

# Tips for SOCS Undergraduates considering graduate school in computer science

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This document is an introduction to many of the issues that you will need to address if you are a McGill CS undergraduate and are considering graduate school in the field of computer science.

## 1 Why obtain a graduate degree in computer science?

There are two kinds of graduate degrees in computer science: the M.Sc. and the Ph.D.. Some students obtain just one of these. Others obtain both. The reasons why will become clear in the following pages.

Overall, there are several good reasons for obtaining a graduate degree:

1. *to acquire a specialization in one area of computer science;*

Graduate level courses that are taught by professors who are involved in a particular research area. The courses introduce students to advanced topics in these areas.

2. *to have a more advanced degree on your CV to separate yourself from the pack;*

A graduate degree – in particular, an M.Sc. degree – is respected and valued by many companies. As such, it gives your C.V. an edge. Even if the particular area of concentration of your M.Sc. has little to do with the job you apply for afterward, successfully completing an M.Sc. means that you acquire certain general skills that a B.Sc. typically does not have. These include organization skills, written and oral communication skills, maturity, and independence.

3. *to satisfy your intellectual hunger;*

Many of you undergraduates enjoy the intellectual life of a student. You enjoy studying and learning. You have proven yourselves good at it with your high grades. You are not yet prepared to give up this life yet, for a 9 to 5 job. You don't know what they hope to achieve in graduate school in computer science, but your figure it could be interesting.

4. *to learn how to do research;*

Many students go to graduate school because they think they might enjoy research. A B.Sc. degree does not prepare you to do research. Undergraduate courses typically offer a well-defined package of concepts, facts, and tools which are bundled in a textbook form. Undergraduates are evaluated by how well they process these packages. Such courses are effective for structured learning, but the process and skills you acquire there do not prepare you for research. To learn how to do research, you need go on to graduate school.

5. *to prepare for the research job market;*

A research career in computer science typically follows one of two paths. One is academics, namely as a professor in a college or university. It is nearly impossible to become a professor without a Ph.D.. Think of a Ph.D. as a license that you need to apply for a professor position.

The second path is a career in industry. Companies like IBM, Sony, Intel, HP, GE, NEC, Xerox, Microsoft, Siemens, AT&T, Kodak, etc have large Research and Development labs world-wide which employ hundreds of computer scientists as researchers. These positions are typically challenging, intense, competitive, well paying, and prestigious. Many of the research breakthroughs in computer science have come out of such research labs. Such positions require proved research experience - at least an M.Sc., but more typically a Ph.D..

## 2 Research life in computer science (Ph.D. and beyond)

This section is for those who go to graduate school and are considering a career in research. It is less relevant for those who are looking for an M.Sc. as a way to improve their skills for the general computer science workforce. (In the latter case, proceed to Sec. 3).

Most of you appreciate that the purpose of research is to create knowledge. In computer science, this means creating new algorithms, programming language concepts and constructs, hardware tools, theorems, etc. There are certain aspects of *research life*, however, that you might not appreciate until you become involved in it:

- *Researchers belong to a community.*

The specific problem you are working on often is being addressed by only a small number of people in the world. This means that any progress you do make on the problem will be of great interest to these people. These includes those in your own laboratory – your supervisor and fellow graduate students – as well as those in other laboratories in the world whom you meet at conferences where you and they present research results. As you continue in your career, exploring a wider range of research problems, this network of colleagues becomes larger and you find yourself a member of a research community. This community becomes a source of personal and professional support, e.g. job opportunities down the road.

- *Researchers become identified with their work.*

When you publish a significant new result, the publication has your name on it and you become identified with it. You are the person who wrote paper X that showed Y or showed how to Z. Having your work identified with you personally can be very satisfying.

