

Applying to MA Programs in Philosophy

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Disclaimer

Although I will try to speak in generalities, my knowledge of MA programs is based primarily on my experience as chair of admissions at UWM. Thus some of my remarks may not generalize. For example, the criteria our admissions committee uses in evaluating applicants may not be the same as that of other schools.

Kinds of Programs

There are essentially three types of MA programs:

1. Those that are part of PhD programs

Comment- Unless they indicate otherwise, by and large these programs do not focus on placing students in PhD programs, including their own.

2. Those that are geared mainly toward awarding terminal degrees in philosophy

Comment- These schools are not appropriate for someone wishing to go on for a PhD in philosophy.

3. Those that focus on placing students in PhD programs

Comment- These schools are appropriate, and my remarks will be limited to such programs.

Who should apply to these MA programs?

The commitment and reasons for pursuing an MA degree are not necessarily the same as those for pursuing a PhD. With few exceptions those seeking PhD's in philosophy wish to have academic careers. At UWM almost all of our students have such plans, but not all do. Some intend to apply to law school, some are unsure of their career plans and wish to determine whether philosophy and teaching are what they really want, some may not want to pursue a research career but hope to teach philosophy in high schools, etc.

I would advise anyone who is determined to pursue a career in academia to look at the **applying to PhD programs** post. This site provides a thoughtful and forthright assessment of the difficulties achieving this goal. I might add that although ES is right to stress the advantages of attending a "top ranked" or "prestigious" PhD program, I think the picture he paints of the alternatives may be overly bleak.

MA program as opposed to a PhD program

Students have various reasons/strategies for applying to MA programs.

1. They do not have sufficient background in philosophy to gain direct admission to a PhD program or to a PhD program that suits their needs.

Comment- Some, including very good, PhD programs will consider non-philosophy majors if they have strong undergraduate records and have background in areas related to philosophy, for example, math, linguistics or psychology. However, even if a PhD program is willing to consider such students, it is often difficult for them to evaluate the student's philosophical abilities from their undergrad records, letters, etc.

In general, I think it most advisable for students who fall into this first category to consider seriously the MA route. MA programs will be much more willing to take a "gamble" on such students. Attending an MA program will mean that you will not be eliminated by PhD programs on the grounds that you do not have sufficient background in

philosophy. Preparation in an MA program may also make it less likely you will feel in over your head or behind your fellow students. Indeed, you have a good chance of being better prepared than others admitted to the program.

2. As a safety school in case they do not get into a PhD program.

Comment- Given the vagaries and long odds of being accepted at one's first choice(s), it is a good policy to apply to safety schools when applying to either MA or PhD programs. Students, though, should consider in advance if the safety schools are ones they would actually accept if they do not get into a program of their choice. Students should also take into account that admissions into a MA program may be more competitive than at many PhD programs -- more competitive not only in terms of number of applicants but in terms of the strength of records of the applicants. Students who fail to gain admissions into our MA program are often successful in being admitted to PhD programs.

3. To improve their chances of being accepted at better PhD programs.

Comment- This strategy makes sense in some cases, but is not to be relied on. First, MA programs do not get students into PhD programs. A student's ability, work habits, performance in the program, GRE scores, etc. do. MA programs do help better prepare a student for PhD work and can help with the application process. Second, the top schools are so competitive that one's chances of being admitted are slim no matter how good a student's record is. Third, students who apply and are accepted into PhD programs should consider seriously whether it is wise to give up a bird in the hand for the possibility of doing better after attending an MA program.

Before making such a decision I advise students to ask themselves the following: Although the PhD program is not one of your preferred schools, does it look as if it will be able to fulfill your academic needs? Will you have regrets or keep second-guessing your decision to attend the less than "ideal" PhD program? Will you feel the other students in the program are not on your level and thus holding back your education and job prospects? Suppose you attend an MA program and in the end are not admitted to a PhD program better than the one you turned down, will you feel your MA studies were a waste of your time?

