

Applying to the M.S./Ph.D. and Ph.D. Programs

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PRODUCING A BETTER APPLICATION

- **How can I improve my chances for admission into the Electrical Engineering MS/Ph.D. (Masters leading to Ph.D.) and Ph.D. programs?**

The Columbia Department of Electrical Engineering is looking for students who have excellent research potential in electrical engineering as well as good grades, test scores, and English language skills. Evidence that you possess these will help your case. So, be sure to include with your application materials any evidence of your research experience and qualifications, including mention of substantial course projects or technical employment. Publications in international conferences and journals are important to mention; you may want to submit up to two of your best such papers with your online application, in the "Research Papers" section. Also list all papers that you have co-authored in your Curriculum Vitae/Resume, which you should submit in the "Required Documents" section of your online application. If possible, at least two of your recommendation letters should address your research qualifications.

You should also carefully choose the "Areas of research interest" and the "Professors and researchers with research interests close to yours" in the "Research Interests" section of your online application. This section is critical to match faculty and MS/Ph.D. and Ph.D. applicants, and hence to make admission and GRA offers to applicants. Carefully review the background, interests, and current directions of faculty members before contacting them by email. If you live in the area or will be visiting New York City, request an in-person interview with faculty members whose research interests are close to yours. Arrange any visit far in advance; do not just arrive unannounced, or you will almost certainly be disappointed when no one is available to see you.

(Note: do not request a meeting with the Ph.D. Admissions Chair unless he/she happens to be one of the faculty you are considering for an advisor. The Ph.D. Admissions Chair does not interview applicants.)

- **Who should I ask for recommendation letters?**

It is usually best to ask professors from your current or most recent academic institution. Research supervisors are strongly preferred over classroom teachers, unless the course(s) involved a substantial project. Otherwise, it is better to obtain letters from faculty who gave you high grades. Obtain letters from regular faculty members if at all possible, rather than from adjuncts, staff, or graduate students. Supervisors from summer internships, particularly research labs, are also good choices. However, applicants returning to school after several years away from academia should submit recommendations from work supervisors and advanced colleagues, preferably those who hold a graduate degree and/or have published articles in major research forums. It is less useful in these circumstances to request letters from former professors who have had no contact with you in many years. It is not recommended that you submit "character references" from people with no academic or research experience or from persons who are unfamiliar with your academic credentials or with your technical, research, or teaching experience or with your qualifications and research potential. Do *not* write your own letters. It is generally useful for your references to include in their letters information about their own background (e.g., whether they hold a Ph.D. degree themselves and from what school, whether they have held a faculty position in the past at a major university, etc.).

- **How long should my "Personal Statement" be? Can I submit a three-page document?**

You can certainly submit a three-page document, but a concise one-page statement is preferable. The department must consider many hundreds of applications, so a short statement, focused on your research experience, interests, and goals, is generally most effective. Except in unusual circumstances, information on your personal history, childhood, and how you became interested in electrical engineering is less useful.

- **Can I submit additional materials online once my application is under review?**

Yes, you can. However, we cannot guarantee that these will be considered during the review of your application, since we try to review applications as soon as they are officially complete.

- **I will be completing my Master's degree in May next year. Can I still apply for fall admission to the Ph.D. program? Do I need to have a Master's degree**

before applying to the Ph.D. program? I am an International student and have just finished my Bachelor's degree; as I am very keen to pursue a Ph.D. at Columbia University, can I apply now or should I get a Master's degree first?

If you do not have a Master's degree and would like to apply to our Ph.D. program, you can apply for our MS/Ph.D. (Master of Science leading to Ph.D.) program.

DEADLINES

- **What are the deadlines for spring and fall semesters?**

Please check the MS/Ph.D. and Ph.D. application web page at <http://www.ee.columbia.edu/pages/academics/admissions/index.html>. To start the MS/Ph.D. or Ph.D. program in the spring, the deadline for new applications is October 1 of the previous year; to start the program in the fall, the application deadline is December 1 of the previous year.

- **I was looking into the Electrical Engineering Ph.D. program and I am really interested in applying for admission. Unfortunately, I just missed the application deadline by a few days. Can I still apply?**

Yes, you can still apply. However, be aware that applications are usually reviewed soon after the deadline, so late applications may not be processed as quickly or have the best chance of getting funding from our department.

STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES

- **I have just taken the GRE exam, but I don't know my scores yet. In fact, my scores will not be available until after the application deadline. Can I still apply? What should I do with respect to the online application system?**

Yes, you can still apply. Please follow all of the following steps:

(1) In the "Test Scores" section of the online application system, check the appropriate "score not yet known" boxes.