- *Research is a slow process. But that is part of what makes it worth doing.*

Before you can discover or invent something, you need to know what has been done before. Getting up to speed on a problem requires months and often years of reading the literature, stewing your thoughts, talking to experts in the field, re-reading the literature, more stewing, etc. Then, once you understand the problem and its history, you need to reformulate it and solve it in a way no one has done before. This process requires patience, focus, and intellectual stamina. It is not for everyone. But those who choose research careers really do

love it. Researchers get tremendous satisfaction from solving a problem that they have worked on for N months or years, and that no one else in the world has been able to solve.

- *As a researcher, you are your own boss. You work on problems that you choose to work on.*

As a university professor in computer science, you can do research on whatever area of computer science (or related fields) that you like. Even in industry, where you may have to work on problems that have relevance to your company's products, you are often still left some time to pursue your own research interests. Companies have to provide some flexibility, otherwise their best researchers will look for jobs elsewhere.

## 3 Graduate degrees: M.Sc. vs. Ph.D.

### 3.1 M.Sc.

There are two types of M.Sc. programs: those that are “terminal” and consist mostly of coursework and perhaps a small project, and those that are research oriented and consist of a combination of courses and a research thesis. Both types of M.Sc. typically take one to two years.

Let's first look at the terminal M.Sc.. One example is the M.Sc. offered by many top U.S. universities for employees of high tech firms. The tuition fees for such programs tend to be very high and are paid for by the student's employer.

A second terminal M.Sc. is for students who begin a graduate program with the intention of carrying out research but who subsequently decide that research is not for them. Such students may be allowed to take extra courses and/or do a small project rather than write a thesis. McGill has such an option, for example.<sup>1</sup> Note that such a terminal M.Sc. is a perfectly valid M.Sc. degree. For many jobs in industry, having the degree is all that matters.

The second type of M.Sc. program is the more common one that SOCS undergraduates to shoot for. This M.Sc. requires research and a thesis.<sup>2</sup> An M.Sc. thesis is not required to contain original or publishable research. Instead, it can be an implementation or verification of a previously published method. It can even be a large literature survey. However, for those who wish to continue on in research beyond the M.Sc., it is better to try to carry out original work. Such research could lead to a publication and publications are viewed highly as research credentials. Another issue is your independence in the thesis research. An M.Sc. thesis is not required to be independent work. Many students rely heavily on their supervisor for directing them throughout their M.Sc. thesis research.

Besides the content of an M.Sc. thesis, the thesis is a good exercise in organization and writing. Even if your thesis topic is on a very specialized subject that has nothing to do with the industry job you eventually apply for, writing a thesis forces you to organize a large body of work and present it in written form. The M.Sc. thesis is read and evaluated by your supervisor, and typically by an external examiner as well.

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<sup>1</sup>At McGill, it is called the Project Option.

<sup>2</sup>At McGill, it is called the Thesis Option.

## 3.2 Ph.D.

A Ph.D. is quite different from an M.Sc.. A Ph.D. is the most advanced academic degree you can get. It is focused on doing original independent research. A Ph.D. typically takes five to six years. The first year or two are spent on courses or exams. The remaining years are spent on a research project that is written up in a document (Ph.D. thesis) and defended orally.

The Ph.D. thesis must contain significant original work. Replicating the experimental findings of others is not enough. Moreover, the majority of the original ideas in the research are expected to come from you the student, rather than from your supervisor or committee members. As such, Ph.D. students are expected to work much more independently on their research than M.Sc. students.

One final note about the Ph.D. concerns the duration. Many people are impressed when there hear that person X took only three years to a Ph.D.. While this is impressive, keep in mind that a Ph.D. that takes six years and makes a major breakthrough is considered to be much more valuable than one that takes four years but which made no impact. The goal is to do a thorough job and to break new ground on a novel problem. The goal is not to graduate as fast as you can.

## 4 Graduate programs: Canada vs. U.S.

Most SOCS undergraduates who are considering graduate school will choose either Canada or the U.S.. A few pursue graduate studies in other countries (England, France, Germany, Australia, . . .) but we restrict our discussion to Canada and the U.S. because they are the most common choice.

