

Next Steps: What To Do After You Accept The Offer

If you received a letter of admittance with a scholarship offer and accepted it, congratulations on starting a new and exciting stage of your life. Your next steps will be mostly logistical: securing the visa at the US Embassy and planning your trip. To make your transition easier, find out what kind of infrastructure for international students your host university has.

Most US universities have either an International Student Center or Association that can arrange for your airport pickup and provide you with temporary accommodations until you find a permanent place to live. Most universities will also have campus housing for graduate students that you can settle in.

Think about what you will need upon arrival and get in touch with people who can help well before you fly out. Also, keep in mind that there may be already some current students from AUCA who were at the same university for a conference or semester of exchange or even the alumni from Kyrgyzstan who attended your host university. Ask them for as much useful information about the university and its city as they can give you. They even may have some connections there that will be useful for you.

One final word: be prepared to work and study A LOT. Assistantships and financial aid are not given as a gift for you to get great education for free or on credit. If you accept the assistantship, you should understand that you will be expected to study for about 20 hours a week and to work for the department as a research or teaching assistant for another 20 hours. That is, it is assumed that your work and study hours will be split somewhat evenly. However, in reality you will be working and studying for a lot more than 40 hours. You will always have a feeling that you catastrophically lack time to do everything you need. You will be chronically behind on your sleep and things like reading for pleasure. But you also should remember that you are not the only one and certainly not the first or the last one to endure these temporary hardships. Form networks of friends and study groups with your fellow graduate students to lean on each other for help and to encourage each other. Remember that all your effort will ultimately pay off as you receive a graduate diploma that will dramatically improve your employment prospects.

Graduate School Myths Debunked

1. It is impossible for an international student to get into a US grad school without connections

Connections matter, but not as much as you might think. It is always useful to know someone in the program so that they can put in a good word for you, but these connections do not have to be your good friends or long-time mentors. It can be someone you met at a conference, or someone whose public lecture you attended and

talked to afterwards, or even someone you wrote to about their research published in a book you had for your class or inquired about your plans and interests and they seemed interested. In any case, the American academia is quite fair for you to get into the most top-notch school without any connections. But you have to be a top-notch candidate to match their needs and expectations and to beat the competition – other applicants..

2. It isn't worth going unless you get into a top-ranked school or program

This has been already covered in this guide. Of course everyone wants to have a degree from Harvard or Stanford because these are big names that open a lot of doors. However, a degree from Oklahoma State or Florida Southern University can be just as good for the employers who know their values and understand that all graduate programs in the US adhere to the highest standards of education.

3. It's too expensive and I can't afford it

All US graduate programs are so expensive that even very few Americans can afford them. There is a new trend in American graduate education – an influx of students from China who are ready to pay full costs of the program. They may be partly driving the upward trend of the increasing number of international students in the US schools. However, most international students cannot afford even a fraction of the graduate program costs, and the universities you are applying to know that perfectly well. This is why they have various assistantships and funding sources available, even with special quotas for international students, and you should definitely indicate in your application that you will need financial aid. However, even with the full tuition waiver and a modest stipend that the university will pay upon acceptance, you will most probably need more money for living expenses and whatever entertainment you may want to have. So save some money if you can beforehand and be prepared to lead a very simple life style of a struggling student. You will most certainly not starve to death, but graduate school is not the place where people accumulate capital or become rich.

4. My undergraduate grades are not high enough to get accepted

There's a mistaken and persistent understanding that only students with the 4.0 GPA get accepted to graduate programs school. They would probably have higher chances (and even that is not guaranteed if their application does not show a strong potential to succeed in the program), but how many of them are there? Generally, if your GPA is higher than 3.5, you have nothing to worry about and have a solid chance to be considered. Check out the Duke University Graduate School page for the formula to estimate your GPA, if you don't have it on record. If your GPA is slightly lower (for example, 3.45-3.49), you still should not worry about it too much either – your application will still be evaluated on its merits. If your GPA is much lower than 3.5, grad school is probably not for you in the first place.

5. My GRE/GMAT scores are too low to apply

Just as the GPA score is not a guaranteed indicator of your academic performance, GRE and GMAT scores are not used as a written-in-stone evidence of your general knowledge and language abilities. The admission committee members understand that it is even harder for international students to get high scores on GRE than for the American students, therefore your scores can be lower because you are taking an exam in a non-native language. It is slightly different for TOEFL, though: since the exam is designed specifically for international students, you are expected to have a high score to do well in the graduate program. So try and do your best on the TOEFL exam. If you have passed a TSE with a good score, submit it as additional evidence of your language skills even if the school you are applying to does not require it.

6. My English is not good enough to study in the US

It is important to have a high TOEFL score to succeed in the program. However, just like for any exam, you can study and prepare for TOEFL. Besides, as an AUCA student you already have enough exposure to English to succeed in a graduate program. It is all a matter of believing in your own abilities and getting as much language practice as possible. Once you are in the native language environment, it is much easier to improve your English. In fact, at some point you will be so immersed in it that you won't even notice how and when you started to think in English without translating for yourself.

7. I can only apply to a program in my original field.

This is another persistent misconception of graduate education. You are not limited to applying only to the political science graduate programs because you majored in political science at ICP. It will be natural and beneficial for you to do so if you would like to, but you are not constrained in your choices. You should probably not go for a PhD in Chemistry or Physics if you have a Bachelor's in Journalism (although this is not completely out of the question if your heart is truly set on it), but you can certainly apply to a program in an "adjacent" social science such as sociology, psychology or political science, or to an MFA in film under humanities and fine arts. These transitions into similar fields are quite common in graduate schools. You can also do a minor in a second field to expand your knowledge and employment horizons.

Some Helpful (Additional) Resources:

- Grad school program rankings by *US News and World Report*: <http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>
- Best Master's rankings (includes schools from all over the world): <http://www.best-masters.us/>
- A list of all programs of studies in US universities by subjects <http://www.univsource.com/usspec.htm>
- Association of American Colleges & Universities – www.aacu.org
- Best 25 colleges in the South (if you are interested in mild and warm climates and Southern American tradition)

http://www3.forbes.com/leadership/best-south-colleges/?utm_campaign=Best-South-Colleges&utm_source=yahoo-gemini&utm_medium=referral

- Phds.org – a rich resource of information on everything relating to doctoral programs
- American Psychological Association: Applying to Grad School (a lot of useful advice for psychology majors) www.apa.org/education/grad/applying.aspx
- Top Business Schools in the US for MBA www.forbes.com/business-schools/list/
- Tips on how to get into business school: www.forbes.com/2009/08/15/best-business-schools-09-leadership-careers-admission.html
- The FreeApp program is an easy way for prospective students to request a graduate application fee waiver for PhD or Master of Fine Arts programs at participating Committee on Institutional Cooperation universities. For more information and the list of CIC schools, visit: cic.net/FreeApp