(2) Once you are informed of your test scores, make sure that you report the scores in the "Test Scores" section of the online application system, even if you learn your scores after the application deadline. You will be able to modify your (unofficial) score report after the deadline. We use your self-reported

scores in the application review process while we wait for the official score reports from ETS, so it is important that you self-report your results as soon as you learn about them.

(3) Ask ETS to submit official score reports to us, following the instructions in the "Test Scores" section of the online application system.

- **I will be applying to your Ph.D. program, and my TOEFL and GRE scores will expire just a month or so before the application deadline. If I apply before the expiration date of my test scores, will they be considered valid?**

Unfortunately, no. Your test scores must be valid *as of the application deadline*. So, scores that expire before the deadline will not be accepted.

- **What are the minimum acceptable GRE and TOEFL scores?**

There are no minimum test score requirements. As a reference, however, the average school GRE scores for the entering class of Fall 2006 were Verbal: 525, Quantitative: 767, and Analytical: 4.4, while in 2004 the average TOEFL score was 263.

- **I have my valid General GRE scores but have not taken the Subject test yet. Can I still apply? Will my application be considered incomplete without the Subject GRE score? Can the requirement for Subject GRE or General GRE be waived if these exams are not administered in my country in the near future?**

General GRE scores are required: your application will absolutely *not* be considered without them. The Electrical Engineering Department does not require Subject GRE scores.

- **I have entered my test scores myself in the "Test Scores" section of the online application. Do I still need to get an official score report sent to Columbia?**

Yes. You must *both* report your (unofficial) test scores in your online application, *and* request that an official score report be sent directly by ETS to Columbia University, as specified in the "Test Scores" section of the online application. Use code 2111 in your request to ETS. No department code is needed. The unofficial scores will be verified against your official scores. Only two groups of applicants *may* be exempted from this requirement: (1) applicants who have applied to any Columbia FFSEAS Electrical Engineering graduate program (Ph.D. or otherwise) in the last year and (2) current Columbia FFSEAS graduate students. If you are in groups (1) or (2) and have submitted official scores from ETS to Columbia in the past, there is no need

to send your official score report again as long as your test scores are still valid as of the application deadline. Note that you still must enter those scores yourself in your online application. If your test scores expire before the application deadline, then you must retake the exams. We cannot make exceptions to this rule.

- **I have done my Master's degree in the U.S. but my undergraduate degree in some country where English is not spoken. Do I still need to submit my TOEFL scores? I have been working in the U.S. for many years and I am very fluent in English. Do I still need to take the TOEFL exam?**

Yes, you do. The TOEFL exam is required for all applicants who have received their undergraduate degree in a country where English is not the official and spoken language. Receiving an advanced degree in the U.S. or working in the U.S. does not exempt you from taking the TOEFL exam.

Note that you must report your (unofficial) TOEFL score in the online application, and also request that an official score report be sent directly by ETS to Columbia University, as specified in the "Test Scores" section of the online application. You should use code 2111 in your request to ETS. No department code is needed. The unofficial scores will be verified against your official scores. TOEFL scores are valid for two years from the exam date. We *cannot* accept old scores so please do not request an exception.

Only two groups of applicants *may* be exempted from this requirement: (1) applicants who have applied to any Columbia FFSEAS Electrical Engineering graduate program (Ph.D. or otherwise) in the last year and (2) current Columbia FFSEAS graduate students. If you are in groups (1) or (2) and have submitted official scores from ETS to Columbia in the past, there is no need to send your official score report again as long as your test score is still valid as of the application deadline. Note that you still must enter the score yourself in your online application. If your test score expires before the application deadline, then you must retake the exam. We cannot make exceptions to this rule.

- **I am an international student. Should I take the TSE and TWE tests?**

No, we do not require these exams. You do not need to take the TSE and TWE tests.

GRADES AND TRANSCRIPTS

- **My transcripts are not in English. What should I do?**

Materials that are not in English must be translated by an official and notarized transcription agency. You must find such agencies yourself; we cannot provide referrals, unfortunately.

My course grades are based on a different grading scale from Columbia's. How can I determine my GPA?

Several agencies provide grade-translation services. You must find such services yourself; we cannot provide referrals, unfortunately. As a reference, here is the key for our grading system:

Letter Grades and Numerical Equivalents:

A+ / A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F	
4.00	3.67	3.33	3.00	2.67	2.33	2.00	1.67	1.33	1.00	0.67	0.00

APPLICATION STATUS AND DECISIONS ON ADMISSION

- **How can I check on the status of my application? Have you received my test scores? Have you received my transcripts?**

Please check the online application website periodically. If there are any problems with your application, or any missing information, you will be notified once you login into your application account.

