INTRODUCTION

The Journey to Is Grad School for Me?

And so, lifting as we climb, onward and upward we go, struggling and striving, and hoping that the buds and blossoms of our desires will burst into glorious fruition ’ere long.

MARY CHURCH TERRELL

THE JOURNEY TO IS GRAD SCHOOL FOR ME? and our commitment to provide a candid and practical approach to applying to graduate school is intimately connected to our professional and personal lives as well as our identities, culture, and history. As first-generation, low-income Students of Color, we (Yvette and Miroslava) faced many of the stresses of navigating predominantly middle- and upper-class, white-dominated spaces where our experiences and those of our communities were absent in the curriculum and infrequently reflected in our instructors and professors. While we did not face the specific challenges of nontraditional students, who return to higher education after a prolonged absence, we did encounter similar challenges, dealing with the loss of a parent (in Yvette’s case) and both parents (in Miroslava’s case) at the age of twelve. These losses meant having our childhoods cut short, having the rug pulled out from under us, and having to take on more responsibilities
than any pre-teen would have wanted. It also meant living with increased financial precarity, given that Yvette had to rely on her now-single mother and Miroslava had to rely on the state to provide support. Fortunately, Miroslava also had the backing of her aunt and uncle who took her and her brother into their household and raised them along with their two younger daughters. Nevertheless, we persisted (and continue to persist) in our personal lives and developed a social-support network not simply to survive but to thrive in academic and non-academic spaces.

In thinking about graduate school and wondering if it’s the right decision for you, we want you to know that no single path exists to a graduate degree. Rather, you map out that route or trajectory based on your needs and those of your family and community as well as the resources that are available to you. Accessing those sources of support is not always simple or transparent, as we know from first-hand experience and has been confirmed in the literature on the “hidden curriculum,” that is, the unspoken cultural beliefs and practices that help socially and/or economically privileged students navigate academia. To assist you along your journey, we developed Is Grad School for Me? Its tools and tips will help you become familiar with the expectations and demands of graduate programs before, during, and after you apply. To demystify the graduate school experience, we begin with our own stories of how we landed in graduate school.

**WHY WE ATTENDED GRADUATE SCHOOL**

**Yvette**

For me, the decision to attend graduate school was easy, as I felt, at that time, as if I had no other option. I was going to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in English literature with few job prospects and could not afford to move back home with my single mother of six without some income. I had also always been told I was “good” at school and was
unafraid to take on more schooling. The thought of getting paid to attend graduate school was appealing because it meant I could pay my bills to study something I loved, even if money was tight. What made it more feasible was the support, femtorship, and mentorship I received from the UCLA Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, a two-year program funded by the Mellon Foundation for underrepresented students in the humanities, arts, and social sciences who intend to pursue a PhD and a career in academia. That program helped me apply to graduate school in my senior year of college. As part of UCLA’s inaugural cohort, the fellows, myself included, had some added pressure to apply and get into graduate school. I did not really understand at the time that I had more career options than going to graduate school right after my bachelor’s. Little did I realize that I had the capacity to apply and get a job with my existing research and writing skills. I also did not understand that the option to attend graduate school does not diminish or go away if you take a year—or many years—to return to school. I only learned about this possibility when I walked into a graduate program with cohort-mates who had much more life and job experience than I. And I also did not realize what a big decision it was to commit six years of my life to a doctoral program. Despite the Mellon Mays support, many aspects of graduate school remained hidden to me, including the expectations and my job prospects after the PhD.

Throughout my time in graduate school, I faced many instances of culture and academic shock, which was further compounded by my deep belief that I was not good enough and did not belong. As a twenty-one-year-old recent graduate with little job experience, I immediately felt “less-than” my cohort-mates who were older and had master’s degrees and/or professional careers in my area of study, theater and performance (for example, costume design, lighting design, dramaturgy, directing, acting, and dancing). In contrast, I was a young Chicana from a disenfranchised, heavily Latinx region of the San Fernando Valley, California. Until then, I had only performed in school plays and
college student organization performances. I had not even majored in theater as an undergraduate in college, as had many of my graduate school peers, and I felt I had a lot of catching up to do.

