

POST-GRADUATE STUDY IN GEOGRAPHY IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Joanne Ellison

Introduction:

Be a geographer and see the world! The purpose of this article is to help, present undergraduates explore the option of a higher degree in North America, through giving my own knowledge of a system which can appear disconcertingly alien and to which there are no comprehensive guides. If you are considering a North American University, you should write to the Departments of Geography for details rather than the graduate admissions offices. The latter are administrative and usually can only offer the book-like calendars, which cost money. Far better to write to the Graduate Adviser in the Department who will send you more appropriate details. At this stage you should concentrate on who they have in your area of geography, whether they offer financial assistance, and the deadline for applications. For the start of study in the fall term (early September), the application deadline will be between the preceding Christmas and Easter, so you should write at the start of your final year at the latest. Postal addresses and all universities can be found in the "World of Learning" book (copies in the library). It is a very good idea to visit the Department before applying the previous summer. Talk to the post-grads, see what the place is like and meet some of the Faculty. This will greatly help your chances of admission.

Applying:

Obviously you need to send the application forms with all attachments to them before the deadline. You should also send a covering letter addressed to the Graduate Advisor, Chairman of Graduate Studies by name, and get his/her title right. Say in this why you are applying and choose your words well. Say you are impressed by the graduate programme they offer, that its opportunities in geographical training are particularly appropriate to yourself, be specific according to your personal details. American students are quite professional in personal presentation, so complete the application form by typing and laying it out well, even if it says you can use a pen, also attach a photo even if it does not request one. Send a copy of your honours dissertation if this is available.

The attachments they ask for will be a "transcript", which is a course by course description of your academic career issued by all American universities; and a Resume, which is the American for c.v.

Certainly for the U.S. and perhaps for Canada, they will ask for GRE scores. The Graduate Record Exam (General Test) is a four and a half hour multiple choice IQ test, divided into verbal, quantitative and analytical sections. You need to organise yourself to take this, both in application and in preparation. Tests occur in the first week of October, December, February, April and June, and you have to submit an application to sit for the test approximately two months before and thus on an official computerised application form with a test fee of U.S.\$39. Get this and details of the test from CITO/Graduate Record Examination, P.O. Box 1109, 6801 BC, Amhem, The Netherlands, which is the centre for Europe (details in Careers Office). Results take six weeks to come out, so if you are applying to start in fall 1991, you should have taken the GRE by January that year, preferably by December 1990. Score results will be sent directly to five universities that you specify.

It is possible to take the test on stand-by which means turning up at a test centre on the day and hoping that one of the applicants does not show. You should be there early and getting in is not guaranteed, it is also more expensive, so it is far better to apply in the regular manner.

As the test centre details will show, the only place in the Republic of Ireland where you can take the test is Dublin and you'll need to go up the night before as it starts at 8.a.m. You should prepare yourself for the test, get a publication with sample tests and with revision sections on mathematics if this is a weak point. These are available from the above address. The tests are always in the same format, you will greatly advantage yourself if you are previously familiar with this.

Funding:

The most common source of funding for post-graduates at North American Universities is teaching assistantships (TAships). Like tutor positions, you help in undergraduate teaching, taking tutorials or laboratory sessions. The workload is heavier though, including for example marking sixty assignments every two weeks as well as mid-term and final examinations. The lecturers generally mark finals and term assignments for upper level courses only. At the end of the term, the students do detailed anonymous instructor evaluations and if you score badly then you have to answer for it. But do not be dismayed, your immediate peers will help you out, tell you what to do, including the tricks of the trade etc. First year courses will be about the level of your last year in school.

You can also be funded by Research Assistantships, i.e. employed by a member of faculty on a research grant doing lab.work, questionnaires or data-chunking. These normally develop after arrival whereas you can be offered a TAship from the first term.

These sources of funding are reallocated several times a year, they go on your continuing record, they are not guaranteed. But unless you really mess up your record, a department feels committed to see you through your programme once you have started and finance will be found from some source.

All universities offer scholarships to students of high academic records, for a term or for a year, seldom longer without reassessment. They tend to be more available to students who have been in the system for a while rather than on first arrival. So you can start off on TAships then if you maintain a high GPA, get a scholarship. This is because standards of grading vary between universities so they like to have their own figure on you, also they like to have their own faculty give references.

Very high calibre students may get a scholarship from outside the University, from a private beneficiary for which there is open competition: all nationalities, all subjects, all universities. For details write to the Fulbright Commission, 6 Porter Street, London W1, and ask for the information sheet "Awards for postgraduate study and research in the United States". Do not hold any expectation of receiving funding from these sources but by all means try them out.

Fees vary between universities, tending to be more for private universities, more earlier in your programme and more because you are a foreigner. The latter applies more to the U.S. than to Canada.

Whatever your source of funding, you can be sure that the standard of living in North America will be higher than if you stayed here. The U.S. is cheaper to live in than Canada and Canada is cheaper than Ireland.

Visas:

To be a student in the U.S., you need a student (F-1) visa. In order to apply a 1-20 Form from the University which has accepted you is needed as well as proof of funds or prospective funds, i.e. a letter to say that the University funding body is giving you so much. Visa application forms are available from the U.S. Embassy, 43 Elgin Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4 (Tel: 01-688085/608922). Put forms and your passport in an envelope and leave in the "drop-box" outside the Embassy which is open from 9 to 5. You can then pick up your passport three working days later between 3 and 4 p.m. when they might want to interview you. If you cannot go to Dublin, it takes three weeks by post. The systems are incompatible, you cannot apply by post and then pick up in person. But American visas are free. If you are going to work as a teaching assistant or research assistant, then you need in addition an Employment Authorisation (Canada) or Temporary Worker's H visa (U.S.). These allow you to work within the department where you study, classifying this type of work as a necessary component of your training. It

is normally impossible to get a work permit for a weekend or holiday job. But whether you are going to the U.S. or Canada, you should get a visitors visa for the other so that you can cross the border should the opportunity arise.

