

STUDY IN THE UNITED STATES

Environment, Social and Development Studies

A primer for students and professionals from India having the zeal to study in the United States.

Prepared by a network of professionals who successfully navigated their way to 'higher education abroad' in environment and development sector with full financial assistance.

DevNetJobs.org has been providing career counseling in the Environment and Development sector worldwide since 2000. Its members have given Career Counseling seminars in colleges and schools across Asia, Europe and USA.

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Acknowledgement

This primer would not have been possible without the efforts and experiences shared by over 20 young professionals working in the Environment and Development Sector worldwide.

We specially thank Ms. Rati Mehrotra, working as an Economic Analyst in an Environmental Consultancy in New York, USA, for being the team leader behind the primer. Ms. Mehrotra secured her Masters in Environmental Economics from Duke University, USA, on an NSOE fellowship and is a graduate in Economics from Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University, India. She has 5 years of professional experience in South Asia and North America in the area of Environmental Economics, Planning and Development. We immensely appreciate the weeks of painstaking efforts put in by her to research, compile, edit and give shape to this primer and to ensure that it provides the reader with a clear and concise insight into the process.

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We thank Mr. Vikas Nath, working as a Policy Analyst with UNDP, New York, USA, for being a continuous source of motivation behind the primer. Mr. Nath secured his Masters degree in Environment and Development from the London School of Economics, UK, on an Inlaks fellowship, and is a graduate in Mathematics from St. Stephens College, Delhi University, India. Mr. Nath has over seven years of professional experience spread over South and East Asia, Middle East, Europe and North America in the Environment and Development sector. We also thank him for providing the support of his network of professionals working in the environment, social and development sector worldwide for this primer.

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We thank Mr. Jesu Mathew working in education delivery and reforms sector in USA for sharing his experiences and suggestions. Mr. Mathews has over 5 years of professional experience in education testing services, examination assessments, and providing counseling services to students in India and USA.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Obtaining a degree from a good foreign university is not simply a career-transforming achievement that broadens professional horizons. It is a turning point in life that opens up opportunities to travel to new countries, meet interesting people, and absorb different cultures.

We dreamed of studying abroad for years before we finally accomplished it. There were many obstacles in our way, the biggest one being the lack of right information at the right time. We learned by trial and error. We learned not to count on luck, or trust to fate, when everything that *could* go wrong, *did*.

Applications get returned, admissions get denied, or you get that politely worded kick in the face: admission without funding. Even if you get a scholarship, there is still the elusive visa to be obtained: the trickiest part of the whole process, for it is the least within your power to control. However, there are things you can do to ensure maximum chances of success at every step of the way, and that is what this primer is about.

Of course, there is a plethora of books and pamphlets available on study abroad. But there isn't a single book that targets students interested in Environment, Social and/or Development (hereafter referred to as **ESD**) studies, or which brings together all resources and information to present a clear picture of the entire application and funding process. You'd be surprised at the funding opportunities available in the ESD fields.

We want to use our own experiences, and those of equally successful compatriots, to reach out to people who aspire to study abroad (specifically the United States), especially in the ESD sectors. This document is equally useful for people interested in other sectors, since it encapsulates the entire process of applying to study abroad (and getting the funding to do it) from A to Z.

Why choose the ESD fields to study abroad?

Making a difference

Let's face it. The world isn't going to become a better place all by itself, not after we humans have made such a mess of it. All over the world, increasing pollution, disappearing forests, and the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, have lead to a growing need for professionals in the ESD sectors. This is your opportunity to make a difference; to build a career based on making the world a more livable place.

Academic and professional opportunities

Globally, the ESD sectors can only grow, in terms of both academic and professional opportunities. The number of academic courses offered in these fields increases every year, as do the number and variety of jobs available, both in the developing and developed world. An ESD

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degree from abroad would firmly establish your academic credentials, and enhance your career prospects no end. The research, field and/or teaching experience you gain abroad would constitute a distinct competitive advantage in establishing yourself in the ESD sector.

Availability of funding

Contrary to the widely held belief that only engineers and scientists are likely to be funded for study abroad (especially in the United States), we have observed a variety of funding mechanisms available for ESD studies. Most of the top universities in the United States have sizeable schools/departments for forestry, environment and/or public policy, and therefore do have substantial funds available for providing financial assistance to International students.

Lifelong learning

The ESD sector provides opportunities to work on diverse projects and in a variety of situations, from forest dwellers' rights in the Amazon to a sanitation project in an African village, or even the plush offices of international NGOs in Washington DC. Working in this sector is a lifelong learning experience that includes traveling and meeting interesting people from all over the world.