My first day of graduate school seminars felt so foggy. I could hardly understand my professors, who spoke using theoretical jargon. Similar to my experience as an undergraduate, I found myself taking excessive notes in class, then going home to look up terms and names of scholars I did not recognize. I struggled to participate in class due to my fear of being caught as an impostor. I believed they would discover that I was the person who was admitted by mistake or that I was ill-prepared to facilitate graduate-level discussions or write doctoral-level seminar papers. At the same time, I attended graduate school in a hostile and tense environment that neither acknowledged my assets nor validated my identity. As I got to know my cohort-mates, I realized we were all just as afraid to participate, we all struggled with our writing, we all were intimidated by our professors, and we all shared similar experiences. To my surprise, they were also intimidated by me, the young scholar who, according to them, seemed so prepared and on top of things. It took time for me to realize that my feelings of inadequacy and lack of belonging was actually a product of deep structural problems and inequities in higher education. Reminding other scholars with similar experiences to my own that they are not alone is one of my motivations for writing this book. Our stories deserve to be told. Our knowledge deserves to be validated. And we—people like you and I—deserve to attend graduate school without the added barriers that come from a lack of institutional and individual support along the path to the degree.

Miroslava

Yvette and I share similar experiences, even though I started my graduate program years before she did. I, too, decided to apply to graduate
school because I did not think or know I had other options after graduating from UCLA with an undergraduate degree in history. I knew, however, that I had a passion for history and research, which was cultivated in my Chicana/o history classes and through a summer research program for underrepresented students where I had the opportunity to work with a professor exploring the experiences of Spanish-Mexican women in nineteenth-century California. Slowly but surely over the course of eight weeks, I found my calling for research, though I had yet to learn anything about a career in academia. Looking back, I now realize I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I briefly considered law school but, after perusing the course catalog and seeing the corporate-style language and the lack of representation of people of color, it was obvious that the curriculum was not for me.

Like many of my peers, I did not contemplate returning home to my family because I wanted to carve my own future. My aunt and uncle had raised me and my older brother after our parents died in a car accident in 1981 and I felt that I could no longer continue to occupy space in their household. Certainly, my aunt and uncle welcomed me with open arms but we had a small house—a one-bath, 800-square-foot home with four to five other people already living in that space—and I had to abide by the general rules of the house. Plus, like most young people, I wanted to explore the world (in my case, Los Angeles) and establish my identity. My thought was to stay in school until I could figure out what I would do next.

As such, when I ended up in graduate school, which was made possible by a mentor who fought for my admission to UCLA’s History Department as a first-generation, low-income, immigrant, and self-identified Chicana, I aimlessly followed the path established by the institution. I took courses, worked with peers, and received feedback from professors, which resulted in the message that I was ill-prepared for graduate school. Essentially, as I came to learn, I lacked the reading, writing, and analytical skills necessary to communicate my ideas
effectively. Coming from a tiny, under-resourced, all-girls Catholic high school, I had struggled with acclimating myself to the space and pace I encountered as an undergraduate (also at UCLA), especially its predominantly upper- and middle-class white culture. By my second year, I navigated the campus and my courses fairly well, even though the sting of not belonging and feeling invisible remained. With a massive undergraduate population at UCLA, and infrequent interaction with professors and graduate students, I received little academic attention, particularly regarding the tools I would later need to advance in graduate school. Today, looking back at my early graduate school career, I realize that few of the faculty, except for a small handful of mentors, believed I was “grad school material,” that is, that I had the skills and intellect needed to make it in academia. I will never forget, years later, at my PhD hooding, the surprised look on the face of a former history professor-turned-associate dean, who was handing out diplomas on stage at Royce Hall at UCLA. “Miroslava!” he said with surprise, when he handed me my degree. That experience did not tear me down. Rather, it emboldened me to work harder to make sure students like myself receive equal access and support in higher education.

