with PhDs in economics
- Review TOEFL requirements (these are typically set by the University and not the department)

Advice to faculty

- Briefly establish your credentials and the comparison pool
 - "I received my PhD in 2011 from the University of Michigan, and since then, I have advised masters students who have gone on to PhD programs at UCSD, LSE, and Harvard, among other schools"
- Evaluate candidate's ability to pass first year classes (discuss rigor of course work, explain student's performance relative to others who have gone on to do PhDs, explain grading standards)
- Make the case for candidate's ability to do research (describe undergrad or master's thesis, give specific examples of research experience, ability to generate ideas, etc.)
- Compare to prior students who have gone on to internationally recognized PhD programs
 - "Jessica is most comparable to my formers student George Genius, who is now a 3rd year student at the University of Michigan. Compared to George, her math preparation is a bit more rigorous, but she has slightly less experience with highly technical coding."
 - "I haven't advised many students who have gone on to PhD programs in the United States, but Jessica is the best-prepared of the 500 students who have taken my undergraduate econometrics course in the past 3 years."
- Most strong LORs are 2-3 pages