

# Choosing Graduate Programs and Potential Advisors

(Note: LSU, the LSU FACES Lab, and Dr. Wilson do not endorse any other university, department, or professor. This document is for information purposes only.)

## Finding Graduate Programs

- **Disclaimer:** You do not need a degree in “forensic anthropology” to be a forensic anthropologist. There are very few universities that offer a degree in “forensic anthropology.” Types of degrees that are common: Anthropology, Human Biology, and Biological Anthropology.
- **Lists on the internet** – There are some websites that have lists of programs that have forensic anthropologists within the department. These lists will vary in how comprehensive they are and will usually be skewed depending on their purpose. Note: you cannot just look at one of these lists to find all of the potential schools. Do not assume that a school is “good” or offers forensic anthropology just because it is on one of these lists!
  - **Google** (or other search engine): “forensic anthropology masters programs”
  - **American Board of Forensic Anthropology** has a list of schools based on where board certified forensic anthropologists teach: <https://www.theabfa.org/schools>
- **Find where your favorite professors work.**
  - If you want to do research on a specific subspecialty of forensic anthropology, find out which department the author (or authors) belongs to. Sometimes they are not at a university, but sometimes they are at a university that you did not previously consider.
  - *Example:* You read an article about estimating age from the 12th thoracic vertebra and you really want to continue that research. Who wrote the article? Where do they teach?
- **Find out where other forensic anthropologists received their degrees.** You can usually find this information on their faculty or employer pages.
- **Reputation** – Be cautious of applying to a program just because it has a specific reputation. The reality is that departments change, professors leave for other universities or retire, graduate funding may be lost, etc. Be diligent about investigating each potential school.

## Choosing Graduate Programs

- **Types of Degrees** – What type of graduate degree is offered in the department?
  - **MA** – Master of Arts is the typical Anthropology Master’s degree that is offered and has a traditional social science curriculum.
  - **MS** – Master of Science is a science-heavy degree that will have a curriculum weighted more toward biology and chemistry courses.
  - **PhD** – This is the terminal degree (highest) for those seeking to become forensic anthropologists. There are some departments in the US that can accept students with a bachelor’s degree into a PhD program, but this is exceptionally rare. (See FAQs for more discussion on this topic).
- **Specialization** – What type of forensic anthropology does the department specialize in?
  - Each department will have professors that specialize in a certain type of forensic anthropology.
  - *Examples:* Trauma analysis, biological profile (age, sex, ancestry), forensic archaeology, taphonomy (decomposition studies), etc.
- **Requirements** – What are the requirements for admission into the department? What are the requirements for graduating from the program?

- **Admissions** – carefully look at the admissions requirements for the department. These are often more specific than the requirements for that university. Pay attention to GRE scores, GPA minimums, undergraduate research requirements, and anything else that may make you a more competitive applicant.
  - **Admissions requirements can be found on the website for each department.** This is usually under their “Graduate Program” tabs. If you have specific questions about a requirement, I encourage you to find the contact person for that department who is usually either the Graduate Coordinator, Graduate Advisor, or Graduate Secretary.
- **Graduation Requirements**– carefully look at the requirements that the department has to graduate from the program. These can usually be found as “Degree Requirements.” Some things to consider:
  - How long does it usually take to graduate? 2-3 years is standard for a MA or MS. If you want to graduate in 2 years, do not apply for a program that usually takes 3 or more years.
  - What classes are required? If you do not want a chemistry-heavy course load, do not apply for programs with 4 required chemistry classes (for example).
  - Do they require a minor? Does the college offer a minor that would interest you?
  - Does the department require “comprehensive exams” or “qualifying exams” in order to graduate? Be prepared to study for and take these exams on top of your course work and research if you attend one of these departments.
- **Location** – To some this point will seem trivial and to others it will be the most important factor for choosing potential schools. Some things to consider:
  - Is the university in a state/city/region that you could live in for 2-3 years?
  - Do you have personal responsibilities that require you stay in a state or region?
  - Do you want to stay in the US or would you go abroad? (More on this in FAQ)
  - What is the cost of living in this state/city/region?
- **Cost** – How much will it cost to attend the program? Some things to consider:
  - What will be the total cost of the program? This is usually based on credit hours (similar to undergrad).
  - Are there extra fees for Out of State Students? These fees can sometimes be substantial, but also may be waived in some circumstances.
  - **Does the department offer graduate assistantships?** These are often competitive awards given in exchange for providing research/lab assistance to a professor (RA), teaching assistance to a professor (GA), or teaching courses (instructor – typically only for PhD students). A graduate assistantship will provide compensation and each package is specific to each department and university. Information about each department’s assistantship package can be found on their websites or by contacting the department.
    - Examples of types of compensation:
      - Out of State fee waiver
      - Tuition waiver
      - Fee waiver
      - Stipend (monthly)
      - Health Insurance
    - Assistantship requirements vary; however, they usually include a specific number of hours worked per week (example: 20 hours a week) or a specific number of classes taught or TAed for.
      - **Department and/or Lab Environment** – Is the department very close and social? Are there high levels of competition in your potential advisor’s lab? Does the department and university support graduate students?

