

Applying to graduate school can be confusing. This document is designed to walk you through the process and answer your questions.

## **IS A PHD IN SOCIOLOGY RIGHT FOR YOU?**

### **What is the difference between an undergraduate degree in sociology and a graduate degree?**

Undergraduate programs in sociology are *very* different from graduate programs in sociology. As an undergraduate, you spend much of your time developing your sociological imagination, reading about research, discussing ideas, and writing about the things you read. In a graduate program, you spend most of your time learning to *produce* the type of research that you read about as an undergraduate. That means spending a lot of time learning about how to design a study, interpret the results, and write up the findings.

### **Producing research sounds awesome! How do I know if Duke is a good place for me to apply?**

When considering where to apply, you want to focus on (at least) two criteria: the *topics* the professors study (substantive area) and the *ways* they study them (methodology). The main topics our faculty study are listed on our website:

- [culture, affect, and cognition](#)
- [health, demography, and life course](#)
- [organizational and economic sociology](#)
- [race, ethnicity, and inequality](#)
- [religion and social change](#)
- [social networks and computational sociology](#)

Methodologically, our strengths are in quantitative research broadly defined, including survey research, experiments, network analysis, and computational research.

### **Do I need a master's degree to apply to the PhD program? What if I didn't major in sociology?**

You do not need a master's degree to be admitted to a PhD program in sociology. Most of our students come in with a BA or BS degree only. After 2 or 3 years in the PhD program, students receive a master's degree to reflect the work they've done in the PhD program so far. And you definitely don't need to have majored in sociology to apply to our program. Many (if not most) of our incoming students did not major in sociology.

### **I'd like to pursue a PhD but that sounds expensive. Is it?**

Not at all! In fact, Duke pays the full tuition of all PhD students and pays all students a stipend of at least \$22,912 per year so you can devote yourself to your education and training. Most students also receive additional funding during the summer. Health insurance is also included.

## WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT HOW TO APPLY?

### How does the admissions committee evaluate statements of purpose?

We train future researchers. As such, we want to know about your interest in and experience with research. Tell us about your senior thesis, research apprenticeships, and experience at a think tank or other research institute. Tell us, too, about what you want to study in the future. You don't need to have a precise research question nailed down – in fact, we don't want you to come in with your heart set on a single question – but we do want to hear about what kind of questions motivate you, what your interests are, and why. If you have any *demonstrated* strengths (awards, high grades, etc.), mention them too, though in a matter-of-fact way rather than in a boasting way.

We also want to know why you think Duke is a good fit. Of course, we want to know your intellectual reasons, but if you also have a tie to North Carolina or any other reason that makes you specifically excited about Duke, please tell us that too.

There are also things that some applicants include that you should probably avoid. Since we are training future researchers, we're less interested in your experience with activism, teaching, and extracurricular activities. Of course, these are all potentially great things to do; they are just not relevant for admission to graduate school.

### You just mentioned research experience multiple times. What can I do if I don't have any?

If you're reading this document years before applying to graduate school, then see if you can acquire this experience. Tell professors you want to attend graduate school, and ask if they would be willing to have you assist them on one of their projects. Write a senior thesis. Read about research on your own. If you want to apply with little research experience, tell us why you are sure that this path is right for you.

### Do I need to pick an advisor in advance? Who should I pick?

You should write down potential people you'd be interested in working with, though doing so is not a commitment that you must work with them if you're admitted. You should note a few factors when writing down the names of potential advisors:

- (1) Generally, only a tenured faculty member can be your primary advisor. Tenured faculty have the title *associate professor* or *professor*. *Assistant professors* do not yet have tenure and are therefore not good choices for advisors. *Professors of the practice* are focused on teaching undergraduates and thus cannot supervise your research.
- (2) Faculty listed under "secondary appointments" on our website can help give you advice on your research, but generally cannot be your primary advisor. Limit yourself to naming the associate and full professors listed under "faculty" on our website.
- (3) You should make sure that the advisors' area of research and research methods are aligned with what you say you want to do. Feel free to list 2-3 people and discuss them briefly in your statement of purpose. Advisors go on leave, become administrators, deal

with personal crises, move, or have working styles that do not fit with your own. You should choose a department in which there are multiple potential advisors, and tell us about a few whom you see as possibilities.