PhD programs' views of applicants with MA's

Until MA programs were developed that focused specifically on preparing students for PhD programs students who took MA's rather than applying to PhD programs after their undergraduate degree were often looked upon with some skepticism. Things have changed now, but not everywhere. Some PhD programs seem to continue with old assumptions. From my experience at UWM, for example, there are several schools that have not admitted our students no matter how good they are. We have had students who have gotten into many/all of the very top PhD programs and are turned down (not even put on a waiting list) by schools that are ranked lower or much lower. Also some PhD programs are skittish/reluctant to admit students who do not come from a prestigious undergraduate school. Completing a good MA program can reduce their concerns, but the "glow" factor that results from having an undergraduate degree from a prestigious university often does have an influence.

In sum, attending a good MA program will improve your philosophical skills, background and for many students their confidence. Not having PhD students, an MA program can provide much one-on-one attention. This enables the program to better tailor its courses and a student's course of study to fit his or her individual needs. Moreover, MA programs have a lot of experience guiding students through the admissions process. At UWM the department as a whole, not merely a student's advisor, plays a role helping students decide where to apply, balancing their application list in terms of admission probabilities, advising them on the choice of writing sample to submit and counseling them in their acceptance decisions. We also provide a good deal of personalized guidance walking a student through the application/admissions process and keeping an eye on problems that may develop along the way.

As the placement records of many MA programs show, students from MA programs are increasingly being admitted to top schools. In the case of UWM the talent and accomplishments of students we have sent to schools has often led these schools to look favorably on our graduates. I think a similar advantage would hold for students attending other MA programs.

MA Completion and Placement Records

Students should try to get information about the program's completion record; these do vary from program to program. Student should also check the placement records of the MA program, especially how they have performed in recent years. Comparing this data is not always easy as the schools use different methods of counting and provide different information. Some do not break the data down by year; so the record will reflect many years of placement, not the performance in any particular year. Some may be selective in reporting or list not only the school's students attend but all acceptances. Hence if one student was admitted to numerous very good schools it can skew the data.

As mentioned earlier MA programs do not get students into PhD programs; they prepare them to apply. Thus placement records reflect the quality of the students enrolled in the program, and this can vary from year to year. UWM's success in placing students at top programs is largely due to the strength of the students in the program. Many who apply to UWM do so in the hope that it will enable them to be admitted to a better program. They probably could and some in fact have been admitted to pretty good PhD programs. I have indicated above my thoughts on the pros and cons of gambling that they will be admitted to a better school.

MA Applications and Admissions

Much information is likely to be found on a program's web site concerning the application process, requirements, the nature of the program and the faculty. Check this for suitability to your needs. At UWM our primary criterion for selecting students is our assessment of the student's *potential* for work in philosophy. We do not require students be philosophy majors or have even taken philosophy courses. A good number of students who have been most successful in gaining admission to top PhD programs fall into this category.

Our admission decisions are most influenced by the writing sample and letters of recommendation. The student's statement of purpose is important, too, in that it provides background information that can help us assess the student's overall record, as well as determine if the student's goals, interests and areas of study fit our program. We have no set standards for GRE scores and grades. They play a role only after our overall assessment of a student's talents. GRE's tend to play a much greater role in PhD admissions. We urge student who do not have very good GRE's to retake them before applying to PhD programs. There are, however, quite good US, Canadian and UK schools that do not require GRE scores.

At UWM we do not give much weight per se to the undergraduate school the student has attended, but as in the case of PhD programs it does play some role in assessment. Attending a high-powered school usually means a student has a long standing record of high achievement and her or his general abilities have to some extent been "prescreened". A school's status can also affect how letters of recommendation and other materials are evaluated. For example, if a letter writer says the student is in the top 10% of recent graduates it can be harder to evaluate the significance of the fact when the letter comes from a school with little track record as opposed to a school that consistently produces strong philosophy majors. It is also likely members of the admissions committee will know more about the background and standards of the person writing the letter if the person is from a well-known program.