What type of career can you expect?

The kind of work you end up doing depends on the sum total of your strengths, qualifications and preferences. You may work in any of the following kinds of organizations after completing your ESD studies abroad:

NGOs (Non governmental organizations)

Corporate NGOs

Corporate NGOs are the ESD 'arms' of large private sector companies. Examples of Indian corporate NGOs are the Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development, TELCO'S Parivar Kalyan Sansthan, Ambuja Development Foundation, Tata Steel Rural Development Society and Sir Ratan Tata Trust. Some of the international corporate NGOs are Bill Gates Foundation, Goldman Sachs Foundation and Markle Foundation (Foundations provide grants to NGOs and individuals working on projects that fit closely with their own objectives).

National NGOs

There are literally thousands of NGOs based in developing countries. The prominent ones in India include AKRSP (Aga Khan Rural Support Program), Center for Science and Environment, PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action), Development Alternatives, CRY (Child Relief and You) and SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association).

International NGOs

International NGOs usually work in several countries on a variety of projects. ActionAid, IIED (International Institute of Environment and Development), OXFAM, PLAN, CARE, AKF (Aga Khan

Foundation), Ford Foundation, Save the Children, WWF, IUCN, Rockefeller Foundation are some of the renowned International NGOs.

Multilateral and Bi-lateral Institutions

Department for International Development (DFID), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), Australian Aid for International Development (AUSAID), German Technological Cooperation (GTZ).

Academic and Research Institutions

United Nations University (UNU), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions

World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank, UN, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, UNIDO, WTO, UNCTAD, UNICC, UNICTRAL, UNICCC and UNESCO.

Why this primer is meant for you

This primer is useful for any developing country national who wants to study in the United States. It is especially tailored to the Indian student who (like us) cannot afford the exorbitant fees and living expenses associated with studying in a foreign university, but still dreams of the cultural and academic experience such an opportunity would offer.

Well, we have news for you. You *can* make it to a top educational institute in the United States, as long as you persevere, work hard, and are ORGANIZED. We can't do anything much about the perseverance or the hard work. That is up to you. But we can help you get organized to concretize your ambitions.

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So you want to study in the United States. Let's assume you have a passport and 16+ years of education, and take it from there.

Including the exam and university application fees, you could end up spending from fifteen to thirty thousand rupees (depending on how many universities you apply to). You will need to devote at least 2-3 hours a day for three months to prepare for the GRE. Time will also be required to research the universities and complete your applications. And at the end of it, you may just have to tell yourself to try again the next year. Are you ready for the investment of all this time, money and effort? If you are, then read on...

General information

The US academic year is usually divided into the Fall (August - December) and Spring (January-May) semesters. Although many universities accept admissions in both Spring and Fall, the availability of funding is usually higher for the Fall semester. Indeed some programs don't take new students in the Spring at all. You must read the university and department-specific guidelines carefully before deciding when to apply. All else being equal, we recommend applying for the Fall semester.

Your preparation must begin at least 12-14 months before you want to start your program. We suggest that you start collecting information in May of the year *before* your targeted admission date. That means if you want to enroll in a university in the US in August 2003, you should start the preparation in May 2002.

During this period of preparation you must, of course, continue your work and/or education in your home country. Although a minimum of 16 years is all that is supposed to be required, many universities do not consider giving admission (let alone funding) to foreign students without a recognized Masters degree. (Engineers who have completed 4-year degree programs are the exception.)

Private universities are more flexible in their interpretation of what constitutes adequate education for admission to graduate studies. For instance, a public or state university may refuse admission unless you have a specific Masters degree, whereas a private one may consider a diploma as equivalent to a degree. Again, you must read the guidelines carefully, and contact the admissions office, in order to find out if you meet all eligibility requirements.

A word to school students here: we are not going to discuss admission to Bachelor (or undergraduate, as they are called in the US) programs. It is certainly not very hard to get admission to an undergraduate program in the US, providing you have the money to finance your studies yourself. But it is extremely difficult to get complete external funding for undergraduate studies. We are assuming that our readers are more interested in getting complete financial assistance, and therefore are leaving undergraduate programs out of the picture. You can get

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information on the process of taking SAT and applying to undergraduate programs from the United States Educational Foundation Center in your country.