There are significant differences between Canadian and U.S. graduate school programs in computer science. *Canadian schools typically require you to apply to the M.Sc. program prior to applying to the Ph.D. program, whereas U.S. schools typically require you to apply straight into the Ph.D. program.* Thus in Canada, you focus on the M.Sc. from the start and keep your Ph.D. options open whereas in the U.S. you focus on the Ph.D. from the start.

### Canada

Many of you SOCS undergraduates may be hesitant to go directly into a Ph.D. program. For example, you still may be unsure of your abilities. Doing well as an undergraduate at McGill is something to be proud of. But how would you do in graduate school where your peers *all* had high GPA's as undergraduates and all come from good schools? You may also be unsure how much you would enjoy research. Or, you may simply wish to stay in Canada because you like it here.

There are other advantages to staying in Canada. Doing an M.Sc. first allows you to test the water. It gives you a taste for research and a chance to prove yourself within a research area. With this experience and an M.Sc. under your belt, you would be in better position to choose a Ph.D. at a place that is right for you - whether in Canada, the U.S. or elsewhere.

To be accepted into an M.Sc. program in Canada, you typically do *not* require research experience as an undergraduate, nor do you require a detailed research proposal. You can be accepted into Canadian M.Sc. programs based on a high GPA alone. You do need letters of recommendation for your M.Sc. application, but if your grades are high enough (say 3.5+) then these letters are merely a formality. It is enough to have a professor who knows your name and has looked at your student transcript and simply writes on the Letter of Recommendation form that they think you would do well in grad school.

There is no cutoff GPA for entry into the M.Sc. program. The grades that committees expect vary from school to school and from year to year. McGill, the University of Toronto, and the University of British Columbia are widely recognized as among the top Canadian CS departments for graduate studies and research, so these tend to admit applicants with higher GPAs than most other Canadian programs. Factors such as whether your grades improved from year to year, in particular, whether you did well in upper level courses matter more than just the raw GPA number. Also, if you have some research experience and your research supervisor can write a strong letter for you, then this helps considerably. There have been several cases of students with GPAs in B range who have made it into McGill's M.Sc. programs, just because they did well in their 500 level courses or because they could show evidence of research skills.

## McGill vs. other Canadian schools

Should a SOCS undergraduate apply to the SOCS M.Sc. program? There are advantages and disadvantages. One big advantage is that you may already know professors here and maybe have started a research project with one (*e.g.* COMP 400) which you would like to extend into an M.Sc. thesis. Such students tend to get through the M.Sc. program quite quickly, often in 16 months total with a publication to show for it.

One big disadvantage of staying at McGill for an M.Sc. is that you limit your exposure to the academic world. Switching universities introduces you to new professors, a new university environment, and a new city. Many of you who come from Montreal hope to stay in this city forever. You may be reluctant to move to other places in Canada because of certain pre-conceptions that life there is bad, or because it too far from home. Those of you who feel this way would probably benefit the most from leaving. If you don't leave, you might at least consider one of the other Montreal universities for graduate school, just for the change of environment. If you do stay at McGill for the M.Sc., you should certainly leave to do the Ph.D. elsewhere.

## U.S.

Because Canadian Ph.D. programs require an M.Sc. whereas U.S programs do not, you could obtain your Ph.D. sooner by going straight to the U.S.. This might be more attractive for those of you who have research experience as undergraduates, who know what area of computer science you wish to work in, and who have a particular supervisor or research group in mind. Top U.S. Universities *e.g.* <http://www.greguide.com/comps.html> have a high concentration of outstanding professors and students. The intellectual and professional opportunities at these places is not to be dismissed. If you can do a reasonably good Ph.D. thesis at one of these top places, the credential alone would carry you a long way in your career.

Another advantage of going to a top U.S. school is that students have an opportunity in the summer to do internships in the private sector, at places like Microsoft and Google. (This can be arranged if you are at a graduate student at a Canadian school too, but this is not part of the culture. In the U.S. it *is* very much part of the culture.) These experiences are eye openers in many ways for people, and they provide you with contacts that you will have throughout your career.