Letters

The better the writer knows you and your work and will take the time to spell it out, the more useful the letter. Since many of our applicants have little formal training in philosophy we recognize that not all the letters may come from philosophers. Informative letters from non-philosophers are reviewed like any others but there often are two problems evaluating them. 1. At times the letters are from a professor who had you in a course that is not readily related to philosophy. 2. The course work is on a more philosophical topic, but the instructor has little background in philosophy and evaluates your work in terms of that are not very informative about your philosophical talents.

Also if a student has, say, had only one philosophy course the letter or the student's statement of purpose should spell out how this minimal background has led the student to undertake the study of philosophy at the graduate level.

Writing Sample

It is hard to evaluate a student's philosophical potential if the paper submitted is only tangentially on a philosophical topic or examined from a non-philosophical perspective. Most of the papers submitted to our program were written originally for a course. Do not assume that the paper that received the best grade is the best to send. Grading varies from instructor to instructor and that paper may not best informatively reflect your potential. Speak to your instructor and your undergraduate advisor about the paper you intend to submit and what you may want to do to improve it.

Papers that although good are mainly repeats of course content or simply follow the readings give less indication of the student's talents than one that shows independent research and an attempt to say something of your own. Similarly papers that largely lay out A's and B's position and declare a winner in the debate tend not to make the best case for the student's philosophical research skills.

Admissions Decisions

Below are the Council of Graduate School guidelines for decision dates that most, but not all, MA and PhD programs go by:

Acceptance of an offer of financial support (such as a graduate scholarship, fellowship, traineeship, or assistantship) for the next academic year by a prospective or enrolled graduate student completes an agreement that both student and graduate school expect to honor. In that context, the conditions affecting such offers and their acceptance must be defined carefully and understood by all parties.

Students are under no obligation to respond to offers of financial support prior to April 15; earlier deadlines for acceptance of such offers violate the intent of this Resolution. In those instances in which a student accepts an offer before April 15, and subsequently desires to withdraw that acceptance, the student may submit in writing a resignation of the appointment at any time through April 15. However, an acceptance given or left in force after April 15 commits the student not to accept another offer without first obtaining a written release from the institution to which a commitment has been made. Similarly, an offer by an institution after April 15 is conditional on presentation by the student of the written release from any previously accepted offer. It is further agreed by the institutions and organizations subscribing to the above Resolution that a copy of this Resolution should accompany every scholarship, fellowship, traineeship, and assistantship offer.

Waiting to hear about admission decisions can be very stressful and not all MA and PhD programs do much to alleviate the pressure. To some extent though students frequently expect more or more definite information before a department really knows what to tell the student. Different MA and PhD programs operate on different time schedules. Once a department accepts and offers to support a student she or he has until April 15 to respond. Naturally the student does not want to make a decision until all the facts are in. So if the student is still in the running for a place at a school she or he would prefer they can and most frequently do delay until April 15.

It is also the case that schools have different policies concerning waiting lists. Usually no school gets acceptances from all those admitted. Some admit more than they want assuming that in the end they will have about as many acceptances as they aim for. Other universities only admit the number of students they are aiming for and put others who they think have a good chance of being accepted on a waiting list. Schools also adopt different policies as to the number of students they put on their waiting lists. This may be determined by their past experience as to how far they have usually gone down their list before filling the class. Some MA and PhD programs less certain of the likely percent of acceptances or not wanting to take chances put a very large number of applicants on their waiting list. And they may not let those on the list know their fate or even where they stand until they actually fill the class. In any case departments often do not know how far they will actually go down their waiting list until quite late, since many students do not make their decisions until April 15.

Blogs

There are a number of student blogs that provide useful information about a school's practices, acceptance policies and also attempt to keep track of who has been accepted, rejected or put on waiting lists. One must be careful depending on this information, as it is not always accurate.