Academic choices

The following degrees are available at the post-graduate level in American universities: PhD, Master of Arts, Master of Science, and Professional Masters degrees based (usually) on 2-year professional programs (which could take different names depending on the field of study).

All post-graduate studies including Masters and PhD are referred to as 'graduate' studies in the US. In most cases, the eligibility for PhD and Masters programs is practically the same. The likelihood of getting funded is usually much higher if you apply for a PhD program. In fact, some departments and schools may not even offer a specific Masters program. In such cases the Masters degree is available under special circumstances, for instance when a PhD student quits the program but has enough credits for a Masters degree. (This of course has to be approved by the Dean or department head). Usually a Master of Science requires some sort of research work and a thesis. A Master of Arts may require the successful completion of a comprehensive exam. It really depends on the rules of the department and the preference of your advisor.

A professional Masters program is different. All students will not be funded, and those that are may not have hundred percent funding. This is because whereas a PhD student is expected to work for and contribute to the research and/or teaching of the department for a number of years, a professional Masters student will leave at the end of the program and (presumably) start making money in the outside world. Moreover, professional programs have a larger pool of applicants competing for the same financial resources. Far fewer students apply for PhD than for professional Masters programs. But that should not discourage you. By all means apply to a variety of degree programs. Just be aware that you may have to seek a part of the financial assistance elsewhere, at least for the first semester.

Getting started

The first thing to do is make a trip to the "United States Educational Foundation in India" Center (USEFI) nearest to you. It's almost like a pilgrimage. We all do it at some initial point in the process. It's certainly a good place to start collecting information. USEFI has its Headquarters in New Delhi, and three regional centers, one each in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata.

If you don't live in the metro cities where the offices of the USEFI are located, we strongly recommend getting on the Internet (at home, office, institute or cyber café) to minimize your dependence and maximize the information available to you.

In the USEFI centers, you will have access to all the online and printed resources you need to get started. The free stuff includes access to basic information, seminars, workshops, orientation program and introductory video, and annual university fairs. RAMs (Request for Application Material: forms you can fill up and mail to universities to request application forms) are available

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to everyone for a price. However, you don't need these if you have Internet and Email access. All universities have detailed websites, and the admissions offices are very prompt in responding to email requests for information and application kits.

Members of the USEFI usually have full access to all resources including test preparation software and individual counseling. A word of caution: don't let their statistics get you down. Hundreds more students apply to US universities than get selected. This just means you have to work hard and smart: be targeted in your application process. And no matter how knowledgeable and experienced the education counselors, getting the right information about your particular field of study depends upon *you*. The counselors are there to give general guidance. Remember there are literally hundreds of universities and programs. No one can have specialized knowledge about all.

Making a list

So how do you make your initial list of universities? Sit down with several university brochures and booklets (or see the university websites) and read, read, read. Each university has several departments or 'schools', and you must also familiarize yourself with department specific guidelines.

What is the broad field of study you are interested in? If you don't know, you may well find out by reading the list of courses and programs available. You must link up the program you are interested in with the qualifications you already have. Although many of the programs available for higher studies are inter-disciplinary and welcome a wide variety of backgrounds, getting admission and funding will depend on your case for how well *you* fit in with your particular set of experiences and academic achievements. So choose programs that mention your academic background as a preference (or even just a possibility) in the students they accept.

Select those universities that offer PhD degrees in your preferred program/s. They are far more likely to have funding in your particular area than the ones that offer just a Masters. Look at the research areas of the department. A wide variety of well-funded projects indicate that the department has a good amount of money for research and probably for PhD students as well.

You could also go in for a professional 2-year Masters program (for instance Environmental Management, or Environment and Development courses). Do choose those programs that offer at least some financial assistance.

Look at the intake of students next. How many students were granted admission in this school/department? Out of these, how many were offered scholarships and other types of financial assistance? Your best bet is to apply to departments with an adequate pool of money. PhD students (in most cases) should be hundred percent funded. Some assistance should be available to Masters students as well.

It is not necessary to apply to large departments that take dozens of students a year. If you are very targeted in your approach and are confident that your background is a good match for the

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kind of student the department is looking for, then you may be competing with a very small pool of applicants anyway. You may even be the only PhD student taken in that semester for that particular program.

Next, examine the backgrounds and research interests of the professors in the school/department. Are there many professors representing a wide range of disciplines? (The Environment department, for instance, can have people specializing in biology, chemistry, economics, statistics, psychology, and marketing.) What are their research interests? How many PhD students do they have, and what are the research areas of the students? Does it look like you could work with any of these professors?

