How to study a PhD in the United States?

Are you thinking about studying in a doctoral program in the United States (USA) but are not sure how to start preparing your application? In this guide we will explain the intricacies of doctoral programs in the USA.
How to study a PhD in the United States?

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This guide gathers experiences and advice from ECUSA members who are studying or have completed a PhD in the United States. These are only their personal opinions and do not represent the views of ECUSA or any other institution or university.

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Unlike programs in Spain or elsewhere in Europe or the UK, where PhDs last about 3-4 years, PhD programs in the USA tend to be longer (about 5-6 years on average). This is due, among other reasons, to the different structure of doctoral programs in this country.

When students start a doctoral program, the first step is to choose the laboratory in which they will develop their thesis. This is usually done through rotations in different laboratories of the university or research center. In addition to this, U.S. doctoral tend have required courses during the first two years. In their second year, students must pass a qualifying exam, after which they are considered to be doctoral candidates. In subsequent years, students must meet with a committee to discuss the progress of their research projects. Finally, in some cases, students have the opportunity, or the requirement, to become teaching assistants.
Rotations are short stays of approximately three months and serve to introduce the student to the laboratory and vice versa. In this time, it is important to pay attention to factors such as the work environment, staff, research, laboratory funding, and the availability and style of the mentor. Once the rotation is completed, the researcher decides whether or not to offer the student the possibility of joining the laboratory when the student completes the other rotations.

This system makes it more likely that the student will end up in a lab that suits his or her personality and interests, but it also delays the start of doctoral research by almost a full year. Thus, rotations are ideal for students who want to explore different areas of research or who are not sure which lab they would like to join. They are also an opportunity to learn new techniques, establish a network of contacts in the program and meet potential collaborators. Some PhD programs are flexible in terms of the number of rotations required and their duration if the student has already made the decision to join a particular lab.
Students usually take two or three courses per semester, which they combine with rotations during the first year and with the beginning of their doctoral research during the second year. In most classes, students acquire general knowledge that may be useful during the research phase, although some subjects may not be directly related to their thesis project. Once the mandatory classes are completed, students devote themselves entirely to their doctoral research, in some cases enrolling in electives. Combining classes with the project is another reason why doctoral programs are longer in the USA.
A very important feature of some U.S. doctoral programs is the qualifying exam, the structure of which varies from program to program. This exam evaluates the student’s ability to apply the skills and knowledge acquired in the classroom and his or her ability to conduct independent research. It is usually taken at the end of the second year and has written and an oral components, both of which are evaluated by a committee. During the oral exam the committee members may ask questions about the project or about any of the classes required in the program. If successfully completed, the student will be eligible to graduate with a Masters in Science (MSc), and so some students may reconsider at this time their continuation in the program.
Another important aspect of PhD programs in the USA is the existence of a research committee that is responsible for monitoring the development of the PhD student’s scientific project, ensuring their progress, and, together with the mentor, deciding when it is time to present the thesis for defense. This committee usually consists of senior researchers from the institution where the program is carried out, but it may also include external researchers. The members of the thesis committee are available to the student and can be essential if the relationship between the mentor and the student becomes complicated. The committee usually meets with the student once or several times a year, and the structure of the meetings varies according to the program.
Some programs require students to be teaching assistants for a particular subject. TAs help professors with their work; they can grade exams or papers, lead class discussion sessions, help with any audio-visual or technical problems that may arise during class, send emails with news or reminders about the class to all students in the class, etc. While not a requirement for all programs, it is something a student should consider if they have an interest in teaching. In addition to providing valuable experience for the resume, TA positions may be financially compensated.
How to study a PhD in the United States? / Structure / Timeline

TIMELINE

1st year
- Rotations, classes and choice of a lab for the thesis (end of course)

2nd year
- Classes, define the project of your thesis, TA (not in every program), form a committee of professors for the thesis and take the candidate exam

3rd year
- Classes and TA (not in all programs), meetings with thesis committee and lab

4th year
- Meetings with the thesis committee and lab

5th year
- Meetings with the thesis committee, lab, writing the dissertation and a first author publication

6th year
- Presenting the thesis and GRADUATION!
Admission to a PhD program is a highly competitive process, where not only previous research experience, academic record and letters of recommendation are taken into account, but also other aspects such as the student's ability to adapt or interpersonal skills. The requirements and the application process for US doctoral programs are usually detailed on the web pages of each university, so we recommend consulting these pages for details. The web site will also list the research groups available for dissertation work. When looking for doctoral programs, it may be useful to visit pages such as Petersons or Gradschools, which organize the programs by branch and geographical area.
A doctoral program in the U.S. can usually be entered directly with a four-year undergraduate degree (or Bachelor’s Degree), and it is advisable to have acquired research experience during this stage. In addition, in order to be admitted to a doctoral school, an international student must take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) -unless they have studied two years at an English-speaking university-, send letters of recommendation, write a personal statement and/or a research statement, send their record and curriculum vitae, as well as any additional documents required by the university. Next, we will cover in detail the application process to a U.S. doctoral program and the most common documents to submit.
THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Although the requirements for admission may vary from one school to another, there are a number of documents that are required in most cases and will need to be prepared well in advance.

