



## Funding for Graduate Study in the United States

The cost of obtaining a graduate degree from a US university can be more than US\$40,000 per year. In most cases, students planning on going to the US need to secure additional sources of funding to supplement their personal funds or Fulbright Scholarship. Following are some notes to help guide you through the process of seeking financial aid.

### Types of funding

There are three main sources of financial aid available for the international student: university-based sources, private sources, and government sources.

University-based aid comes from within the university and is the most common (and usually largest) source of aid for the international student. When researching funding availability from a university, be sure to inquire at both the graduate admissions office and the appropriate department. There can be aid available from both places, but they don't necessarily each know what the other has to offer. Each will probably have their own forms and procedures. Common types of university-based funding are teaching assistantships, research assistantships, lab assistantships, tuition and fee waivers, and stipends. These opportunities aren't necessarily advertised so be proactive about finding these opportunities.

Private sources of funding consist of grants, fellowships, and scholarships. There are many private sources of funding that offer aid to international students (even if they don't specifically state it in their information materials). These sources may be from within New Zealand, or from the US, or elsewhere. While it may be difficult to receive a substantial award before you arrive in the US, most universities have an extensive supply of resource materials listing private donors to help you research funding for the future.

Most US government-supported financial aid is reserved for citizens or legal permanent residents of the US. The one notable exception is the Fulbright Programme.

### Understanding the realities of funding

It is very important that you understand the realities of funding for graduate study in the US. This way you won't waste valuable time and effort looking for funds from the "wrong" sources. So, these are the "golden rules":

- For university-based aid, there is more money available to PhD students than to Master's students.
- For private funding, in general, there are large pools of money available for students at two stages in their graduate careers: the very beginning and the end. There are many funding opportunities for the new graduate student (those entering a Masters or PhD programme for the first time). This money is often in the form of fellowships (money for tuition and/or living expenses). There is also a large pool of funds available for students just before they begin the last stage of their graduate academic careers, the dissertation

stage. This money is often in the form of grants (money to cover research or project-specific expenses).

- For both types of funding, there is typically more money available in the hard sciences and social sciences than in the arts, humanities, and education, and there is more money in the humanities, arts, and education than in business and law. Money to support travel to attend conferences or meetings is scarce, as is money to support a family. Even the most generous of awards only factor in living expenses for a single student.

### **Timing and due dates**

All forms of financial aid (including university-based aid) have deadlines that are independent from entrance application deadlines. It is not uncommon for financial aid application deadlines to occur *before* entrance application deadlines. It is critical that you identify deadlines and then meet them.

The average turnaround time (from application to offer of funding) takes from six to nine months. Most deadlines for study beginning in August/September occur between October of the previous year and February of the same year that study starts. During July and August of the year before you wish to commence your studies, sources of aid should be targeted and applications collected. The student should then prepare for the crush of deadlines that begin in November. *It is key to plan ahead.* There is no better time than the present to start searching for funds. Try to avoid the all-too-regular dilemma of being offered admission to the programme of your choice without having secured adequate funding. It is almost impossible to find funding at the "eleventh hour".

### **Tips on seeking aid**

#### ***University-based funds***

University-based aid often comes from your academic department. It pays to do some in-depth investigation into the research interests of the department to which you are going to apply. How well you match your research goals with that of the department is directly related to whether or not they offer you funding. It is important to show a clear understanding of the department's research and demonstrate that you have some new and innovative approach to contribute to their work.

Many graduate students do not receive significant university-based aid before they enroll but are offered an assistantship after a semester or two on campus. It is very important to develop and maintain relationships with those in the university who make decisions about funding. Make yourself known to the graduate students' office, departmental secretary, department head, and departmental faculty advisor as soon as you arrive on campus and be sure to maintain these relationships. People are more likely to give you money if they know your face, have seen your work, and have heard your ideas.

#### ***Private sources***

As with university-based aid, private sources of funding have their own purposes and agendas. You should find out as much as possible about these goals and needs and then demonstrate how your work will help fulfill them. You should spend a significant amount of time gathering information about a potential sponsor and use this information to shape your proposal.

Eligibility for funding from private sources is based on a number of different criteria. It is best to clearly but *broadly* define your project. Try an exercise called "creative cross-indexing" in which

you actively define your project under a variety of different categories (use the following as a guide).