- **When will I receive a decision on my application? Can you tell me the status of my application? Has a decision been made? Please let me know now, since I have been accepted to a few other universities but Columbia is my top choice.**

Unfortunately MS/Ph.D. and Ph.D. admissions staff cannot answer these questions. As soon as a decision is made, you will be notified by email to the address that you specified in your online application.

- **If I have been denied admission, may I receive feedback on the reasons behind this decision?**

Unfortunately, the volume of applications that we receive every year makes it impossible for us a) to admit all of the highly qualified persons who apply to our MS/Ph.D. or Ph.D. programs or b) to provide specific feedback on our decisions. We understand that the application process is extremely stressful, and we deeply regret that we cannot provide specific reasons why individual applicants were not accepted into the program.

M.S. VS. MS/Ph.D. and PH.D. PROGRAMS

- **What is the relationship between the M.S. and the MS/Ph.D. programs?**

They are completely independent programs with separate admissions; one does not "lead to" the other. Some students complete the "terminal" M.S. program first and then apply to the Ph.D. program; some students without an M.S. degree enter the MS/Ph.D. program; other students complete their M.S. degree at some other institution prior to enrolling in our Ph.D. program. Some students leave after completing the M.S program.

- **In the application form, you ask whether I would consider admission to the M.S. program if I am denied admission to the MS/Ph.D. program. If I answer "yes" and attend your M.S. program, does this mean that after getting my M.S. degree I would be able to continue with my Ph.D.?**

Not necessarily. After completing your M.S. degree you would still have to apply (again) to the Ph.D. program. You cannot automatically transfer from the M.S. program to the Ph.D. program.

- **I applied to the MS/Ph.D. program but have just received a notice saying I have been admitted to the M.S. program. What does this mean? I did not apply to the M.S. program.**

This means you have **not** been admitted to the MS/Ph.D. or Ph.D. program but that you **have** been admitted to the M.S. program. Recall that the application form asked you if you would consider admission to the M.S. program if you were denied admission to the MS/Ph.D. program. If you enter the M.S. program you may still apply again to the Ph.D. program next year.

- **I applied to the MS/Ph.D. degree program. However, my application was denied. I **was** admitted into the M.S. program. If I join the M.S. program, can I still apply to the Ph.D. program again later?**

Yes. After entering the M.S. program, you can re-apply to the Ph.D. program, and transfer to it if you are admitted.

FINANCIAL AID

- **What types of financial aid are available and who is eligible to apply for financial aid? What kind of department funding is available? How do I apply for funding?**

There are two broad categories for financial aid:

(1) Federal Aid. Domestic students (i.e., U.S. citizens or permanent residents) are eligible to apply for scholarships, merit fellowships, and loans.

International students cannot apply for this type of financial aid. Please direct all inquiries to the FFSEAS Office of Financial Aid and Educational Financing, <http://www.engineering.columbia.edu/admissions/grad/financing/>.

(2) Institutional Aid/Departmental Funding. All applicants (i.e., both international and domestic students) who indicate in the online application that they would like to apply for financial aid will automatically be considered for funding by FFSEAS and by the Department of Electrical Engineering.

Columbia's FFSEAS awards a very small number of prestigious "Presidential Distinguished Fellowships" to new applicants. Eligible Ph.D. applicants for the fall semester will automatically be considered for the FFSEAS fellowships.

(These fellowships are unfortunately not available to spring applicants.) The department offers both Graduate Research Assistantships (GRA) and Teaching Assistantships (TA). All applicants who indicate in the online application that they would like to apply for financial aid will automatically be considered for all these types of funding. It is not necessary to do anything else in order to apply for this funding.

- **Can you tell me the difference between GRA and TA funding? Which one should I apply to? Will I have better chances if I apply for GRA than for TA?**

Both the GRA and the TA funding provide the same level of financial support: full tuition exemption (which amounts to over \$30,000 per year), basic health and medical insurance fees, and a monthly stipend. In the 2006-07 academic year, the stipend is \$2,222 per month. Both forms of funding (i.e., GRA and TA) are officially offered to admitted students for only the first academic year. Funding beyond the first year is always contingent upon satisfactory progress and availability of funds. However, GRA funding typically continues throughout the doctoral program (up to a maximum of 5-7 years). Most TAs switch to GRAs after the first year.

If you are interested in being considered for a TA position (as well as for a GRA or fellowship), it would be important to include with your application materials any evidence of your TAing and/or teaching experience and qualifications. If possible, at least one of your recommendation letters should address your TAing/teaching qualifications. Note that few TAs are offered for fall admission, and typically none are available for spring admission.

- **Is it true that funding is more limited for spring admissions than for fall admissions? Will my chances of gaining admission with funding be better in the fall than in the spring?**

Generally many more students are admitted (with funding) in the fall than in the spring.