- ACADEMIC RECORD
- COVER LETTER
- LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
- ADMISSION TESTS (TOEFL AND GRE)
- CURRICULUM VITAE AND/OR RESUME
- INTERVIEWS
- DECISIONS
ACADEMIC RECORD

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- COVER LETTER
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- DECISIONS

The final grades of the university degree and/or master’s degree, with as much detail as possible and with an official stamp or signature of the administration. Some universities in Spain do not offer transcripts in English, so it will be necessary to hire the services of an official translator (recommended) or translate them personally. In addition to the translation, many universities require a document that equates the grades of the Spanish system to the U.S. system. Although both systems have grades from 1 to 4, the equivalence is not the same, so it will be necessary to hire an external service to transform our record to the U.S.’ GPA (general point average) system in the U.S. Universities that require it usually provide the name of companies that perform this service.
How to study a PhD in the United States? / Ready to apply to the program / Process

COVER LETTER

- ACADEMIC RECORD
- COVER LETTER
- LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
- ADMISSION TESTS (TOEFL AND GRE)
- CURRICULUM VITAE AND/OR RESUME
- INTERVIEWS
- DECISIONS

In this document the student states why they have chosen candidate that particular program and why they are a suitable candidate for the program, as well as those aspects that are not reflected in the rest of the documents to be submitted. It is important to note the following:

- Personal record - especially if it contains a clearly defined relationship to the student’s research enthusiasm.
- Student record
- Description of extracurricular activities
- Achievements and publications
- Personal values that may support the student as a pre-doctoral candidate
- Reason for choosing the program and/or center, or chosen PI

There are two types of cover letters, the Personal Statement and the Statement of Purpose, which differ in style and content. Each university usually specifies the document’s maximum length and what it should contain. In general, the Personal Statement is more focused on personal experiences and reasons for applying to a particular program, while the Statement of Purpose highlights the student’s professional goals and preparation for entering that program.
LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

As part of the application, universities in the U.S. usually require two or three letters of recommendation written by professors or mentors who can give a reference of the student’s work. Usually the student provides the contact addresses of the professors/mentors and they are contacted by the university so that they can send the letters directly to the admissions committee.

It is important to keep in mind that in the U.S. there is a very specific style of recommendation letters where the professor/mentor/employer mentions details such as the percentile in which the student is compared to the rest of the students/employees, and usually talks about other qualities of the applicant such as maturity, leadership ability or personality, aspects that are not usually included in a Spanish recommendation letter. Therefore, it may be useful for the applicant to discuss with his or her recommenders his or her expectations regarding the letter of recommendation, although some universities in the U.S. already take into account these differences in style between countries.

Find a sample letter of recommendation for a PhD program in the following link: https://gsi.berkeley.edu/media/sample-recommendation-letter.pdf.
TOEFL is a test that measures the level of English and consists of 4 parts: speaking, listening, reading and writing. It will be required for those students who have not done their undergraduate/master's degree at a university whose main language is English. For graduate programs, universities usually require a minimum of 100 points in the TOEFL. It is necessary to take this test well in advance since the grading and submission of the scores to the universities requires some time. All information about the TOEFL can be found at https://www.ets.org/toefl.

The GRE is a test of general knowledge in mathematics and English language. It consists of 3 parts: analytical writing, verbal reasoning and quantitative reasoning. This exam requires practice, and it is advisable to prepare for it and take it well in advance, as places for the exam are limited and are only available in some cities in Spain. In addition, correction and sending the scores require time and it may be necessary to take the exam more than once if the scores have not been satisfactory. GRE scores are given in percentiles, and although there is usually no cut-off score, it is recommended to have a score above the 60th percentile on each part.

Many programs are dropping some previously required exams, such as the GRE, so it is advisable for the student to regularly check the documents needed to prepare for the application. In addition to the general GRE, some programs recommend taking the GRE subject test, a test of specific knowledge in a certain subject, which will depend on the program. All information about the GRE can be found at https://www.ets.org/gre.
CURRICULUM VITAE AND/OR RESUME

- ACADEMIC RECORD
- COVER LETTER
- LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
- ADMISSION TESTS (TOEFL AND GRE)
- CURRICULUM VITAE AND/OR RESUME
- INTERVIEWS
- DECISIONS

This document should summarize the student’s academic and professional background. In this link from the National Institute of Health (NIH) you will find information on how to prepare your CV or resume:
INTERVIEWS

- ACADEMIC RECORD
- COVER LETTER
- LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
- ADMISSION TESTS (TOEFL AND GRE)
- CURRICULUM VITAE AND/OR RESUME
- INTERVIEWS
- DECISIONS

Many PhD programs organize interviews with senior researchers from the department/program that will host the student. If the student has been pre-selected by the admissions committee, they will receive an invitation to come to the campus for the interviews, in the case of face-to-face interviews, or will be scheduled for a virtual interview. In some cases, the student may suggest in their application some researchers to be interviewed by and the admissions committee will decide if they are suitable or will propose others whose research is related to their interests or scientific experience.