- type of funding (fellowship, grant, or some mix)
- project location
- personal characteristics of applicant (gender, ethnicity, age, grade point average, place of residence, religion, personal interests, etc.)
- duration of project (short-term, months, years)
- subject area (make a list of all specific keywords that apply to your project)
- purpose of project
- constituency affected
- amount of funds needed

Example: You are a woman who has volunteered extensively for the World Wildlife Foundation and Amnesty International. Your grandfather is a World War II veteran and your father is a member of his local Rotary Club. Your project requires summer-long research on wildlife management in the Louisiana Bayou for your PhD dissertation. You could search for funding under the categories of “grant money”, “doctoral awards”, “Louisiana”, “short-term”, “awards for women”, “wildlife management”, “resource management”, “biological sciences”, “public policy”, “World War II veterans”, “Rotary Club”, “WWF”, “conservation”, “Amnesty International”, etc.

There are many smaller awards that you may not consider. This is a mistake. Although an award in the \$250-\$1000 range may not put much of a dent in your total costs, it may help defray the costs of books and supplies for a semester and it is an invaluable investment for the future. Potential sponsors look favourably on past grant winners. These awards, even small ones, will always be on your CV and will help you secure other larger awards (both private and university-based) later on in your educational and professional career. This process, called “trading up”, should not be overlooked.

## **Other Potential Sources of Funding**

### ***Bank loans from New Zealand***

This is relatively easy means of accessing additional funding if you find yourself short of funds before or during your studies in the United States. A New Zealand bank likely won't lend to you directly unless you have a large amount of capital to guarantee the loan. The other option is to have someone in New Zealand guarantee the loan for you. For this to work, the guarantor (e.g. a friend or family member) must have sufficient income and/or equity to satisfy the lender. You must realize that you will be accruing interest while you are studying and that you are asking your guarantor to take a risk on your behalf.

### ***Bank loans from the US***

Obtaining a bank loan in the United States is a difficult process, but you may be awarded with a lengthy interest free period while you complete your studies and lower interest rates than you would receive in New Zealand. The tricky part is that for most schools you will require a US-based co-signer (guarantor) with a good credit history who is prepared to take on the risk of paying your loan if you default. You should check online to see whether your school is part of a “no co-signer”,

and otherwise be aware of the interest costs you'll accrue and the risk you're asking your co-signer to take on your behalf. In any case, it will not be possible to secure a US bank loan until you are established in the United States. If you are considering getting a US bank loan you should consult with your school's financial aid office which will be able to guide you through the process.

### ***Working on campus***

Fulbright rules allow you to work for up to 20 hours per week while in the United States as long as the position relates to your field of study (you should closely check the relevant terms and conditions).

### ***New Zealand based scholarships***

In addition to scholarships offered by your US university you may be able to apply for a range of New Zealand based scholarships, grants and or fellowships to "top up" your finances. To find these sources of funding you can access [www.fis.org.nz/databases/BreakOut.php](http://www.fis.org.nz/databases/BreakOut.php) via a public or university library.

### ***Voluntary Bonding***

Another creative way to access financial support for studying in the United States is to be sponsored or "voluntarily bonded" to a course of study by your employers, a professional or trade body, or a community organisation. Sponsorship and bonding arrangements vary according to the course of study and the sponsor, but most require applicants to successfully complete a course of study and return to NZ to work in a specific organisation, subject area or geographical area for a length of time in return for funding. If such arrangements are not already in place, you could approach your employer, professional or trade body, or relevant community organisation/s to negotiate an arrangement.

### ***In conclusion***

Above all, treat the funds-seeking process as a continual learning experience and try to maintain your sense of humour. Think of it as a game. Like all games, practice makes perfect. Always keep in mind the following words of wisdom:

- think ahead
- plan ahead
- you can't get an award without asking for it
- there is no time like the present
- success breeds success
- trade up
- if at first you don't succeed, apply, apply again

## **Resources to help search for financial aid**

Following is a list (by no means exhaustive) of resources that can help you in your search for financial aid. Some of these resources can be found in our educational advising library in Wellington. If you cannot come to Wellington, try looking in your local or university library.

### Reference guides

- *Peterson's Grants for Graduate & Postdoctoral Study*, Peterson's Guides
- *Funding for United States Study*, Institute of International Education
- *The Grants Register*, Palgrave Macmillan

### Other helpful publications

- *Chronicle of Higher Education* – a weekly newspaper for the education community that has a section on upcoming grants and fellowships.
- *The Research Centers Directory*, Gale Research Inc – a directory listing current research at research centers around the US.

### Websites

- [www.educationusa.state.gov](http://www.educationusa.state.gov)
- [www.foundationcenter.org](http://www.foundationcenter.org)
- [www.nas.edu](http://www.nas.edu) – home page for the National Academy of Sciences
- [www.nsf.gov](http://www.nsf.gov) – home page for the National Science Foundation
- [www.neh.gov](http://www.neh.gov) – home page for the National Endowment for the Humanities