You may also prefer to choose universities with a high intake of international students. Your list should include 5 –10 top ranking universities, 5-10 medium ranked ones, and some relatively lower ranked ones. When looking at the ranking of a university, remember that ranking of a particular department may be different. A low or medium ranked university may have a top ranking department, and vice versa. Some of the top private universities in the ESD fields are Harvard, Yale, Cornell and Duke. (See annexure for a list of select schools and programs.)

To sum up, make your initial list based on the following points:

- The field of study you are interested in is offered by department/school
- PhD degree offered by department/school
- PhD students are fully funded. Some funding is available for Masters students as well.
- The backgrounds and research interests of professors
- The research projects of the department/school
- Intake of international students
- Ranking of university and department/school

Requesting application material

As already stated, you don't need to send RAM forms to universities if you have email access. In fact, emailing the admissions office is a far better way to get application material because it avoids the vagaries and delays of the postal service. You can get the email address from the university brochures in USEFI Center or from the university website.

In your email, do give as much information as is required by the RAM forms. Introduce yourself, sum up your qualifications and/or experience, indicate the degree, program and semester that you are interested in joining, and request an application kit. Be to the point and polite.

If you have unrestricted Internet access, you may not even need the application forms. You can download application and reference forms from the university website. You can even apply online to many universities. But it is still a good idea to get hold of as much of the latest printed matter as you can, both from the department, and from the admissions office. There may be information that is not included on the website.

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Preparing for the exams

You need to take the General GRE (Graduate Record Examination) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Some universities (especially the more flexible, private ones) may not require you to take TOEFL if you have a degree from an English medium college. But take it anyway. It will increase your options.

There are many guides available on how to study for the exams. We recommend sticking faithfully to any one. Barron's guides are comprehensive without being overwhelming. You can also use Peterson's guide. Give yourself three months to prepare for the GRE, and stick to a regular timetable. If you have studied in English medium schools and colleges, you won't need much time to prepare for TOEFL. Do familiarize yourself with the different sections of the test, and take a few practice tests so that you know what to expect.

Both TOEFL and GRE are computer-based tests now, so this is a good time to familiarize yourself with computers, if you haven't already done so. Take some practice computer-based tests. These are available in USEFI. The software should also be available with the exam guides you buy.

Remember that your exam score is just one of several points on which your application will be evaluated. But you must score above a certain basic minimum to be even considered for funding. This figure depends on the department and university you are applying to, and should be available in the admission guidelines. In very general terms, a score of at least 1900 will meet the requirements of most universities. To be funded, though, you may need a higher score.

Don't be disheartened or apprehensive. The General GRE is easier than many of the management entrance exams in India. Just practice, practice, practice.

Writing to professors

You could of course send 'blind' applications to universities, without contacting professors. But we don't recommend this, at least not to the PhD aspirants. You may have to indicate on your application form which professor you'd like to be considered by. A professor must anyway agree to be your advisor before your application for PhD is accepted. Your application will be circulated in the department to see if anyone is interested in you. To increase the chances of being accepted, write to the professors first.

Take a look at the websites of the professors in the department you are applying to, and read about them in the department information handbook. Select the professors whose research interests seem to match with yours (or whose work is related to your academic and/or professional background). Younger professors may not be tenured, and may not have many funds as compared to the older, more established professors. On the other hand, younger professors may be more enthusiastic and interested in your progress. If a professor already has several students, s/he may not have much time or interest in you.

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Keeping these things in mind, choose 3-4 professors in the department to write to. Their email addresses are usually available on the department website. Email *one* professor at a time. They may circulate your email within the department to see if anyone is interested. Wait a week, and then if you don't get a response email the next one on your list.

This is a sample format that may help you formulate your email:

Dear Professor [Last name]

I read with interest your work on [Topics of research, and books and papers the professor may have written].

[Describe in a short paragraph your educational qualifications, work experience and any academic achievements and awards. Don't be shy.]

Please let me know if you would be interested in taking a student next fall. I intend to apply to [Name of Degree, Department and University] next year, and it would be great if I could work with you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Your first name]

Some professors may be too busy or uninterested to respond to you. Others may be on leave or sabbatical and hence their response may be delayed. Still others will respond, and say they aren't taking any new students next year.

But there will be others who respond more positively. They may direct you to other professors who are planning to take new students, or whose work is more closely aligned to your area of interest. If they are interested in you they may a) ask you for your resume, b) tell you to go ahead and apply and that they will consider your application along with the others, c) ask you questions about your academic or professional background and/or d) describe the program and courses in greater detail so that you are more informed in making a decision.