Face-to-face interviews usually last two to three days, during which candidates have interviews with different researchers, they interact with students at the university, and attend social events (dinners, poster presentations, and entertainment events) where their personality is also considered outside of the lab to see if they fit the program.

The main purpose of the interviews is to confirm the student’s capabilities and suitability for the PhD program. It is very important to learn about the program and to know the scientific articles of the interviewer and, if possible, of other researchers in that department - especially if there is a specific researcher of interest to the student. The most frequent interview questions focus on the student’s academic background and research experience, as well as their scientific interests.
After the interviews, it will take approximately one month before students receive the notification of the admissions committee’s final decision, which falls into one of three categories:

- **Accepted**: this will initiate the mobility procedure to the university.
- **Denied**: usually because some aspects of the application can be improved.
- **Waitlisted**: students are considered good candidates for that program but not among the initially selected candidates. Students may be admitted if some of the initially admitted candidates decide not to enter the program.
In the U.S. the vast majority of universities offer a stipend to cover your expenses and enrollment fees are covered by the university. The amount of the stipend and other funding details are usually specified on the Ph.D. program’s website or will be disclosed during interviews.

It is possible to obtain scholarships for graduate studies, also valid for master’s studies. These scholarships give international students a better chance of being accepted, since part or all of their salary would come from the scholarship and not from the university.

Furthermore, there are some upfront costs that students will have to cover if they plan to pursue a PhD in the US, such as TOEFL and GRE exam fees (around 200 USD per exam), application fees for each program (100-200 USD per application), visa, travel to interviews (some universities cover this), and finally moving to the US. Some scholarships cover some of these expenses.
EXPENSES

LIVING AND HOUSING COSTS
ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS
MEDICAL INSURANCE
MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES
TRANSPORTATION AND TRAVEL

These costs vary greatly by city and region. They are higher in large cities, California and the Northeast, and typically lower in the South and the Midwest regions. College websites are good starting points to get an estimate of these costs. In addition, some colleges offer subsidized housing to their students.
EXPENSES

- Living and Housing Costs
- Administrative Costs
- Medical Insurance
- Materials and Activities
- Transportation and Travel

Non-US students will need an F-1 or J-1 visa. Most doctoral programs at American universities sponsor F-1 visas for their students, which have a cost for the student of around 300 USD. In some cases, students may also be recruited through a J-1 visitor visa, with a cost similar to the F-1, or even exempt from fees if sponsored by a government organization.
It is important to confirm whether the funding source will cover medical insurance, which is essential for doctoral studies. Its cost varies greatly depending on the program requested and the desired coverage, but it is very important to have this matter settled before entering the United States.
How to study a PhD in the United States? / Funding / Expenses

EXPENSES

- Living and housing costs
- Administrative costs
- Medical insurance
- Materials and activities
- Transportation and travel

Most universities have libraries where books can be accessed for free or at a very low cost. However, students may still need to purchase some textbooks required by the program. If you want to study a discipline that requires special materials such as engineering, medicine or architecture, your material costs are likely to be higher than average.
It is important to consider the costs associated with transportation to the study center, which will vary depending on the location of the housing. Some universities offer grants for this purpose. Most selection processes include a face-to-face interview at the host university. Depending on the institution and program, travel expenses may be covered or paid by the student. In addition, for the duration of your studies, you will be responsible for any travel costs between the U.S. and your home country.
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Figure out what your initial financial support is.**
A good first step is to determine the amount of personal funds you can commit to this process since many of the scholarships offered by American institutions are based on the difference between enrollment costs and what you can afford to pay personally.

**Establish a budget.**
Developing a financial plan for your doctoral studies as early as possible will increase your chances of obtaining the necessary financial support. Our budget associated with doctoral studies should include, at a minimum, tuition fees, program-specific fees, and living expenses. Remember that costs can vary significantly from school to school. In addition, it is highly recommended to directly contact researchers in the department of interest at the host university, as they play an important role in the allocation of scholarships and funding in their departments.

**General links for info:**
Finding financing opportunities from EducationUSA:
[https://educationusa.state.gov/find-financial-aid](https://educationusa.state.gov/find-financial-aid)
Finding guidance centers from EducationUSA:
[https://educationusa.state.gov/find-advising-center](https://educationusa.state.gov/find-advising-center)
IIE Funding for US Study Online:
[http://www.fundingusstudy.org](http://www.fundingusstudy.org)
InternationalScholarships.com:
[http://www.internationalscholarships.com](http://www.internationalscholarships.com)
Scholarship Help:
[http://www.mycollegescholarship.org](http://www.mycollegescholarship.org)
International Education Financial Aid:
[http://www.iefa.org](http://www.iefa.org)
Global Student Loan Corporation:
[http://www.globalslc.com](http://www.globalslc.com)
International Student Loan:
[http://www.internationalstudentloan.com](http://www.internationalstudentloan.com)
Access Group:
[https://www.accessgroup.org](https://www.accessgroup.org)
Guaranteed Scholarships:
[http://www.guaranteed-scholarships.com](http://www.guaranteed-scholarships.com)
FELLOWSHIPS

There are many sources of financial aid for pursuing doctoral studies in the U.S., including options from Spain or offered by US institutions. Scholarships such as those from “La Caixa”, Rafael del Pino, or Fulbright scholarships are very prestigious and difficult to obtain. The monetary component is clearly important, but so are the prestige and the future professional opportunities that can be achieved by obtaining one of these scholarships.

- POSTGRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS ABROAD FROM FUNDACIÓN LA CAIXA
- RAFAEL DEL PINO FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIPS FOR EXCELLENCE
- FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIPS
- US UNIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIPS (SCHOLARSHIPS, FELLOWSHIPS)
- NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH-GRADUATE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (NIH-GPP)
La Caixa offers a scholarship called “Postgraduate Fellowships Abroad” for master's and doctoral studies outside of Europe (in North America and the Asia-Pacific region). This scholarship is offered to 45 candidates out of approximately 1,000 applicants annually. The application process for “La Caixa” scholarship is quite similar to a PhD application in the US. The application period usually starts at the beginning of the year and ends in mid-March. All the information about the scholarship, requirements, deadlines and the application process can be found on the la Caixa web site [https://fundacionlacaixa.org/en/web/guest/postgraduate-fellowships-abroad-call](https://fundacionlacaixa.org/en/web/guest/postgraduate-fellowships-abroad-call)

This link is for the 2023 call, for updated information go to the main site [https://fundacionlacaixa.org](https://fundacionlacaixa.org) and search for Fellowships.
FELLOWSHIPS

- POSTGRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS ABROAD FROM FUNDACIÓN LA CAIXA
- RAFAEL DEL PINO FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIPS FOR EXCELLENCE
- FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIPS
- US UNIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIPS (SCHOLARSHIPS, FELLOWSHIPS)
- NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH-GRADUATE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (NIH-GPP)

The Rafael del Pino Excellence Scholarship Program is aimed at Spanish graduates and postgraduates who wish to pursue postgraduate studies - master’s, doctorate or post-doctorate - at universities and research centers around the world. The total number of scholarships awarded through this program is usually around 10, so competitiveness is very high. In order to have a competitive application, it is recommended to have previous experience in the field of research and to have a solid project that can return the investment made by this organization.

The call usually opens in early January and closes at the end of February. Specific details of the current call can be found at:

https://frdelpino.es/categoria-beca/01_becas-de-excelencia/
The Fulbright program, originally created to foster collaboration and understanding between the U.S. and other countries, offers several opportunities to fund your doctoral studies in the U.S. at its Spanish headquarters.

- **Scholarships for further studies**: around 20 scholarships are published each year for graduates who are interested in pursuing master’s or doctoral programs at U.S. universities. In this type of scholarship it is especially important to show the motivation to study in the USA and the rationale for the choice of specific universities and programs. It is also very important to explain how the scholarship fits into the applicant’s long-term goals.

- **Pre-doctoral research grants**: this grant program is intended for Spanish graduates who are pursuing their doctoral degree in Spain and are interested in carrying out pre-doctoral research projects in the U.S. A letter of invitation from a U.S. institution is required to apply for this grant. A maximum of 10 scholarships are available, 5 of which are specifically for doctoral students from Andalusian universities and funded by the Junta de Andalucía.

https://fulbright.es/programas-y-becas/becas-para-españoles/
**General Recommendations to apply for Fulbright Scholarships**

- **Start the procedures with enough time in advance:** bearing in mind that the project to be developed, the university degree or academic transcript, the language certificate and the letters of recommendation must be available for delivery between January and March, so we recommend starting the preparation of these materials in September of the previous year.

- **Be clear about the chosen program** and justify how the choice will contribute both to the students’ education and to the benefit of the institution: it is very important that the candidate identifies and explains why they want to pursue a PhD in the US. In the selection process, it is important that the candidate explains how they will participate in the academic community and in the activities organized on campus.

- **Writing a clear and compelling project:** together with the interview, this is the most important part of the application process. It is the candidate’s opportunity to express coherently why their organization should invest in their doctoral training, how this training fits into their career and how it will contribute to their future plans. In addition, it is important to be able to convey the enthusiasm for the project and the specific reasons why the candidate has decided to apply for the scholarship. Extracurricular activities that are not reflected on your university transcript are also important in this section. This may include volunteering, externships, teaching, sports, involvement in a student organiza-
How to study a PhD in the United States? / Funding / Fellowships

- **POSTGRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS ABROAD FROM FUNDACIÓN LA CAIXA**

- **RAFAEL DEL PINO FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIPS FOR EXCELLENCE**

- **FULBRIGHT SCHOLARSHIPS**

- **US UNIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIPS (SCHOLARSHIPS, FELLOWSHIPS)**

- **NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH-GRADUATE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (NIH-GPP)**

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- **Letters of reference**: we recommend requesting the reference as far in advance as possible from mentors or professors who have interacted with the candidate and can express their academic and professional worth. A good reference letter should not be a list of praises, but a solid justification with concrete reasons and examples of why the student is qualified to get the most out of a PhD in the US and how the projects they have worked on have been successful thanks to their collaboration.