If going straight into a Ph.D. program at a top U.S. school appeals to you, you should nevertheless be aware that things can go wrong. Here are a few ways how. First, while it is great to work in

a lab of a famous professor at a top U.S. school, you might find that you spend little one-on-one time with this professor. Perhaps the professor is heavily involved in academic administration, or is heavily involved in a company, or has ten other Ph.D. students who want his/her ear. Second, these schools are very competitive and this can have negative consequences. Fellow graduate students, especially those working for other professors in other labs, may be hesitant to discuss their research ideas openly for fear of them being "stolen." You may find yourself having the same fear. Third, students who are funded by a professor's grant that promises to do X and who do not do X (because they don't find X as interesting as Y) risk having pressure put on them, which can be unpleasant. Fourth, being a graduate student at many top U.S. schools is not as prestigious as you might imagine. These schools sometimes pamper undergraduate students<sup>3</sup> but leave graduate students to fend for themselves. So, before you sign up, *talk to people who are students at these schools and with the prof you want to work with, and find out if these are issues.*

What about funding? Nearly all Ph.D. students in the U.S. get funding in the form of a Teaching Assistantship or a Research Assistantship. If you get accepted into U.S. school but they don't offer you significant funding, then don't go. No money means they don't want you.

## 5 Preparing to apply for graduate school

### M.Sc. program in Canada

To apply to an M.Sc. program in Canada, you do not need to make preparations well in advance. Applications for M.Sc. programs are due early in the Winter semester (for programs starting in September). Many schools consider applications well into the spring (April or even May). Applying in the spring may kill your chances of funding, however.

### U.S. Ph.D. program

If you wish to apply to a Ph.D. program at a U.S. school then you *do* need to prepare well in advance. Many U.S. schools have application deadlines in December for programs that start the following September. U.S. Ph.D. programs require that you write the GRE exam.<sup>4</sup> Thus, you need to write these in the Fall semester of U3 so that the results can be sent with your application.

### Fellowships: why getting your own funding matters

Regardless of which program you are applying to, it is always better if you get your own funding. Having your own fellowship has significant advantages, and no disadvantages. First, you are a more attractive student since obviously you were good enough to get your own money. Second, you have more control over your graduate experience, namely you will be more free to choose your supervisor and research topic. Professors often fund students from their grants but these grants are associated with specific research projects. Third, you do not have to work as a Teaching Assistant to supplement your income. Fourth, many schools offer "top-ups" to these fellowships, which means that you can earn decent money and get a graduate degree at the same time.

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<sup>3</sup>who pay astronomical tuition fees and often donate large piles of money to their *alma mater* after they graduate

<sup>4</sup>Some U.S. schools require just the GRE General Exam, while other require the General and the Subject.

Fellowships for funding grad studies are available both from the federal (NSERC) and Quebec (FQRNT) governments. The application deadlines for these two fellowships are early October (of your U3 year). The Application includes a Personal Statement/Research Proposal, as well as Letters of Recommendation. These are *very important* parts of your file. Do not assume you can coast to a fellowship based on your GPA alone.

These fellowships are available only to Canadian citizens or Permanent Residents of Canada. Yes, in certain cases, the fellowships can be taken outside of Canada.

For more information, see <http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/fellowships>

## 6 General preparation for graduate school

There are certain basic steps you should take to prepare yourself for graduate school. These steps are especially important if you are applying to go to a Ph.D. program in the U.S. or if you are applying for an NSERC or FQRNT fellowship.<sup>5</sup>

- *take 400 and 500 level courses as early as possible in your SOCS ugrad program;*

If you apply during your U3 year<sup>6</sup>, then you need to know at that time which area you wish to work in for your graduate research. This means you should be taking advanced courses (400 level or above) in this area in the Winter semester of U2 or the Fall semester of U3. Doing well in such advanced courses indicates (to your evaluators) that you can do well in graduate school.