- **Will my chances of admission improve if I have outside funding or otherwise do not require financial aid?**

Probably, but not necessarily. You should specify the terms and time duration of your outside funding on your online application. Warning: if you are admitted "without support," that really means you will not receive any financial support. It is not possible to apply for TA or GRA funding after admission decisions have been made. And please do not plan to "pay your own way" through outside employment: the Electrical Engineering department normally does not permit "part-time" Ph.D. students. (However, part-time students are common in the "terminal" M.S. program.)

- **Will I be informed if I have received any departmental funding?**

Yes, as soon as a decision is made in this respect, you will be notified by email and by physical mail.

THE ONLINE APPLICATION SYSTEM

- **I am not sure if I have submitted my application correctly. How can I check?**

Please log into the application system. You will be able to see the contents of each of your application's sections, and check whether the data matches what you intended. You can change your application even after having "submitted" it.

- **Do all of my application materials need to be submitted online?**

Most of your application materials must be submitted online. The only exceptions are: (1) your official transcripts, (2) your official TOEFL and GRE test scores, and (3) your application fee, if you are not paying by credit card. The official transcripts and the application fee (if you are not paying by credit card) should be mailed to the "Ph.D. Admissions Coordinator," using the mailing address specified in the "Transcripts" and "Application Fee" sections of the online application system. The official test scores should be sent to us directly by ETS using the appropriate school code, as specified in the "Test Scores" section of the online application system. All other materials, including letters of recommendation, must be submitted electronically. Unfortunately, we cannot make exceptions to this rule.

- **What if I don't have the latest version of Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer? Will the online application still work for me?**

Please try filling out the application using your current browser. If you run into any problems, we strongly suggest that you upgrade your browser and install the latest version of Netscape or Internet Explorer. We cannot support older browsers, unfortunately.

- **My password will not work. Why?**

Passwords are case-sensitive, so check your "caps lock" key. If you are still unable to login, then have the application system send you a new password to the email address that you provided. You can do this by just filling out your email address, with no password, in the main login page of the application system.

- **The email account that I used to create my application does not work any more. What should I do?**

Please send email to azlyn@ee.columbia.edu explaining your situation. In general, please use email addresses that you know will continue to work throughout the application process.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

- **Do my recommendation providers have to submit their letters of recommendation electronically? What if they insist on sending hard-copies?**

All recommendations should be submitted electronically by your recommendation providers. The application review process is handled completely electronically, so we cannot make exceptions to this rule.

- **What is the deadline for the arrival of the recommendations supporting my application?**

The deadline for the arrival of the recommendations is the same as the deadline for the submission of the application. However, it is acceptable for your recommendations to arrive just a few days (e.g., a week or two) after this deadline. Be aware, though, that your application will not receive full consideration until all recommendations have been received.

- **Where do I find the recommendation forms that I should send to my recommendation providers?**

There are no such forms. Instead, you need to add the name, email address, etc. of your recommendation providers in the "Recommendations" section of the online application system. After you have completed and submitted your application, we will contact by email each of your recommendation providers and give them instructions on how they can submit their recommendations. The recommendation providers submit their recommendations themselves.

MISCELLANEOUS QUESTIONS

- **Does the Department of Electrical Engineering permit part-time Ph.D. students?**

All Ph.D. students are expected to participate in departmental and laboratory activity full-time on-campus throughout the program, except possibly for summer jobs elsewhere. Therefore, the department does not normally consider admission of part-time students. Furthermore, it does *not* permit students to participate in the Ph.D. program through the Columbia Video Network.

- **Can I "transfer" to your Ph.D. program from the graduate program at my current institution?**

No. Graduate students enrolled at other institutions or programs must apply through the regular Ph.D. application process.

- **I was accepted for last fall but was unable to attend due to visa problems; will I need to reapply or can I defer my admission for a later semester?**

Our school does not let students defer admission, unfortunately. So you will have to apply again. Note that if you reapply within a year of your original application, then you do not have to pay the application fee, plus you might not need to send official test scores and transcripts. Please see the online application for more details.

- **I applied to your Ph.D. program a year ago, and did not get in. Now I would like to apply again. Do I need to fill out the online application, pay the application fee again, etc.?**

All applicants must fill out the complete online application in all cases.

However, if you are reapplying within a year of your original application, then you do not have to pay the application fee, plus you might not need to send official test scores and transcripts. Please see the online application for more details. If your original application was more than a year ago, then you need to pay the application fee, etc. just as any new applicant.

- **I am currently a Columbia FFSEAS graduate student, and would like to apply to your Ph.D. program. Do I need to fill out the online application, pay the application fee again, etc.?**

All applicants must fill out the complete online application in all cases. However, if you are a current Columbia FFSEAS graduate student, then you do not have to pay the application fee, plus you might not need to send official test scores and transcripts. Please see the online application for more details.