Coursework:

In both the United States and Canada, M.A./M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees require course work in partial satisfaction of requirements. In the Irish and British systems, assessment is solely through the organisation, research and writing of a thesis, necessitating a long-term relationship with the supervisor of this and causing the work-load to increase towards the end, the writing period.

In the North American system, post-graduate programmes are more multi-dimensional. The first year is taken up by courses which clock up credit units (around four per course) towards the requirement of your degree. In most universities, under the "semester" system, courses are only a term long, with "final exams" for each at the end of the term. Each course is given a grade between 0 and 4 (roughly B=3.0 and A=3.5), from which your all-important Grade Point Average (GPA) is worked out to two decimal places and appears on your term transcript or course record. This figure is critical for your continuation in the programme and in getting finance from the University.

These courses are a great opportunity to fill in gaps in your geographical training, particularly in areas where you are interested in doing thesis research. All departments have different research strengths, an area of geography that was really important in your first department may be quite unimportant in another and there will be new areas that you barely knew existed. Through taking courses that are supportive of your research ideas, you can get to know the lecturers and maybe talk them into being on your supervisory committee. You have to take the majority of courses within geography, but you are able to take relevant courses in other faculties, in biology if you are a biogeographer or economics if an economic geographer, for example. But in the highly flexible American system, you should not be tempted to switch faculties, you will be disadvantaged there by your nominally different background.

Another advantage of course is that from the start you are ticking off your degree requirements. There is not one great finishing post where it is all bestowed, which looks ages away from early on, but rather you feel from the beginning that you are getting there which gives you credibility even before starting your thesis.

For graduate level courses as well as the exam, you usually have to submit some sort of assignment. If you are organised here you can try out review sections of your anticipated thesis.

Other Requirements:

M.A./M.Sc. degrees normally have a course requirement equivalent to four or six courses then you are into the thesis section. There may be "comprehensives" and a foreign language requirement for a Masters, but certainly for a Ph.D. "comprehensives" are a test of general abilities as a researcher and a geographer, before allowing you to specialise into your thesis research. This sounds vague, but they can be of different forms, either oral questioning or written. A PhD candidate I knew lived in his office for a week, occasionally sleeping on the floor, as the system at that university was to ask for three research papers to be written within the week. Another failed his orals on a statistics question, and then had to take a statistics course in order to pass. But you should not over-react to the comprehensives, they should be no problem to students who have been conscientious in their careers. Of relevance to courses as well, you will find that you have more geographical knowledge than American students at your level, as they specialise in a subject far later in their careers. If there is a foreign language requirement, this can be fulfilled either by a one-off exam, or by taking courses.

Thesis work:

Throughout the first year you are developing thesis ideas, taking relevant courses, finding supervisors and maybe even writing bits that can be incorporated into the early chapters. A student reports to a supervisory committee, normally of three faculty members and a chairperson with whom you have the closest relationship. You can have committee members from different departments, but your chairperson should be in geography. If you are to learn the most from your thesis research, it is best to soak up opportunities in your first year, listen and discover the expertise of the faculty and find the areas that they are enthusiastic about. If you breeze in and tell them what you are going to do, you will miss out on local research opportunities, and particularly the skills of your supervisors.

You will have to write a research proposal, and circulate this to your committee. Again, be organised and write material that can become parts of your thesis without too much alteration. With approval from your committee, you then give a thesis proposal seminar, when you present your ideas to the faculty and post-grads. This is not desperately formal, rather it is for you to get some objective feed-back before you embark on something that may be problematic. Following this there will be a faculty-level decision as to whether you can continue with this thesis proposal or not.

There will be strong influence on you to finish your graduate programme as quickly as possible, and some universities have a deadline. A thesis must be an original contribution to knowledge, but in North American Universities, there is a length constricton, great monographs are discouraged. You should identify the boundaries of your area of research, and keep to them. The more you learn during research, the more you will be tempted to slightly drift from your original proposal as adjacent aspects appear more promising and exciting. This type of development is natural in life, but seriously adds time to your thesis. Make sure, therefore, that you are not confused between what is your thesis, and what is your personal development as an academic. You will be encouraged by your peers and contemporary graduate students to write with publication of your thesis in mind, to identify from quite early on how it can be split, and to write concisely. The pressure to publish in North American Universities starts very early, it is an ultimate aim equal to the actual getting of the degree, and is a good training experience. If you are working closely with one of your supervisory committee on a project that was introduced to you by them, then any publications will be joint authorship between you, which is a help in getting it organised and eventually accepted by a journal.

Once the thesis is written, and reviewed by the committee, then it is sent to an external examiner. After a few weeks you give a formal open "defence" in the presence of all, which is giving a short presentation of your research, and then answer questions about it. This is an ordeal, but your committee will not have permitted you to reach this stage unless they believe that you will pass. The external examiner is the appointed judge, this stage your committee should be on your side. The questions can go on for hours, but generally everybody wants you to pass. Following this there is a meeting of the committee, external, and department chairman, where they decide on the revisions necessary for the thesis to be acceptable. Once you have made these, and given the thesis to the library, then you have fulfilled all requirements for the degree.

Hopefully by this stage you feel informed rather than put off. You should realise that organisation and professionalism are the keywords for success in the American post-graduate system. The variety within programmes inherently leaves you with responsibility for the nature of your programme, and how and with what speed you go about it. It is a possibility well worth exploring, because there are many opportunities for graduate students in North America with a large number of universities, and the teaching assistant system which funds most students.