

'My PhD Journey' - Sahana Kamath

Sahana P Kamath, Saturday 25 August 2012 - 19:49:00

Hi everyone. I am an Indian physiotherapist with my Masters in Pediatrics who is now pursuing PhD in the esteemed University of Florida and I want to share with you all my story so that anyone who has a similar dream can follow the procedure.

When I had initially thought of PhD in USA, I decided to consult some professional consultants. I went to them with total excitement and enthusiasm but they poured cold water on all my aspirations stating until and unless you have a thesis for PhD in hand and lots of publications, you can't even dream of getting into a PhD program in USA. I felt really disheartened but nevertheless decided to research things on my own.

I started contacting a few friends of mine who are already in USA and also started searching for top graduate schools in USA which provide the PhD program. The sites which I found useful were

<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-health-schools/physical-therapy-rankings> and <http://us-universities-colleges.topgre.com/top-physical-therapy-usa.shtml> (this one is much better).

When the sites give top graduate schools, we need to keep in mind that lab workload keeps fluctuating and faculty keep changing so one can't be sure that the university will always reflect the ranking (unless of course the ranking site is updating itself thoroughly).

I also kept in mind my GRE and TOEFL scores as every college has their own requirement. Regarding the GRE and TOEFL, people keep saying its better to give GRE first and then TOEFL because TOEFL is valid only for 2 yrs while GRE is valid for 5 yrs and also more higher level of English as compared to TOEFL. So getting GRE out the way first makes the TOEFL preparation easier as you have already finished with your tougher and higher level exam. I had not thought on those lines and completed my TOEFL first and then worked on my GRE for 3 months and went ahead with the exam. Lucky for me things worked out well and I could clear both the exams in first attempt. For PhD most of the colleges expect you to have 1000 atleast on your GRE (I gave the old format GRE which was out of 1600, I guess now they expect 320 or so out of 340 but not so sure) and 100 on TOEFL (sometimes even lower is ok but not lower than 90). I gave a month for TOEFL and scores 108 out of 120 and in 3 months of GRE prep time scores 1120 and 3.5 in the analytical section. You need to score a minimum of 3 to come in the PhD league. You don't need to be a novel writer kind of good because in your PhD years, they will be training you to be a professional in writing. What they want to see is your zest and your basic level. The main factors on which your PhD confirmation lies is your GRE and TOEFL scores (but that is just for your entry and for the admin purpose), SOP, your enthusiasm and perseverance, your interest and exposure to research and your willingness to learn. Hence it is clear that whatever your score, if you are able to win the heart of your mentor, that is all that matters. I told my mentor that even though I have lot of interest in research and have done lots of studies myself we don't have the kind of technology and exposure that they have but am willing to put in my best and make sure that I come up to a much higher level. (Other than my pg thesis work, I have conducted various independent as well as group studies on occupational disorders like beedi workers, ortho screening in telecom workers, posture problems in fish packaging industries, back and neck problems in steel and iron factory workers etc. In my 4 yrs as staff, I have guided and co-guided many PGs in their thesis). Those words made my mentor ask me more questions in detail about the kind of data collection methods and other research related details. I short listed some colleges after going through the resumes of the staff there and checking the ones who had similar interest to mine (so that I can consider them to be my potential mentors). I made a list of the mentors (in the descending list of priority for each university so that I could pursue the mentors who had maximum interests similarity to me) and started mailing them. The mail mainly had my introduction, my education, and my work experience including my experience in research (in brief so that they can ask me to explain in detail if they find it interesting).

The biggest test is waiting and it takes 2 weeks to 5 weeks minimum for the mentors to reply you back. We need to have patience as we need to look professional but not too desperate. I found it very difficult to stop myself from re mailing them (which I did after giving them a time of 2 weeks to reply back) but it has to be kept in mind that sometimes our mail might get buried in their mail load and sometimes it even goes in spam so make sure that when we are mailing as a gentle reminder that we are awaiting their reply, do give them the benefit of doubt (mention that you guess they are very busy so they couldn't reply back but you are still awaiting their reply once they get free). They also check how much perseverance is shown by the potential candidate.