- **Preparing for the personal interview**: if the candidate passes the first selection, they will attend a personal interview with a committee of experts and former interns. The format is similar to that of a job interview; what you have done and where you are aiming for. It is vital that the candidate knows how to make a case in front of a panel as to why they should invest in their training, how they will benefit from their studies at the host university and how they will contribute their knowledge to their home country. It is also important to prove that you have a general knowledge of your field of research, as well as of the university and research system in the USA.
American universities offer a wide range of funding possibilities connected with their PhD programs. Most applications for these grants are made jointly with the application for admission to the corresponding PhD program, although in some cases a separate application is required. Thus, these grants are awarded by the university’s own graduate school and are based on the academic and professional merit of the candidate. Recipients are not required to work outside their line of research.

These types of scholarships are often highly competitive and tend to provide more funding for science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) and other research-based fields.
Other ways to obtain funding through the host institution include:

- **Research assistantships.** Researchers and/or professors may apply for funding from external sources (foundations, agencies, etc.) to carry out research projects and to hire students. Candidates are hired as “Research Assistants” and dedicate their time to their thesis project. The funds allocated to these grants usually cover the registration fee for the program plus a monthly salary. It is advisable to check with the potential supervisor to determine if there is a possibility of applying for this type of grant.

- **Teaching assistantships (TA).** This option allows the student to work for the host institution in research, teaching and/or administrative tasks. In return, the student is usually exempt from paying registration fees and receives a stipend to cover living expenses. Most subjects with a practical component are usually taught by a senior lecturer and a variable number of assistants. TAs are usually responsible for teaching small seminars or classes on an individual basis. If studying for a doctoral degree, students may be undergraduate or master’s students.

- **On-campus employment.** Current U.S. immigration regulations allow international students to work up to 20 hours per week on-campus during the academic year and up to 40 hours per week during vacations.

- **Loans.** Another way to obtain financial assistance is to apply for a loan from a bank in Spain. Some U.S. loans may also be available, but may have additional requirements.
Another option to consider is the Graduate Partnership Program of the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE). This program offers the opportunity for students already enrolled in a university to conduct research in its laboratories. Participants enjoy the university academic environment, the extensive research resources of the NIH, and the breadth and depth of the research programs of both the host university and the NIH Research Program (IRP). The goal is to create a different kind of Ph.D. experience, one that focuses on training the next generation of scientific leaders by emphasizing communication and collaboration skills, information integration, and interdisciplinary research.

In order to benefit from this program, Spanish candidates must enroll in a Spanish university and establish an individual collaboration with an NIH laboratory. It is important to have an idea of the project to be undertaken and to contact the American researcher by e-mail explaining why you want to establish this collaboration, how the host laboratory will benefit from receiving the student and what are the future plans. In this email it is also essential to attach a CV, motivation letter, completed projects and/or letters of reference. It is also advisable to explain to the potential mentor why they should invest in the candidate’s training, in addition to a potential project schedule.

This program provides the candidate with a monthly salary, medical insurance and a budget for materials or travel to conferences. It also has other advantages, such as the availability of research resources at the NIH, the prestige of the institution, the possibility of establishing collaborations and contacts, and avoiding many of the formalities required for admission to an American university.

Information of the program details can be found on the [NIH-GPP](https://nih-gpp.org) site.
In this section you will find the opinions of several Spanish PhD students in the United States. Each one of them tells their experience, gives advice, some of them even leave their email address and Linkedin profile in case any future PhD student needs to contact them.

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“The more experience the applicant has, the more chances he/she will have to enter the PhD program”

DOCTORATE STUDENT IN IMMUNOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

My first piece of advice is to get as much lab experience as possible during your undergraduate studies in Spain or in another country, and to use the summers of your undergraduate studies to gain experience, either as an intern or as a volunteer in a company or in a research lab. The more experience the applicant has, the more chances they will have to enter the PhD program.

My second piece of advice is to do everything well in advance; that is, at least 1.5 to 2 years in advance to take the GRE, I advise doing it the summer before submitting the application, and doing the application process, as well as contacting professors/people who can write letters of recommendation for the application.

My third piece of advice is to be very clear that what the applicant likes the most is science, and that they are passionate about reading and being in the lab, and they are passionate about the uncertainty of running experiments and not knowing if the hypothesis is correct or not. When it comes to choosing a university, my advice is to choose the place where you would like to live, find a university in that place, and then look for the professors that are at that university and if there would be any that they would like to work with because their research...
is what the applicant is passionate about. My advice is to have these ideas very clear before applying to any PhD program. Finally, I advise you not to be afraid to contact PI professors with whom you would like to work at your chosen university, as they will be delighted that an applicant has contacted and showed interest in working with them.

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BACK
For me the most useful advice has been to study English and get as much research experience as possible during my undergraduate studies. That’s why I joined a lab during my second year, studied English for a few summers, and collaborated in a lab for a summer with the Jae Intro scholarship.

When preparing PhD applications, it is very important to prepare well in advance and, if possible, with the help of professors or students who are already familiar with the admissions process.