- *spend your U2 summer doing research*

Find a professor to supervise you on a project for a few months in the summer. Such an experience will orient you to what research is about. It will also give you contact with a professor and with graduate students, who can help you along the way with letters of recommendation and advice. It might also lead to a publication.

NSERC offers undergraduate scholarships (called USRA) for summer research. The application deadline is early in the Winter semester.

- *try to get started early on Project Courses (COMP 396/400).*

Start thinking about a COMP 400 project in the summer following your U2 year. Although you would register for the course in the U3 year, having a head start on the project would inevitably lessen your burden in the U3 year. It would also give you a chance to get to know a particular professor and show him or her how keen are capable you are, so that this professor could write a letter of recommendation for you.

Note: COMP 400 is intended for Honours students, but it is not restricted to Honours students. If you are a CS Major student with a GPA of 3.5 or more, then you are a candidate for graduate school and so you should seriously consider taking COMP 400.

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<sup>5</sup> Typically 5-10 SOCS undergraduates receive a major fellowship award such as an NSERC or FQRNT, and typically up to five SOCS undergraduate students go directly to top U.S. Ph.D. programs.

<sup>6</sup>as opposed to the year after you graduate, or later still

The following two steps apply only to those who are applying to U.S. Ph.D. programs:

- *Write the GRE exam.* See [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org) for details.
- *Contact the professor you would like to work with, after having done your homework*

Typically, a department will not accept a student into its Ph.D. program unless some professor in the department has shown an interest in the student's file. If you wish to work with a professor, then it is expected that you contact that professor to let him/her know. (See Sec. 7 for some advice on contacting professors about possible supervision.)

## 7 Approaching professors

Applying to graduate school means that you need to approach professors and ask for their involvement in your life. This can be as small as writing a letter of recommendation, or more significant as in supervising a summer research or a technical project (COMP 400), or even bigger as in supervising a M.Sc. or Ph.D. thesis.

Some students are shy to approach professors. They do not know what is expected from them or how to proceed. My impression is that many students end up not going to graduate school because they are hesitant to approach professors (sometimes until it is too late), or they fail to get into the graduate school they want because they make mistakes in how they approach professors.

Here are a few tips for the various cases.

### Letter of Recommendation

In most cases, professors are happy to write Letters of Recommendation. If you did well in a course and you had some interaction with the professor during the course e.g. by asking questions, then the professor will probably know you by name and have a sense of who you are. In this case, the professor will certainly appreciate how much work you did to get your A, and will try to help you out. Letter of recommendation forms for M.Sc. programs in Canada take very little time to fill out.

In general, writing Letters of Recommendation is part of the professor's job. A professor is allowed to decline to write a letter, but generally they don't decline if the request is a reasonable one. No prof became a prof without others writing letters for him/her, so we all understand the importance of the process.

The most effective letter of recommendation for graduate school comes from an established professor (preferably at the Associate or Full Prof level i.e. tenured), someone with whom you have worked, and who is recommending you to work in a field in which he/she has a solid reputation. A strong letter from a top person is worth as much as straight A's in all your courses.

Avoid getting letters from non-academics, unless they themselves have Ph.D. degrees in computer science. For example, if you spent the summer working in a company, you may be tempted to ask your boss to write a letter. Don't. Such letters will be disregarded (unless the person can state in the letter why they have any business recommending you to do something – i.e. research in graduate school – that they know very little about).

Inevitably, you will also need letters from people whom you do not know so well. For these, make sure you:

- Give them a hard copy *and* an electronic copy of your CV and a Personal Statement. Ask them for comments and suggestions. It takes a professor less than five minutes to read this information. Your application will be competing against other students who *did* get such feedback, so if you choose not to get such feedback then your application will suffer in comparison. Also, the feedback helps the professor to get to know you and presumably this can only help the letter.
- Fill in as much of each form as you can – including the professor’s name and address – before giving the form to the professor. Provide an envelope with an address and stamp. Such gestures show that you are organized and appreciative and that you don’t want the prof to be spending his/her cycles on such things – instead they should spend their cycles thinking about what to say in the letter.
- Don’t wait until the last minute. It makes you look disorganized. Why should a professor spend time to carefully think through a letter for you, if you yourself do a rush job?
- Confirm that the letter was sent. Confirmation is standard professional practice.