For those without email at this stage: *get it*. It's the quickest, cheapest (and sometimes the only) way to get a response from a busy professor or a department secretary. No one has time for snail mail. And phoning is way too expensive. It's far better to invest your time and money in a cyber café.

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Narrowing your list

You need to narrow your list of universities based on the additional information you have gained since you made your initial list. Read carefully all the application material that is sent to you, particularly the guidelines for applicants. If you have questions, don't be afraid to ask the admissions office and department secretary. You may not meet all the eligibility requirements. (One of the authors obtained department funding for a PhD from a particular university, and was then refused admission by the university admissions office because they didn't recognize her post graduate diploma.)

You should have taken the GRE and TOEFL by now, and obtained your scores. Compare your GRE scores with the average scores of those who are accepted for admission and funded by the department in question. Ideally your scores should be higher. Even if they are not, you can go ahead and apply as long as they satisfy the minimum requirements of the department. In this case, the success of your application will depend to a greater degree on other factors like your statement of purpose and relevant academic/professional background.

Obviously, it is better to apply where you have received a positive response from one of the professors, even if it's just to say that you will be considered along with all the rest of the applicants.

Draw up your final list of 6-8 universities. The mix of top, medium and lower ranked universities in your list should depend partly on your GRE scores.

Your application

You must send your COMPLETE and accurate application well before the stated deadlines. Applications are considered on a rolling basis, and you have a greater chance of being accepted if your application is received, without error, early on in the process. Many deserving candidates may not succeed in obtaining admission and funding simply because they have failed to meet some bureaucratic requirement, or forgotten one of the several documents required. We cannot stress how important it is to be on time, and to present a neat and complete application. Create a good impression. Don't forget anything. Your exam scores must be sent directly to the university by the Educational Testing Service, but you are responsible for just about everything regarding your application. Take your exams in time to have your scores reach before the program deadline.

You may, if you like, apply online. Several universities encourage online or electronic applications. You don't have to fill the form in one sitting. You can download it and work on it in paper before entering the information online. You can save your work and return to it until you are sure it is complete and says what you want it to say. Of course you will still have to send your supporting documents by mail. Alternatively, you may do a paper-based application. But do practice filling it out, and make sure your final application is typed.

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Many universities require you to submit at least two (this figure can even go to five) *original* copies of your complete application. Sometimes the different parts of your application have to be sent to different offices.

Do *not* mail incomplete application kits. It will delay the entire process by weeks or months, and may decrease your chances of success. Be certain you are mailing everything that is required with your application form. If the university or department later asks you to provide additional documentation, be prompt in responding.

Documents

You will need to send the following documents along with your application forms:

1. All college and post graduate academic transcripts. Include transcripts of any relevant study apart from these, for instance computer or language courses. The transcripts must be original, signed and attested by the registrar's office, and enclosed in confidential, signed-across-the-seal envelopes. You may also have to send photocopies of your tenth and twelfth exam certificates.
2. Application fee. The fee is non-refundable and must be paid in the form of a money order or draft in US dollars.
3. Letters of evaluation/reference. Most universities require three letters of reference. The application kit will include the letters/forms your referees are required to complete. Again, they must be enclosed in confidential, signed-across-the-seal envelopes and mailed/handed back to you. They can also be mailed directly to the university by your referees, but we don't really recommend this. You are not in control of when your reference letters will be posted to the university or what method will be used. You, on the other hand, will Fedex your application (we hope!) and can be certain that it will reach on time.

Ideally, one of your referees should be your current employer or professor. The other two may be a past employer and a professor whom you have maintained a good rapport with. If you are applying for a PhD, two of your references should be academic, i.e. professors who can testify to your research ability and academic background. Having a referee who is well known in his or her field is, of course, useful. Such a referee may have links with foreign universities and may even be able to suggest which professor you should contact.

If you have worked or volunteered with an NGO, you can ask your team leader or project manager to write a reference for you. This is especially important if you are applying for a professional ESD program.

(Note: An official copy of your GRE and TOEFL scores must be mailed to the university directly from the Educational Testing Service. Your application will not be considered without these scores.)

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SOP (Statement of Purpose)

The SOP is the most crucial part of your application. It is what sets you apart from other applicants. This is where you can employ creativity and intelligence to communicate directly to the professors and the admissions committee, convincing them that you are the best applicant in a highly qualified pool. Moreover your SOPs must be tailor-made to each of the different programs you are applying to. So unless you are applying for exactly the same program everywhere (unlikely), you will have to write a separate SOP for each university.