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“Do not be discouraged if you do not get an offer of admission on your first attempt; it is common for the same program to deny you admission one year and then make you an offer the next that will change your academic life forever”

DOCTORATE STUDENT IN THE THEORY AND HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

First of all, it is important to keep in mind that many of the doctoral programs that exist in the U.S. do not usually admit students who have not completed a master’s degree at an American (or Anglo-Saxon, depending on the program) university. If you really want to study your PhD in the U.S., you should try to pursue previous studies in the U.S., or attend summer courses, seminars, conferences or events that will allow you to make contacts, understand how the U.S. Ph.D. system works and what documents an application for admission includes (academic project, letters of recommendation, etc.).

Second, you should locate a Ph.D. program that suits your academic and/or professional interests and identify those faculty members with whom you want to work. Admissions depend almost entirely on the small number of faculty members who make up the admissions committees for each program, and it is critical that you have had prior contact with them (by email, on campus visits, at conferences, etc.) before submitting your application for admission.

Finally, it is highly recommended that you talk to current students in the doctoral program you are interested in to help guide you through the admissions

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process. Students are usually sincere and will be able to answer many questions that may not be appropriate to ask professors that you can talk to such as questions about funding, the cost of living in the host city, the general atmosphere of the department, etc.

Finally, do not be discouraged if you do not get an offer of admission on your first attempt; it is common for the same program to deny you admission one year and then make you an offer the next that will change your academic life forever. Best of luck!

BACK
I have always been passionate about languages, and English in particular, so after my undergraduate and first master's degree in Spain, I went to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA, thanks to a Fulbright scholarship to pursue my second master's degree. This prepared me more thoroughly to undertake my doctorate later on.

When I graduated from Carnegie Mellon, I enrolled in the PhD program at UJI, where I learned that I could complete multiple research stays and that this would bring the International Mention to my thesis. I completed two stays in the United States. The first was in 2017, when I returned to Carnegie Mellon to learn about facial recognition techniques from Dr. Fernando De la Torre in his Human Sensing Lab, within the Robotics Institute of the Computer Science Department. I applied his IntraFace software for the analysis of my data in language acquisition, a totally new and different use of his software. This gave my thesis an interdisciplinary character, which enriched it exponentially.

In 2018 I completed my second stay, at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, under the supervision of Dr. Marta González-Lloret. I mainly increased my knowledge

“My advice to doctoral students is not to give up. In my experience, the PhD is an arduous long-distance race in which if plans change, keeping an open mind is essential”

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of different technologies used in language acquisition and teaching. I was also fortunate enough to audit several courses taught by renowned researchers in my field of research. All this added great value to my thesis.

These two research stays, in two very different fields of knowledge, allowed me to explore different areas of expertise, and I was able to familiarize myself with data collection and analysis techniques that were not available to me in Spain. This not only helped my doctoral thesis to become a more complete and robust interdisciplinary study, but also prepared me personally and professionally in a more comprehensive way for my life as a teacher and researcher once I finished my doctorate.

My advice to doctoral students is not to give up. In my experience, the PhD is an arduous long-distance race in which if plans change, keeping an open mind is essential. For me, this meant experiencing these two wonderful stays that opened the doors to meet different lines of research and professors who helped and supported me a lot, with whom I learned a lot.

Best of luck!

◆ BACK
A PhD is a significant commitment in terms of time and effort. From my personal experience, a good relationship between a doctoral student and thesis supervisor is essential for a supportive and productive doctoral experience, not only from a professional point of view, but also in terms of one's personal well-being.

For anyone considering a PhD, I advise inquiring not only about a professor's scientific interests, but also about their management style and laboratory environment, e.g., are they a person who actively advises and manages the various phases of a project, becoming closely involved in the project; or an advisor who is inclined to give their doctoral students freedom to explore, offering general advice on the intellectual direction of the thesis? Does the laboratory typically work in teams or does it encourage work done on an individual basis?

There is no single formula, which fits all research topics, projects and people; nor will the most famous professor necessarily always offer the best student experience. The successful development of a PhD involves finding the style that best suits our way of working. Ideally, having a previous research experience in a laboratory (a short stay such as a bachelor’s or master’s thesis) can give us all this in-
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formation but, if that is not possible, campus visits before accepting a PhD offer are the perfect time to find answers to all these questions. PhD students have all the answers!

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REGINA BOU PUERTO
DOCTORATE STUDENT IN IMMUNOLOGY AND MICROBIAL PATHOGENESIS AT WEILL CORNELL GRADUATE SCHOOL

My advice is twofold, on the one hand, to look for guides who have been successful in applying for a PhD in the US. It is a more complex process than in Spain, with many small details that can make a big difference, and having someone who knows those details is of great help.

I would also recommend asking students who are doing the program you are interested in. PhDs in the US are longer than in Spain, and it is extremely important to choose the right place - personally and professionally - to invest the next 5-6 years of your life.
Carefully study the financial help offered by your university. In general, it is not a good idea to accept an offer without funding, but even if you are offered a stipend/salary, it is essential to know the details and the fine print. This is especially important for international students, since visa restrictions limit our options for working and earning income in the US. Your funding may require you to work a certain number of hours for your university or department, either as a teaching assistant, research assistant or doing administrative tasks. It is advisable to find out what kind of tasks you will be assigned, how many hours per week/month you have to dedicate to those tasks, and whether you will be working year-round or only during the academic year. You may also want to know if your university offers you the opportunity to do other work during the winter and summer breaks to supplement your salary, such as teaching undergraduate classes. If your funding is directly dependent on a specific professor or lab, you need to find out what your options are if that particular professor leaves your university or their project funding runs out.