### **Should I email a potential advisor in advance to ask if they are taking students?**

You are welcome (but in no way required) to contact individual professors to ask about their research interests and plans before you apply. But unlike some disciplines, you are not admitted to work with a specific professor and you do not need their permission or encouragement to apply. It is best to apply because you want to do research that is aligned with Duke's substantive and methodological strengths. If you do, there will be several good potential advisors for you. Once you arrive, you can see who is a good fit for you.

### **How do you evaluate writing samples?**

We look for two key criteria: evidence of understanding and executing social science research and writing ability.

### **What should I do if my writing sample is my senior thesis – a much longer document than is allowed?**

You can edit your thesis down to fit in the space. Minimizing your literature review – though not cutting it entirely – is probably a good idea. Focus on your research question, why it is important, your methods, and findings. If you do cut the document down, include a cover letter on the document that tells us that you edited it for your application.

### **What should I submit for a writing sample if I was not a sociology major?**

If you can, submit a writing sample that is within the social sciences – ones that shows that you understand what social science research is and shows your ability to execute it. Also tell us in your personal statement why you decided to pursue a PhD in sociology.

### **What GRE scores do I need?**

While, of course, higher scores are better, we take students with a variety of scores. On average, our admitted students have GRE scores of 162 on verbal, 157 on quantitative, and 4.5 on writing. However, keep in mind that these are averages, which means that we also admit students with lower scores than these. (The lowest scores among recent admitted students are 154 verbal, 143 quant, and 3 on writing.) Several of our students have one “weakness” and for some students that is one of their GRE scores.

### **What grades do I need?**

Again, higher grades are better, but we do take students with a variety of GPAs. The average is 3.7 but we have admitted students with GPAs as low as 3.3. If you had a bad semester or year,

use the application to tell us why. If most of your low grades were from when you were pursuing a major that you later dropped, mention that too.

### **Who should I ask for letters of recommendation?**

As you've probably gathered from the points above, we really care about your research ability. So ask people who can tell us about your demonstrated research ability or potential. These people might include your senior thesis advisor, master's program advisor, advisor of your research assistantship position, professor of a course on methods or statistics, or boss at a research-related job. If you do not have three people in these categories – and most people don't – then also ask professors of courses in which you performed well.

### **Duke sounds like the type of place that cares about the prestige of my undergraduate university. Can I still get in if I did not attend an Ivy League university, top tier public university, or elite liberal arts college?**

Absolutely! We care about where you went to college far less than you probably think. Most undergraduate sociology programs have similar structures – one course on theory, one on methods, and the opportunity to write a senior thesis – so most students are in the same boat in terms of their preparation for graduate school. We also recognize that there are talented students at all universities so even if you were not a sociology major, we encourage you to apply if a PhD in sociology sounds exciting to you.

That said, some universities offer more opportunities to get involved in research than others. It might be worth mentioning – in just a short phrase in your statement of purpose – if your university doesn't offer undergraduate students research assistantship positions or other research opportunities that you think are relevant.

### **I am a first-generation college student. I worry that I might not fit in at Duke.**

One of Duke's strengths is our social class diversity. About half of our faculty were first-generation college students and/or grew up in poor or working-class families. Our graduate students who were the first in their families to attend college are among our most successful students. We also have faculty members who study social class issues in higher education. If you're concerned about being a first-generation, low-income, or working-class student at Duke, please reach out to Jessi Streib ([jessi.streib@duke.edu](mailto:jessi.streib@duke.edu)) and she'll do her best to answer your questions.

## **OTHER QUESTIONS**

### **Is the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) required?**

Yes, as an international applicant the only requirement specific to you is the TOEFL exam. If your first language is not English, you must submit scores. The minimum scores are 90 for the Internet-based TOEFL, 577 for the paper-based, and 7.0 for the IELTS test.

**Can I request an application fee waiver?**

Yes, if you feel that you qualify or may qualify, contact [Dr. Alan Kendrick](#), Assistant Dean for Graduate Student Development at the Graduate School.

**Can I arrange a visit to the department prior to being admitted?**

We only arrange visits for students who have been admitted to the program and are trying to make a final decision about whether to attend. Of course, you are always welcome to visit Duke's campus and [Durham!](#)

**Do you offer online courses or is residency required?**

We do not offer any courses online. The rest is a little tricky. Technically, the Graduate School only requires one year of residency, however, this would not work in our program because the intense nature of training and research requires being here in person. Several students have completed field research outside of the state and even the country, but this usually means being away for no more than one year.