My lack of preparation and understanding of the rigors of graduate school resulted in a constant battle with self-doubt and desire to drop out—not just at the beginning or end of the quarter, but on a weekly basis, particularly in my first year. I recall that I would come home with a throbbing headache. In productive moments, I argued with myself, debating the merits of staying in school. I had limited funding for the first year but I found ways to make it work and, fortunately, the same mentor who assisted me earlier made it possible for me to receive a multi-year package going into my second year. Ultimately, however, the only thing that kept me in graduate school were my subjects of historical research: Spanish-speaking women in nineteenth-century California. I asked myself, if I didn’t complete the project I had set out to do, which was to recover and rewrite history through their lived experi-
ences, who would? I owed it to them, I reasoned, and to all the women of Spanish-Mexican origin who had sacrificed so much for their families and communities to survive and thrive in the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries.

My commitment to my subjects is what kept me, and still keeps me, focused on reaching for my goals, but at the time it did not provide me with the knowledge and skills to access and navigate graduate school successfully. Fortunately, generous, tireless, and invaluable mentors, my twenty-year-plus journey in academia, and my deep passion for creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment in higher education, have all helped me learn what it takes to navigate successful paths to graduate school for first-generation, low-income, and/or nontraditional Students of Color. Certainly, no one mold fits everyone’s needs and desires, but in this guide we share the key tenets to make it possible for you to achieve your professional and personal goals.

**WHY IS GRAD SCHOOL FOR ME?**

*Is Grad School for Me?* is a useful tool for first-generation, low-income, and/or nontraditional Students of Color who are exploring or seriously considering graduate school as a viable path to professional and personal success. *Is Grad School for Me?* helps you not only make the right decision but also successfully apply to graduate school, even if you are not familiar or have little understanding of what goes on behind closed doors. Both of us have spent many years as students and workers at graduate institutions and are still figuring out what goes on behind the academic veil or curtain. In *Is Grad School for Me?* we share those insights and walk you through the process, step-by-step, for thinking about what you need to do to achieve your goals.

Part 1 focuses on what you need to consider before applying. Chapter 1 pays attention to demystifying graduate school by teaching you the key differences in graduate programs and giving you an insider’s
perspective on the graduate school admissions process. We discuss what committees have historically looked for in an applicant’s profile as well as the ways that implicit forms of bias have influenced decisions. We also provide you with insights on what you can do to take control of your education to ensure you get what you need from the programs you’re applying to. In chapter 2, we turn our attention to helping you decide if graduate school is the right step for you by addressing the wrong reasons to attend and discussing how graduate school may impact you depending on your life and career stage as well as your intersectional identity—that is, the combination of your race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on. Chapter 3 focuses on debunking common misconceptions about graduate school and sharing the expectations of admissions committees once they review your application. This chapter also covers the common obstacles that first-generation, low-income, and/or nontraditional Students of Color face—including impostor phenomenon, family achievement guilt, and feelings of doubt—and how to manage them.

Part 2 focuses on the application process and the components of a successful application with real-world examples of essays. Chapter 4 focuses on how to get started by learning organizational, time-management, and productivity strategies to help you get your application done without burning yourself out. This chapter also discusses how to create a graduate school list and questions to ask yourself and others during this process. Chapter 5 focuses on the statement of purpose and walks you through the components of that statement. It includes sample statements, showing you a variety of approaches from different disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Chapter 6 pays attention to the personal and diversity statements, and like chapter 5, contains sample statements. Chapter 7 teaches you everything you need to know about letters of recommendation: what they mean, who to ask for them, and how to obtain them. It also looks at other components of the application process as well, including hidden costs.