Some universities give detailed guidelines on how to write an SOP. They may have specific questions that you need to answer within a certain word limit. Others simply tell you to write a 2-page letter of intent describing your research interests, future plans, and just how you will be an asset to the department. In general an SOP must address the following questions:

1. What bothers you. What ESD problems are you planning to address through your research? What knowledge/practice gap are you trying to fill? What scientific or policy question are you trying to answer? Don't be vague here, but don't be too specific either (unless you have a clear-cut research idea that has received an enthusiastic response from a professor, or one that is based on your past work/research experience and you are confident will generate interest). And don't be hackneyed. Pollution is a big problem but there is already plenty of research on it. You must present a (relatively) unique problem, a new way of looking at or solving an existing problem, or a unique way of using existing tools.

Don't worry. No one expects you to present a proposal until you have completed at least a year of course work. But you must demonstrate that there are problems that bother you and that you are committed to devoting years to researching how they can be solved.

2. What you want to do. How are you going to solve the problem that bothers you? Outline your research ideas. You could, for instance, say that the continued gender inequality in parts of rural India bother you, that you want to research the creation of Internet nodes to link women up and give them a single voice, and that you intend to do your fieldwork in a village with an NGO presence.
3. Why you? What unique set of qualifications and experiences do you have that will benefit the department and will be advantageous to you in your future study and research? Describe your academic and professional background and achievements in a way that meets the guidelines, preferences and requirements that were mentioned in the department handbook.

Financial assistance

Most American universities offer at least a degree of financial support to graduate students. However competition for aid is keen and your best bet is to send in your application package

before the end of December so that you are among the early applicants considered. This can improve your chances for funding because sometimes aid is awarded on a rolling basis.

There are several kinds of financial assistance available. By far the most common forms of aid awarded by the departments themselves are Research Assistantships (RAs) and Teaching Assistantships (TAs). As an RA you would be expected to help in the research of the department. Perhaps you would be assigned to a particular professor (your advisor) or a research lab. As a TA you would be expected to help professors in their teaching duties. You may have to take classes yourself, or simply grade and set question papers.

The most you can legally work is 20 hours a week during term time, and 40 hours during vacations (on campus only!). A full-time TA or RA is paid enough to cover all fees and living expenses. Usually you may have to work only 12-15 hours a week, depending on the workload. Of course this is in addition to your usual classes, assignments and exams. It's not surprising that graduate students are the most stressed community in universities.

Some departments may also offer a few fellowships with varying degrees of financial assistance. Fellowships are commonly offered at the university level, and your department may nominate you for one. A fellowship does not require you to work for the department or university. But competition for fellowships is very keen, since they are limited.

With many American universities, applying for admission is practically the same as applying for financial aid as well. The admission form may simply ask you to indicate whether or not you wish to be considered for financial assistance, and if so, how much. It may also ask whether you would be able to pursue your studies without financial assistance. Always indicate that you seek full financial assistance and that you would be unable to pursue your studies if it is not forthcoming.

However, you may have to fill out a separate form to request financial assistance. Read the financial aid guidelines carefully. We have a friend who simply neglected to fill out and post this form. Of course by the time he found out, it was too late and all the funding had already been allocated to other students.

Some of the university fellowships may also have separate application procedures. If you are eligible for any of them, do request the relevant application forms.

Other avenues for assistance

The use of loans to fund studies is particularly common for undergraduates, management and medical students. But even an ESD graduate student may receive only partial funding from the university that has accepted him/her.

Don't let incomplete funding discourage you. It is likely that if you perform reasonably during the first term, your funding will be extended and increased. Even if it isn't, you can find a variety of paying part time jobs on the university campus, from being a library intern to cleaning the primate center to teaching undergraduates or grading their papers.

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In order to receive the I-20 form (the visa eligibility form) from the university, you will need to show documented financial support (including fees and living expenses) for the first academic year. You can bridge the gap between what the university has offered and what you need by taking an educational loan from a bank (collateral may be required beyond a certain figure). Of course, it may take a long time to pay back the loan after your academic program is over unless you get financial aid in your subsequent semesters, or a job on campus, or stay on to work in the United States for a couple of years.