Another important issue is possible sources of funding for your thesis research project, and even for attendance at conferences and other academic and/or
scientific events. Your department or university may have a specific budget dedicated to these aspects. Sometimes these grants are competitive in nature and require you to submit a separate application.

Unexpected financial hardship can be detrimental to your academic performance, so it’s a good idea to find out about the cost of rent in your area, as well as the price of transportation, the average cost of groceries, and so on. It is also important to know what your financing package includes in terms of medical coverage, especially if you have a chronic condition, as it determines what services you will have access to. In addition, it is in your best interest to find out if you need to pay any additional fees (e.g. SEVIS fee). You should also find out how your university handles the payment of taxes. Your taxes may be automatically withheld, but you may also have to calculate them on your own. Even if they are automatically deducted, you may have to make some tax decisions.
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DOCTORATE STUDENT IN PATHOBIOLOGY AND MOLECULAR MEDICINE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

▶ My advice to students who are considering coming here is to plan everything ahead of time. I started writing all my applications and getting all the paperwork in place more than half a year before the deadline.

Send your essays to people in and out of the science world to take a look at and keep in mind that not everyone on a university admissions committee is a scientist. Bureaucracy is slow.

I would also tell you to take every opportunity to do research, as you will only know if you like something or not by trying it.

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"Take every opportunity to do research, as you will only know if you like something or not by trying it"
**JUAN ENRÍQUEZ TRABA**  
Doctorate Student at National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

I am a beneficiary of the NIH Graduate Partnerships Program, whose characteristics are summarized in this guide. I am a student at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid but I do my research at the NIH, the largest biomedical research institution in the world. The resources here are exceptional, and often the only limiting factor is ideas.

If you are certain that you want to do your PhD in the USA, I recommend that you consider this option as very plausible. You may find it intimidating to approach an American researcher with a project idea, but believe me there are many PIs (principal investigators) willing to give a good idea a chance.

Best of luck with whatever path you take in coming to study for a PhD in the US!

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XIMO PECUAN I JORGE
DOCTORATE IN EVOLUTIVE SYSTEMS BIOLOGY FROM ALBERT EINSTEIN COLLEGE OF MEDICINE, NEW YORK

▶ I would tell my past self to prepare the application ahead of time and submit very well prepared documents, extensively reviewed following the advice in this guide.

I would also tell myself to engage the services of an agency to establish the equivalency of my record, after all, I did much more than a double major.

I would tell me to contact the PIs of the program and the student associations of the universities, some of which are present in Spain.

All in all, if there is one thing that time has taught me, it is that all roads can lead to Rome or to l’Albufera.

Contact the PIs of the program and the student associations of the universities, some of which are present in Spain

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“Contact the PIs of the program and the student associations of the universities, some of which are present in Spain”
The main difference between a successful and an unsuccessful application to a US university is that the former is done actively. First, research the university itself to find laboratories of interest and discover which parts of the educational program would be most beneficial to you. This will inform your personal statement, which should convey eloquently not only that your personal and research background is a good fit for a PhD, but with the PhD program at the university in question. Research on the institution and its researchers is also necessary for the second part of an active application, which consists of a previous contact with the university (as has been rightly pointed out in other testimonials).

Due to the high number of applicants, it is highly recommended to contact professors with whom you would be interested in doing a PhD (who obviously have to be affiliated to the program) so that your application has a face and a good impression attached to it. This also gives the chance to learn more about a lab where the applicant could potentially end up doing a PhD (active research at that time, funding, people in the lab, dealing with the PI...etc.). The easiest way to make contact is through a simple meeting, but the best way in my experience is to do an internship in a lab at the host university to have the greatest impact. This is well known by American students, who even work as lab assistants for one
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or two years after finishing the degree. The internship does not have to be that long, the minimum is usually 6 months, but some labs may accept 2 or 3 months. Another option is to obtain a master’s degree at the host university, which in my opinion is the most guaranteed option, but also the most expensive if you do not have a scholarship (up to 80,000 USD per year in US institutions).

Generally, the better the applicant's profile, i.e. the better the academic record, the more prestige of their previous institutions, the more publications, and especially if they have a scholarship to do a PhD, the less active the application process can be. Even so, it is always necessary and it is my main recommendation. Good luck!

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If you are thinking of pursuing a PhD in the USA, there are several things to keep in mind.

First of all, the level of English is very important, since most graduate programs require GRE tests (logic, vocabulary, and writing in English), as well as TOEFL scores or an equivalent test. Many universities are phasing out the GRE requirement, but many others still have it. If you are going to prepare for this exam, I recommend you find a good specialized tutor.

Secondly, you need to think about funding. The good thing about PhDs in the US is that there are no fees to pay and you have a guaranteed salary for 5 years (usually). However, depending on the university, that salary may be tied to countless hours of work as a Teaching Assistant (TA). The best way to get around this requirement is to apply for PhD positions with a fellowship. Getting a fellowship not only reduces your TA requirements, but also usually leads to an increase in your allowance, and also strengthens your resume. The scholarships I recommend are the La Caixa and Fulbright scholarships.