- The best way to find out what it is like to be a graduate student in a program is to ask the current graduate students. Some departments post the contact information for the current students. Or you can ask your potential advisor for contact information for their current students.

## **Finding a Potential Advisor**

Finding the right advisor for you may be the most important factor in choosing which schools to apply to. You will work closely with your advisor for the next 2-3 years (or more). They will guide you through the research and writing process. They will help you choose the right courses to take. They will help you find an appropriate PhD program if you choose to continue in the field. They will be the most important letter of recommendation for PhD programs or provide you with a reference if you choose to find a career instead. The graduate student/advisor relationship is critical.

- **Locating an advisor:** You can either choose a department because a professor works in that department, or you can choose a professor because they work in a department you want to apply to.
- **Contacting a potential advisor:** Once you have found a professor who are interested in working with, you need to email them to introduce yourself. This should be done early in the Fall semester before applications are due.
  - Introduce yourself: what university you currently attend, research you have done or are doing, your research interests, including possible thesis topics, and extracurriculars that are pertinent to your application (i.e., SDL, internships, etc.).
  - Ask if they will be taking graduate students for the year you are applying.
    - Some years professors will not take students because they are on sabbatical or have too many current students. Some years they may only accept one or two students. Some professors accept a lot of students each year. Everyone is different!
    - Do not waste your application fee if the professor is not taking students.
  - If you are concerned about graduate assistantships, you may also inquire in this introductory email.
  - Ask for contact information for their current students.
  - Attach a copy of your CV and/or personal statement if you have one. If you don't have these, it is okay because we will cover them in September.
  - Try to tailor your email to each school and personalize it for each potential advisor.
  - Note: not all potential advisors will email you back. This is a reality and do not take it as a rejection. You will have to consider whether the department and advisor is still worth applying to.
- **Meeting with a potential advisor:** If the professor is taking students and they provide an encouraging or neutral response email, you need to consider having a meeting with your potential advisor.
  - Virtual/phone meetings – Ask to schedule a virtual or phone meeting to ask additional questions about the advisor/program/university/etc. It is possible to get all your questions answered through email, however, you want to have a personal meeting with your potential advisor. You need to stand out from the crowd and be competitive.
    - You must do comprehensive research on your potential advisor before the meeting. What do they research? Where do they do field research? What kinds of grants do they have right now? What do their current graduate students study? Lots of information can be found on their faculty pages.
    - Students sometimes choose a potential program and advisor because everything looks perfect on paper, but when they have a zoom or phone meeting with their potential

- advisor, they realize that it is not a good fit. Or they are not sold on a school until after they meet their potential advisor.
- Some advisors are very hands on and will be a constant presence. Others will be more hands off and provide guidance only when asked. What style is right for you?
  - If they have a forensic anthropology lab, do students get a chance to work on cases? What types of opportunities do the graduates students have to gain experience in forensic anthropology?
  - Remember you will be working closely with this person for several years (or beyond).
- Campus visit – If you are serious about a particular program, it may be worth traveling to do a campus visit. You will need to schedule a day with your potential advisor and department. These visits usually include a meeting with the potential advisor, a tour of the facilities (lab if they have one), and meeting with the current graduate students.
- Some departments offer recruitment days where multiple potential candidates will visit the department on the same day.
  - The program and advisor may look perfect on paper, but you do not really know what it will be like to attend that university, live in the city, or work with the advisor until you visit.
  - You must go to a campus visit with pre-prepared questions and be prepared to talk about yourself and your accomplishments.

## **Narrowing Down the List**

Once you have gathered information about your prospective programs and advisors, you need to narrow down the list of schools you will apply to. It is suggested that you create a spreadsheet to better organize your priorities.

