Guidelines for Application to U.S. for PhD

Having gone through the pains of US applications, I realised that a few guidelines would have been useful. I scavenged for help; from seniors, friends and faculty members. From my experience and hearing the experience of others I gained some perspective of this arduous process. I would like to share that perspective as a form of guidelines fot the students of IISER Kolkata. The LaTeX file is also available, so that people may constantly modify this file in future. -*Saswata Roy*

Steps:

1. Book a date for your general GRE at around mid-September. To get a date of your choice, you would probably have to book it by mid-May.

2. Start studying for the general GRE at the very beginning of the summer before your 5th year.

3. Book a date for your TOEFL exam at around early October. Book it by June to get a date of your choice.

4. If your GRE preparation was good, no need to seperately prepare for TOEFL. Just spend 5 days practising the Speaking section. It is the section that the US Universities look at most scrutiniously.

5. Book for subject GRE; there is one date per semester; so book quickly!

6. Start looking at the Universities by end of September. Do not try to fixate on the Universitites at one go. Make a long list (say about 20 universities) by end of October and start to eliminate and reduce it to less than half of the total applications you would like to do (say, four).

7. When selecting Universities, look at the faculty members most carefully. *Actually* read a few papers published by them. And write to them. This is called a 'pre-application mail'. Write only if you are genuinely interested. Do not write to more than two faculty members per department, and never to more than one faculty member of that field per University. You basically write to impress that you have done your homework on him/her, and you have some knowledge of that field, and are interested to make it into your career. Never write a common mail, always write a fresh mail; the faculty members and understand if it is a common mail or not. In your mail, do not ask him/her to take you; as it is not in his/her discretion (usually). Instead, ask if his/her lab can accommodate you, or will you be an able candidate for the lab; because it will then "influence you positively to apply to that grad school". Your mail should be short, and the faculty member should not have to scroll down. Discuss with him/her, if there is, any particular problem that you would like to investigate in your PhD life. Attach your CV (you should have one ready by then) with this mail. Remember, the faculty member will not spare more than 5 minutes behind you; so be brief. Make sure you add your GRE and TOEFL scores in the mail body.

8. Start writing your Statement of Purpose (Will elaborate on this later).

9. If the reply from the faculty is positive, then almost definitely apply. If the reply is negative, almost definitely don't apply. If the reply is silence, do as you please! Remember, silence is not a bad sign.

10. By this time, you should have decided on your referees. Remember, usually three letters of recommendation are required. One of them comes from your MS Project mentor. Keep at least three more, so that not more than five recommendations are required from one referee. Better to have at least on referee from outside IISER Kolkata.

11. Don't worry about funding; no US PhD program comes without a scholarship. (I guess they do, but not of our interests; they are usually not applicable for international students.)

12. Start talking among the other applicants of your department. THIS IS IMPORTANT. Have as less overlap in choice of universities as possible. Remember, you will face competition from other IISERs and IITs; let not your own institute also be your competitor.

13. By November 15th, you should have zeroed down on your final list of US Universities. Note: In selecting Universitites, please take help from the faculty members at IISER Kolkata. Some of them may not be very helpful on this regard, but some of them are really helpful. They have contacts; use them. Don't feel shy to ask; but always ask them beforehand to use their references in the pre-application mails. Your choices should have at least one safe school (i.e., if you want US that badly).

14. About writing your Statement of Purpose (SOP):

    (a) Remember; SOP is not the same as PS (Personal Statement). Some universities want PS. Check sample PS and SOP on the internet.

    (b) The average length of an SOP is about 1500 words, though it ranges from 500 to 4000! Keep one 1500 word SOP ready.

    (c) Be direct in your SOP; don't be too flowery or figurative as it adds to the frustration of your readers (and also avoid alliterations!)

    (d) Every paragraph of your SOP should refer to, somehow, how much you want to do PhD. It should not be too boastful nor too meek.

    (e) Be coherent in your SOP. It is difficult to be so in the first go. So, write it once, and don't read it for 3 days. Then pick it up and read it. (I am sure you will find the writing crappy! I did.) Rewrite. Best if you use pen and paper, that way you don't get a chance to just edit the file, which leads to an even worse SOP.

    (f) The contents of the SOP follows (usually) the following pattern: Why are you into that discipline -> What have you learnt in your discipline -> How keen are you in you field of 'interest' -> How capable are you in your field of interest -> Your experience as a researcher -> How may you contribute to the lab/society by doing research.

    (g) Keep one paragraph at the end which describes why you are choosing that particular University.

15. Be sure to have your mentor check your SOP (repeatedly!). If your faith on your own mentor is weak regarding this matter, you may seek help of some other faculty members in IISER Kolkata in this matter. Quite a few of them are extremely helpful regarding US applications.

16. Now, Apply!

    (a) Get a credit card! I suppose you already have that, given you filled up the fees for GRE and TOEFL.

    (b) Go the the grad admission page of the Website. Usually, each department has a separate grad admission page.

    (c) You will have to create an account in that website. Make a file in your computer that will store the username and the password for each university. You may be wondering; Why cant I do away with just my facebook account and password. The problem is, each university has a different policy: some of them use an email account, others a different user account with various specification. The same if applicable for a passwords. Just keep a file to keep track.

    (d) Start filling up part by part. Do not try to complete the first application in one day. They will ask you all sorts of questions: starting from whether you are married to all your courses and your marks in each (that too reported in a 4.0 scale; make sure you don't convert it linearly, it is not a linear conversion).

    (e) By the time you are filling up your last form, you will not require more than an hour for one application.

    (f) Always keep your referees informed as to which Universities will be asking them for letter of recommendation for you. Remember, you don't have to get the LoR from the prof and send it to the US, you will have to just type their e-mail ids.

    (g) Get your transcripts. Always get it sealed; never opened! Get one open transcript that you will have to scan. Some universities want it online; some want it in hard copy. Always send a sealed copy.

    (h) When you fill in the names of your referees, an option will come: "Waive the right to see the Letter of Recommendation" or similar. Always fill in 'Yes'.

    (i) Be sure to send in your GRE scores.

    (j) There are some student facilitites in DHL or likewise, which sends documents to the Universities at cheaper rates.