

MTS Colloquium

Applying to doctoral programs: tips

1. Choosing a program

- Look for an institution with both strong faculty and a strong program. Some issues: a strong program:
 - has more than one scholar in the area you are in
 - and/or has good support from related departments (e.g. for New Testament, Classics, Jewish Studies, Ancient Near East; for Ethics, Philosophy; for Buddhism, East Asian Studies and so on)
 - includes a variety of methods (literary, history of thought, social science)
 - has a well-defined program
 - makes it easy for you to know what will be offered
 - is clear about requirements and examinations
- Do your best to discover whether or not you will be comfortable working with the people who are there now, but **don't** assume that you now know either your dissertation topic or its director.
- Talk to the faculty at ND in the area in which you are applying to get their views on good programs. If you are not entirely sure which area will suit you best, discuss this also.
- Visit the websites of the schools that spark your interest and order their catalogues and applications as soon as you get really interested.
- Look over the faculty list, look them up in the library and, if you aren't familiar with their work in the ATLA database and try to read one or two recent articles by each of them, so you have some idea whose work is most interesting. Alternatively you go around to the faculty here, ask them to recommend something you could read that's typical for the person in question.
- Go to the AAR or SBL and go to the receptions of the schools you're interested in to meet current and recent students and faculty
- If you can, visit the schools **when they are in session and you can attend a class and make appointments with faculty**. Call ahead, and you will probably get help from the department administrators. On the visit, ask at least one faculty person and one student to go over the program with you, so you get an idea of how it really works (e.g. how long exams take, how they are administered, what courses will be available next year etc. how many courses one takes a semester), and what they see as its strengths and weaknesses. You may wish to postpone visits until you are accepted and have to make a decision, but if you can manage it a visit can help both you and them.

2. Making the application

- GRE's and GPA's are important. There isn't all that much you can do about them in the fall of your second year, and raising a GRE a few points is not likely to make that much difference. But it is the case that the preparation courses can be

helpful. One applicant raised her verbal score from the mid 600's into the 700's by taking the course and retaking the exam, and it seems to have helped her application.

- Choose at least two recommenders who are in the area in which you are applying and do your best to make sure that all your recommenders know your work well. A letter from someone who is outside your area, but knows your work really well, writes clear, concrete letters and has some knowledge of the program(s) to which you are applying may well write the most effective letter.
- The recommenders need to see your vita, the courses you have taken here, and YOUR STATEMENT. It's wise to return a copy of the papers that you wrote for them, with their comments (Some professors keep their comments anyway, but better safe than sorry). It doesn't hurt to include your writing sample.
- SOOO draft your statement as soon as possible and give it to the faculty whom you ask to write. Ask for their help to sharpen it and make it more concrete and also stop you from saying something that may undercut your work.
- The statement MUST make clear that you know what a Ph.D. is for: teaching and research. Tell them that that is what you hope to do, and give them an idea of your intellectual commitments – that's what they need to know. Spiritual commitments aren't by any means unwelcome in these programs – most, if not all, of the faculty will also be strongly committed to their own religious communions. But you usually only have 500-1000 words, so get to the information that tells them that you know what the program is and will be able to do it.
- Do your best to show that you know the particular strong points of the program to which you are applying. But DO NOT suggest that you already have a dissertation topic or that you are only interested in working with one person. If you list the faculty you expect to work with, be careful not to omit anyone.
- DO include extra-academic experience that is relevant or unusual – including travel and service experience. STAY WITHIN THE WORD LIMITS, consider what each program asks for and don't be afraid to provide a statement that is shorter than the limit.
- Writing samples are not required by all programs. Supply one only if the application asks for one. Again, stay within the word or page limits. If you think that you are best represented by a very long paper (say 40-60 pages), you can provide a section of that paper. Write a brief introduction explaining that you are excerpting from an xx-page paper, provide a summary of the argument (like an abstract, at the beginning and explain how the portion you send fits into the whole.

3. Making the Decision

- The normal financial and geographical considerations play a role here, of course. If you are worried about finances at a place you find particularly attractive, be really aggressive in comparing the packages and call both financial aid and students and faculty at the place to find out what you can about other ways of

supporting yourself while you get your degree. If you have strong personal reasons for limiting your choice geographically, do your best to find out about ways that you can supplement a program that is geographically desirable but less attractive to your interests.

- Visit the school (see above) and meet as many of the professors and students as you can; listen to their descriptions of the program, and get a feel for how comfortable you would be. This might be a time to ask directors of programs one is considering what percentage of graduates end up in tenure-tenure track positions, and at what kinds of institutions.
- Talk to area faculty here.

As Professor Deane-Drummond pointed out, none of this applies outside the US. Though a lot of it does apply in Canadian institutions – for them, you need individual advice.