It has to be remembered that a PhD candidate is judged by the way they write (and if you write a mail full of grammatical mistakes, and basically come across a person who can't put their ideas across to others through writing, you will be least likely to get in so please work on communication skills both verbal and non verbal as they will help you a lot in the long run).

Once you get lucky enough to have got the mentor to mail you back, make sure you keep up the interest of the mentor but don't lie about anything. Be truthful and be willing to put in hard work (as they don't expect you to know everything but they do expect you to be willing to learn anything new that comes your way).

Answer the mails sticking to the questions asked to you and if you have any questions, do feel free to ask them (this shows the mentor that you have an active and curious mind and you have been researching on the subjects and the university, hence the doubt. But avoid asking silly doubts which can be easily answered using the university websites).

Be sure to keep your latest resume, SOP (Statement of Purpose), recommendation letters (atleast 3) handy. If and when the mentor likes you through your mails, he/she might ask you to mail these documents to them (as mail attachments mostly as they are faster) and then fix up a time and date for your video interview.

This will be your test as to check your verbal communication (to a large extent) and your body language (to some extent). Do remember that almost everyone has an accent depending upon where they come from so you don't need to hide your accent or put on a false accent. Just make sure that your words are pronounced well and clearly. Speak slowly so that you can be understood (I have the habit of speaking fast when am excited and had to keep reminding myself to maintain the cadence of my voice during the interview).

Once the interview is over and your mentor decides that he/she wants you doing PhD under their advisor ship, they will start with the fund allotment for you (these funds make sure that your tuition fees are covered and you also get a stipend ranging from 16000 to 20000 USD annually which is comfortable enough to manage your expenses (and I have friends who even manage family with their stipend).

Any questions you have, you can ask your mentor and they patiently answer you. My mentor is an amazing lady who gave me time even when she was caught up in a very tight schedule. She introduced me to few Indian students pursuing PhD under her (so that they being students themselves will help me better with the transition to new place and culture). It was really very thoughtful and considerate of her as it helped me understand things better and clear every small and silly doubt of mine concerned with adjusting to everything from the weather, to the lab, to classes, the shopping I need to do before leaving for that particular state of the USA etc. Once the funding process was completed, I started getting mails from the admission officer (sending me the confirmation and some forms that I needed to fill), my international student officer (to start processing my I 20) and so on. I kept updating my mentor on the progress happening in my life and she kept discussing with me which subjects would be helpful for me in the first semester.

I finally got my I 20 in my hand one fine day and I rushed to get my VISA appointment. The site www.path2usa.com is amazing. The A to Z of the VISA process is explained in it ranging from what documents are needed, what are the forms to be filled etc etc. It covers each and every step and its been my greatest help in understanding the VISA process.

I followed it and booked my VISA appointment. On the day of VISA interview I was really worried (as my whole dream fulfilment depended on the VISA officer and I had heard lots of horror stories of VISA interviews and I didn't want to be one of them (although there was no reason to feel worry sometimes when your biggest dream is about to come true you worry that things might fall apart at last minute, right?).

My seniors from the University of Florida told me that for PhD with funding there is no VISA issues and it will be granted but still I was cold with fear. Finally it was my turn (I thankfully had to hardly wait 25 minutes for my turn while I have heard of my friends waiting for 5 to 6 hrs for their turn) and I must say the whole process is co ordinated very well with the officials making sure that all are clear about the given instructions and there is no confusion.

The VISA officer was a very sweet and cool lady who seeing that am going for my doctorate seemed impressed and more excited to see the name of the university. She gave me a smile saying WELCOME TO THE US!! And I was too excited to say anything. I thanked her and collected my documents and left from there.

Once I left from the consulate I spent hours on phone calling up my family and friends giving them the good news. VISA stamped passport arrived within 3 days to my home and then I ran to book my tickets to the USA. Since I had anyways made a list of all the things I need to buy, I got busy with shopping and packing and the flight was smooth and every airport had very helping officials who made sure that even though it was my first international flight I didn't feel lost at all.

I am now in Florida since the last 19 days and am feeling like I belong here.. like I have always been here. I have made wonderful friends here, blessed with an awesome mentor, wonderful classmates who all are making sure that am at my best always. I must say am truly blessed.

If anyone has any questions on details of any parts of my journey, you can feel free to mail me at [sahana41\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:sahana41[at]gmail.com)