- **How many schools should you apply to?** The answer is different for everyone.
  - Each school has an application fee. How many application fees can you reasonably afford? Some schools offer application fee assistance or waivers.
  - Professors that you ask to write you a letter of recommendation will have to write a letter for each school you apply to. Be considerate of their time.
  - You will need to submit transcripts to each school. Be aware of that cost too.
  - Remember that acceptance into all graduate programs in forensic anthropology is highly competitive and there is no such thing as a “back-up school.”
- **How to narrow it down?** Find your priorities. Only you will know if a school is right for you.
  - Ask your professors for guidance. If you are having trouble narrowing down the list, ask a forensic anthropologist for their insights. They may even have suggestions on which schools to look at based on your interests or type of advisor you want.
  - Ask the FACES Lab graduate students. They have recently gone through the process and were successful in finding a program.

## **Frequently Asked Questions about Choosing Graduate Programs and Advisors**

- **The program I want to apply to does not offer a degree in forensic anthropology. Should I not even consider it?**

- There are only a few programs that offer these specific degrees and you do not need one to become a forensic anthropologist. The Director (Dr. Listi) and Assistant Director (Dr. Wilson) of the FACES Lab have MAs and PhDs in Anthropology.
- What you do need to worry about is the kinds of classes and opportunities each program offers. Some schools will have a large forensic anthropology curriculum with most of the courses geared towards the subject. Some will have a few forensic classes within a traditional four-field curriculum. Some programs will give students an opportunity to work on forensic casework and others will not. What is most important for your goals?
- **What if there is more than one professor I would want to work with in a department?**
  - Great! Email all of them, separately. You will (usually) only have one advisor, but you will be working with the others in some capacity. It is important to find which of these professors would be the best fit for you. If you find that more than one would be good advisors for you, you can indicate this in your personal statement.
  - Also, keep in mind that each professor may have different opportunities for their students. A professor may be working on a specific project that they only allow their students to work on.
- **I don't want to get a MA/MS and I want to go directly to a PhD program. How do I find these programs?**
  - These programs are rare in forensic anthropology. The traditional path to a PhD is to obtain a MA or MS first. Some programs will accept their MA/MS students into their PhD programs at the completion of their degrees. Discuss this with your potential advisor.
  - The purpose of the MA/MS is to show that you are capable of completing graduate-level course work, conduct independent research, and successfully write a scientific manuscript. The completion of this step prepares you for the rigorous doctoral research you must conduct in PhD programs.
- **I want to get all my degrees from the same university. Is it advisable that I only apply to LSU's program?**
  - There are some professionals who advise getting degrees from multiple universities. The problem with going to one university for three degrees is a lack of variety. The professors are the same. The classes are the same. You will not be given the opportunity to learn new ideas, techniques, and methods.
  - If you plan to apply to LSU's MA in Anthropology, you need to speak with your potential advisor ASAP. Drs. Listi, Brophy, and Tague may have specific requirements for admission that go beyond the departmental requirements. You will need to have one of them agree to be your advisor for admission into the MA program. Dr. Wilson does not currently accept students.
- **Should I consider programs abroad?**
  - There are some great programs in other countries (i.e., UK, Canada, and beyond). Some things to consider about these programs:
    - They are different than those in the US. Some offer an MSc degree. Some are shorter in length (1-1.5 years). They may be in "forensic archaeology" or something similar. They may not have a thesis component.
    - If you wish to continue and get a PhD after, will the non-US degree be transferable/accepted?
    - What is the cost and how will you get funding?
  - You will need to do extensive research on programs abroad if you are considering them.
- **What if I don't know what I want to specialize in?**
  - That is perfectly okay. Some students will cast a wide net by targeting programs and potential advisors in a wide range of specializations. If everything interests you, apply to a variety of programs. Also, some forensic anthropologists are "generalists" and study multiple topics.

- It is advisable to still tailor your emails, personal statement, etc. toward the specialization for each school, if there is one. More on this in a later UFAC document.
- **What if a potential advisor never responds to my email?**
  - Don't take it personally!
  - This is unfortunately common. Professors are busy and often juggling other email commitments. It may be advisable to send a follow-up email if the professor hasn't responded in a reasonable amount of time.
  - If a professor does not respond to your email, you will not have information about whether they are taking students. Very rarely, the professor may post on their faculty page that they are not accepting students during an academic cycle. You may need to decide whether the program is a good fit without the benefit of communicating with your potential advisor.