There are other options besides taking a loan. Many public and corporate agencies provide some degree of financial aid for studying abroad, which may not be sufficient by itself, but can help bridge the gap in funds available and funds needed. A notable exception among those is the Inlaks Foundation (<http://www.inlaksfoundation.org>) which provides full funding (including to-and-fro airfare) to scholars for courses in high-ranking universities in US and UK. The other options are, ITC Ltd, K.C. Mahindra Trust, Lady Maherbai D. Tata Education Trust which offer limited but potentially very helpful funds for study/travel.

Table 1: Timeline

Are you on top of the application process? Check yourself against this timeline.

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| May-July | Visit USEFI Center. Become a member of the library and make regular use of Internet and printed resources to draw initial list of 15-20 universities and programs and to start preparing for GRE and TOEFL exams. Email universities' admissions offices, requesting application kits. Request for GRE and TOEFL application forms Prepare resume |
| July-August | Email the professors you want to work with, introducing yourself and your research interests and asking them whether they are interested in taking you on as a student. Attach your resume. |
| September-November | Take the GRE and TOEFL exams. Narrow your list of universities to 6-9, based on your scores and the responses of the professors you emailed. Gather the documents you need for your application, including college transcripts and references. |
| December | Post all applications |
| May-July | Apply for visa and student cards |

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3. GETTING A VISA

It was a heart-breaking scene. The young man was shouting, a note of desperation in his voice, "Please give me a chance, sir! That's all I'm asking, just a chance! I have a full scholarship, sir."

None of us could hear what the visa officer's response was. We sat in nervous rows in the visa section of the American consulate, feeling a mixture of pity for the young man's plight, and relief that we weren't in his position. He had most certainly ruined his chances of getting a visa. Sure enough, two minutes later he was forcibly evicted from the room. All the while, he kept pleading, "All I want is a chance!"

Well, we would all like to get a break, a chance to prove ourselves, wouldn't we? But we can't count on it. We certainly can't afford to be complacent once we have received admission and funding (and the all-important I-20 form) to attend a US university.

There are mainly two types of student visas:

- **F-1 (Student Visa).** The F-1 visa is for full-time students enrolled in an academic or language program. F-1 students must maintain a full-time course load and complete their studies by the expiration date listed on the I-20 form.
- **J-1 (Exchange Visitor Visa).** The J-1 visa is issued for students needing practical training that is not available in their home country to complete their academic program. The training must be directly related to the academic program.

Visa officers aren't evil ogres. They have a job to do, just like everybody else. Some, of course, perform it more conscientiously than others. But, fair or not, they are all powerful. With one stroke of a pen they can dismiss years of ambitions and hard work. Your job is to make sure you do everything possible to avoid the fate of the desperate young man described above.

Appearances

This is one time when appearances *do* matter. Dress well, and soberly. Check your documents the day before you plan to go to the consulate for your visa, and file them in a folder. It looks impressive and orderly. Print neatly and legibly on all application forms. Carry extra photocopies of all your documents in a separate folder. Keep your voice well modulated at all times. Don't talk too much; answer what is asked concisely and convincingly.

Time and Place

You have the choice of applying for a visa from four cities: Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai. We have a friend who applied from Chennai even though his house and family were in Delhi, because of the scary stories he heard about the visa rejections there. Two minutes is all they give you, he said, and you could be turned down for no apparent reason. These stories may be

nonsense of course. Visa officers keep changing, and it is hard to gauge where you may have a 'better chance'. We suggest you leave as little as possible to chance.

It's not as simple as choosing whichever city you like anyway. You have to give logical reasons for applying from there. You must prove (with documents) that it's your place of residence, or work, or that your parents live there and you are staying with them. Our friend worked in Bangalore and had the necessary documents to prove it.

Queue up at the consulate early, so that you are in the first 25% interviewed. This may mean arriving in the wee hours of the morning, or the night before, depending on where you are being interviewed. Check it out the lines a couple of days in advance so you know what to expect.

Documents

A simple phone call to the consulate will tell you exactly what documents you need to carry. Basically you need your passport, the I-20 form from the university, the application fee, and a completed application form.

But that's not all you might need. The visa officer is interested in one crucial thing: will you return to your home country after your academic program is over? The reason most visa applicants are rejected is that the visa officer decides they have intent to immigrate, to stay on after they have gotten their degree.

Now of course you want to keep your options open. You may like to get a couple of years work experience before returning. But you must avoid giving any impression that you will do so. After your degree is over, your F-1 status will permit you to work for one year on OPT (Optional Practical Training) in any organization in the US. This is one of the benefits of the F-1 student visa. However, working beyond that one year requires a change in visa status. You must indicate that you really want to return to your home country after your OPT is over.

