

Hey Jane!

Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School

Welcome to Column 36 of *Hey Jane!* This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions are generated by the committee and SWS members.

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Hey Jane! I'm an undergraduate sociology major. I'm starting my senior year and thinking about applying to graduate school. I have so many questions. Do you have any advice for me that might help me make a decision about whether or not graduate school is right for me? What should I do if I decide to apply but have low GRE scores? And, how do I choose what school(s) to apply to?

Ah, senior year! The time when students across the country must ask themselves the age-old question, “What should I do with my life?” You are smart to ask these questions now. In our experience, many undergraduates apply to graduate school because they don't know what else to do. They've been good students, their friends are applying to other graduate and professional programs, and their parents expect them to obtain a graduate degree. These students often think graduate school will be an extension of their undergraduate experience, are ill-prepared, disappointed, and often leave. So what can you expect if you decide to go to graduate school?

- Graduate school is more challenging and time-consuming than undergraduate school. Know this going in, and know that a majority of your time will have to be devoted to your studies. This can be very different from your undergraduate experiences, even if you were a stellar student!
- Time management is important. You will be required to read and write more than when you were an undergrad, so be prepared. Do not wait until the last minute to complete assignments. Regardless of what you think, your best work is not done at midnight the day before the assignment is due.
- Your professors may be harder on you, because they expect more of you. However, don't take criticism personally. Your professors provide feedback so that you can improve. Think about it this way, they take the time to actually read, think, and comment on your work when they could have said nothing.

Regarding those low GRE scores, understand that although GRE scores are often a part of the application, and are something that graduate programs take into consideration, they are not the only factor. Having an impressive academic record, strong letters of recommendation, and work/volunteer experience—particularly in research or with professors in other capacities—can

really build an application. Consider contacting a professor whose class you really enjoyed. Ask him/her if you can work as a research assistant in exchange for course credit or simply volunteer. With this being said, it is important to consider a wide-range of schools, because top-tier research programs may put more emphasis on GRE scores. You should be knowledgeable about program expectations and not put all of your eggs in one basket.

Finally, how do you choose what graduate school(s) to apply to? When choosing schools(s) there are various things to consider, such as:

- The topic you are interested in studying. Find schools that have faculty researching and focusing on the same topics. Research some of the faculty members and read some of the things they have recently published.
- Location. If you are someone who loathes the cold weather, applying to a school in Alaska is probably not a good idea. Think about the location of the places you are applying; is it somewhere you can comfortably spend the next few years (or more) of your life?
- Funding opportunities. What types of funding does each school provide? What is the likelihood that you will receive funding? Graduate programs—especially Ph.D. programs—often waive students' tuition, provide health insurance, and pay their students to work as a teaching or research assistant. If at all possible, we strongly encourage students to attend programs that fully or almost-fully fund them. Otherwise, you'll rack up substantial debt, and end up competing for jobs with people who have valuable teaching and research experiences that you haven't had.

In addition, the [ASA Guide to Graduate Departments of Sociology](#) is a great resource when looking for graduate schools. It provides a list of what topics various schools focus on, faculty members at particular schools, tuition rates, the number of degrees awarded recently, and many other important details about each school. It is a bit pricey however, so ask your undergraduate professors if they have a copy, or if there is a departmental copy, you can borrow.