## Supervision of Summer Research or COMP 400

The most useful research experiences are those in which you have some freedom to show your stuff. Pick a computer science area that interests you and ask a professor if they could suggest topics and books or papers to look at. Be explicit about your intentions, namely that you are thinking of pursuing this topic in COMP 400 and possibly in graduate school. Then, read the books; read the papers; ask questions; get into the professor’s head.

For your project, be wary of getting involved in an implementation that involves lots of programming but not much theory or creative room. Programming expertise does *not* get you into graduate school and it does *not* prepare you for research. Rather it prepares you for more programming. If you demonstrate that programming is what you like to do and this is what you are good at, then this is what your Letters of Recommendation will indicate. And this is not what top graduate schools are looking for.

## Potential graduate supervisor

For a M.Sc. program at a Canadian university, there is often no need to contact a professor about possible supervision of your M.Sc. thesis. Often you are asked to indicate a research area. Professors in that area then review the file and recommend whether they think you should be accepted.

The Ph.D. is a typically a different story. A Ph.D. means that you will work with a specific professor for a period of several years, and typically this professor needs to commit to supervising you from day 1. So, a professor will typically be more careful in committing to supervise a student and similarly, you should be careful in committing to work with a professor. (Make sure you speak to other students who are/have worked with this person.)

Given the above, it should be no surprise that your chances of being accepted into a top Ph.D. program are much higher if you are being recommended by someone who has contacts in that program. If this is not the case, then you will just have to introduce yourself. However, you should do your homework beforehand. Do not send out emails to a professor after having spent just a few

minutes looking at his/her web page or research articles. Professors receive hundreds of such emails every year from aggressive students. Professors build up a thick skin and treat such emails as spam.

Instead, you should carefully read at least a few of that person's recent research papers, and email intelligent comments/questions about them. *It is very rare for students to do this, and so if you can do it and your questions are right on, then you will have an edge. You will also get a sense of whether you want to work with the person, based on how/if they respond.*

## 8 Personal Statement

There are plenty of articles available on the web that advise on how to write personal statements or statements of research interest. You should hunt down and read through several of these. Follow the link to several such articles from [www.cim.mcgill.ca/langer/resources-gradschool.html](http://www.cim.mcgill.ca/langer/resources-gradschool.html). In particular, have a look at "*Applying to Ph.D. programs in computer science*", by Prof. Mor Harchol-Balter at CMU. She has a few examples – **The grade regurgitator** and **The boy genius** – which you should definitely try to avoid. Here are a few other *don'ts* that you should resist:

- Don't try to shock the reader into attention. You are not a professional writer and so such special effects typically come across as amateurish. Instead, just be serious and honest and play it straight.
- Don't be boastful of your accomplishments. Let the professors writing your Letters of Recommendation tell about your abilities.
- Don't be too specific about your plans, because you may come across as being narrow minded. Try to find a balance between having a plausible plan based on your experiences, and being open to new ideas.
- Don't stress what a good programmer you are and how many programming languages or systems you know or what software you have written. This may be relevant for certain industry jobs, but not for research. Specifying these details shows that you *don't* know what research is about and this looks bad.
- The probability that a person reads what you write is inversely proportional to the length of what you write, so you need to tradeoff information for conciseness. Try getting it all into one page.

One final point: Letter of Recommendation forms typically ask professors to rate the students maturity, judgment, and ability to communicate. You would be surprised at how many students rank poorly on these categories because of how they behave in brief interactions with a professor: Particularly annoying are:

- hastily or carelessly written emails that require clarification;
- spending precious time complaining about a lost mark on an assignment;
- asking questions that indicate you have made no effort on your own to find the answers.

Good luck!