How can you convince the visa officer of your desire to return? Showing financial, legal and emotional ties to the home country is always helpful. Carry a letter of financial and emotional support from your parents. Show financial ties by getting the power of attorney on some family property, along with a statement of its value. Make a detailed resume, and on a separate page type in bold a brief paragraph on what and why you want to study in the United States, how it will help you when you return, and what you want to do when you return. This should not be more than a few lines in the middle of a page. You can slip it in with your transcripts or resume when asked for it.

Carry proof of your residential status in the city you are applying from. Carry all your transcripts from high school onward. No year of your life should be unaccounted for. Above all, you must be gainfully employed at the time of your visa interview. Carry proof of employment, both current and past. Or carry proof that you are student, or have very recently graduated.

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Rejection

If your visa is turned down, ask politely for the reason. Remember you have only a couple of chances to be interviewed in person. You'll have a better chance the next time if you know exactly why you were rejected. One of our friends was summarily dismissed by the visa officer. When he asked if he may know the reason, the officer stated that he didn't know 'what you've been up to the last one year'. Our friend had forgotten to bring his employment letter.

Another thing that may (or may not) help getting a visa the second time is a direct personal communication from your advisor (who presumably wants you) to the visa officer, stating that you have qualifications and experience that the department is looking for.

Table 2: Tips for our readers

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| Students in School | It's early days for you yet if you want to get funding to study abroad. However, it's the right time to focus on your academic record. Don't neglect extra-curricular activities (ECA) either. A good academic and ECA record are the foundations of an attractive resume. |
| Students in Bachelors programs | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Start collecting information. Visit the American education centers, get appointments with their education counselors, and talk with people who are applying or have applied to universities abroad.2. Get on the Internet. Visit the websites of universities and scholarship programs, and start making an initial list of 15-20 universities and the programs you are interested in.3. Volunteer with NGOs working in the broad fields of study you are interested in. You can work part-time or during holidays.4. Start building contacts for references. Potential referees include not just your professors, but also the team leaders or project managers in the NGOs you may have worked with.5. Remember you need 16+ years of education to apply for post-graduate studies in an American university. If you are in your final year, apply for Masters programs as closely related to your field of interest as possible. |
| Students in Masters, professional or PhD programs in ESD related studies | Points 1-4 above, plus you must continue to focus on your studies, research and/or career in your home country too. Although you may be eligible to apply for admission and funding to foreign universities by now, you may not succeed the first time. In order to continuously improve your chances of success, you need to keep building on your study and work in your home country. Getting some work experience in an ESD related field will tremendously increase your chances. |
| Students in Masters, professional or PhD programs in | Points 1-4 above. The good news is that the ESD sectors are very open and welcoming to people who may have specialized in other fields. Do try and leverage your specialization by linking it into an ESD related research topic. For instance, if you are a computer, physics or geography professional you |

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| non-ESD related studies | can do GIS and remote sensing of forests and wildlife. If your subject is biology, you can choose from a variety of environmental applications. If you are a history graduate, think of public policy. If you are engineer, consider environmental engineering. There is virtually no limit to what you can do as long as you are creative and logical. Of course, getting some relevant work experience will be even more important for you, as it will give you an entry into the ESD sector before or during your application process. |
| People working in ESD related fields | <p>Points 1,2 and 4 above.</p> <p>Ensure that you have at least 16 years of education. Do you have just a 3-year Bachelors degree? Look for a one-year, recognized degree program, or enroll in a part-time Masters program.</p> <p>Try finding a PHD research agenda from the work that you are doing. This will not only clarify what you want to do in your own mind so that you are better focused in your applications, but will help you write an original and eye-catching SOP (Statement of Purpose).</p> <p>Write and publish papers based on your original work.</p> |
| People working in other fields | Points 1-5 above. You can enter the ESD sector at almost any time in your professional career. Build your resume by working part-time for an organization doing work you are interested in. Do a correspondence course that is directly related to the foreign university program of study you plan to apply to. If you don't know which field of study may appeal to you, just go ahead and volunteer/work for an NGO. The experience itself will present research topics and show you where your interest lies. |

Remember, the more informed, well prepared and organized you are from the start of the process, the greater is the chance that your quest for pursuing higher education from United States will be smooth. Do remember, you are treading on a path which will open up a window for lifelong learning and broaden your perspective. And all it takes is an indefatigable zeal, loads of hard work and being prepared.

And we all vouch for it.