The Fulbright scholarship is a bit particular, as you have to apply for it before you...
apply for a PhD position, since they are the ones who apply to the universities on your behalf and negotiate the terms of your doctoral contract.

Thirdly, it is highly recommended to have a very clear and concise idea of the person you want as a mentor (advisor), and the specific project you want to do for the thesis. Unlike European programs, in the USA it is essential to be in contact with your potential mentor well before starting the application process, since the admission process requires that at least one of the professors in the department “fights for you” to get the position in your name. For that you need to send e-mails as a cover letter with your resume to the professor in question, make a video call and talk about your common interests and possible projects you would be interested in working on.

This is also important in order to write a good “Research Statement” in the application, as departments, especially in the sciences, are looking for specific, well-crafted thesis project proposals that demonstrate depth of knowledge on the topic and connect the proposals to published studies.

To this end, I also recommend reading many articles on the topic you are interested in. This also helps to find authors writing on topics of your interest who can serve as mentors for your thesis. It is much better to look for the mentor first and...
see where the university falls rather than the other way around. When choosing a mentor, it is important to look not only at the science they produce but what they are like as a person and as a mentor.

To do this, it is typical in the US to contact their PhD students and ask them about their opinion and experience.
First of all, locate the universities you are interested in attending. Make sure you understand all the entrance requirements, for example, not all programs require GRE scores. Locate the professors who are available as mentors in the program you are interested in. You need to have a conversation via zoom/skype before submitting all the documentation. I don’t know anyone who has gotten into the program without first talking to their potential mentor. Doing research prior to this interview is critical. Read the papers published by whoever you are interested in having as your mentor. Ask if you can talk to the doctoral/master’s/postdoc students currently in the lab. They will be the most honest in telling you if the mentor is good or not.

Regarding funding for the PhD, I would ask your mentor during the soft-interview or ask the administration of the PhD program what options exist for funding the PhD. Find out what scholarships are available in Spain and suggest that you are interested in writing fellowships but ask if there is funding for your first year to give you time to prepare for the fellowships. They love that. I do not recommend coming to the US without funding given the high cost of living here. It is important to know what kind of city you are going to. It is not the same to live in Boston, where you can get around by public transportation, or to live in Phoenix, My recommendation is to adapt, learn, and enjoy a unique experience.
where you need a car to get around. It is very important to ask if your contract includes medical insurance and how much it covers. Be prepared for a big culture shock. This is not like going on vacation to New York or coming to California to study English in the summer. This is living in America. My recommendation is to adapt, learn, and enjoy a unique experience.
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"It has been a very enriching experience, I have had the best of both worlds and it has opened many doors for me, which would have been impossible from my laboratory in Alicante."

DOCTORATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALICANTE WITH INTERNATIONAL MENTION

- My PhD fellowship offered the possibility to apply for an international stay and I have always been very much in contact with the US, so I wanted to do the pre-doctoral stay there, to open the doors to a future postdoc. I was accepted into a lab at Yale University, and to my surprise it was such a good fit that there was no need to wait for the postdoc. I learned to do bioinformatics analysis of exome sequences practically from scratch, and this was a turning point in my career. I got my Spanish thesis director and PI to agree to change the direction of my thesis, and it was co-directed by him and Dr. Xicola.

I spent the four years moving between one side of the ocean to the other, but I was more than delighted, I did the experimental part and the data processing in the USA and then I returned to Spain to finish curating the sequence analysis, get more samples for analysis and renew visas. I consider it a very enriching experience. I have had the best of both worlds and it has opened many doors for me, which would have been impossible from my laboratory in Alicante.

I have been very fortunate, because I felt at home from the first minute and both PIs supported me financially and allowed me to carry out my research, in a somewhat unusual collaborative way, but that should be encouraged more!
Having a good working environment is paramount. This is the advice I always give to any student who is looking for a laboratory or institution to carry out their doctoral thesis in the USA. Specifically, in two contexts:

1. The style of mentor you choose will be key during your thesis. I recommend reflecting on what kind of direction you would like to have and what goals you want to set for yourselves during the thesis.

   For example, large research groups with a very high publication profile are often very attractive, but we are likely to have a thesis director who is less involved in your project, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is something to keep in mind.

   Having support from your thesis director, not only in your scientific project, but also on a personal level is essential for your mental health as a student.

2. Faculty and lab members. You will see members of your lab and faculty every day, you will be forced to work with them, and, after all, they are the people who...
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best understand your day-to-day life. I recommend talking to PhD students at the institutions you are interested in and lab members before making the decision to join a research group.

From my personal experience, having emotional support at the institution or in the lab itself is very important, since PhD dissertations in the US usually take about 6 years and they will accompany you along the way and help you overcome obstacles.

◄ BACK
We hope this guide has been helpful and wish you the best of luck in the application process should you decide to pursue a PhD in the USA.

Once you are here, don’t forget to reach out to ECUSA to be in the loop about all our outreach, professional development and networking events with other Spanish scientists.

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