

Career Services

OUR MISSION IS YOUR FUTURE

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Graduate School Guide

Is Graduate School for You?

Your interest and success with a particular discipline may lead you to personal satisfaction and the chance to broaden your experience and expertise in graduate school. Today, graduate school opportunities throughout the world are diverse. If you have interests in a specific field of study, exploring the options of attending graduate school will be beneficial. In addition, many careers require advanced degrees: medicine, social work, law, higher education, specialized research, etc.

Please reconsider attending graduate school in order to delay or postpone the job search process. You should have clearly defined interests in a particular field before applying to schools. Remember that an advanced degree may not necessarily increase your chances of initial job search success.

Self-Assessment

Many students withdraw from graduate programs because they dislike the concentrated academic work and realize they had not defined their career goals adequately and clearly. Asking yourself the following questions will help you assess your needs, interests, values, skills and goals in order to make an informed decision about pursuing a graduate or professional degree.

- What are my short-range and long-range career goals?
- How might graduate school effect my career or professional plans?
- Will the graduate degree enhance or narrow my employment prospects?
- Do I have the interest and abilities to be successful in a graduate program?
- Am I mentally and physically prepared to undertake a long-term academic commitment?
- At the present time, do I have other needs that conflict with pursuing a graduate degree?
- Would I benefit more by gaining some practical experience before pursuing graduate studies?
- Can I realistically invest the time and money required pursuing another academic degree?
- What type of value, if any, do I place on attaining a graduate degree?

Selection of a Program

A major concern of many individuals considering graduate education is that they need to attend the **best** program of study. National rankings are available for review from a number of sources, but may be based on different criteria. Is the national recognition that a program or school has received the most important factor to consider when selecting a program? No, a program should meet your individual needs, interests, and goals. Here is some information to consider about each program:

- Departmental courses and offerings
- Theoretical or pragmatic approach to the subject matter
- Specialties and interests of the faculty (read their publications and books)
- Philosophical and professional attitudes of department and faculty
- Flexibility of curriculum and length of program
- Availability of placement outlook and services
- Accreditation of the program
- Size, geographic location, type and availability of housing, community environment
- Financial aid opportunities, cost and residency requirements

Researching Graduate Schools

- Talk with individuals who have knowledge of the field: faculty, deans, advisors, friends, alumni, counselors to determine if and what type of an advanced degree is needed.
- Consult Career Library resources, such as *Peterson's Guides*, the Kaplan guides or resources geared specifically toward your field.
- Utilize the Internet or link directly to schools of interest.
- Contact individual graduate schools' departments requesting catalog, application and financial aid information.
- Review academic journals in your field and pay attention to the authors of articles and their university affiliation.
- Visit institutions and interview, if possible.
- Interview with graduate school recruiters on campus.
- Attend graduate school fairs and forums.

Key websites to research include:

<http://www.petersons.com>

<http://www.gradschools.com>

<http://www.gradprofiles.com>

<http://www.graduateguide.com>

<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/beyond/bcrank.htm>

<http://www.lsac.org>

<http://www.mba.com>

<http://www.finaid.com>

The Application Process

Applying to graduate school can be complex, time consuming and difficult if you are not well organized and prepared. Keep in mind the following requirements when applying to schools:

Application Forms:

- Follow instructions carefully and accurately while completing all requested information.
- Tailor your communication to the specific aspects of the graduate program.
- Complete the forms on-line whenever possible, ensuring a neat and attractive appearance.
- Include all requested documents and materials: résumé, fees, personal statements, etc.
- Always make copies for your records before sending.

Reference Letters:

- The Career Services Office provides a placement file service that enables you to maintain up to eight (8) letters of recommendation. You are welcome to send letters to graduate schools via this service.
- Select recommenders who know you well enough to write detailed letters on your behalf and who can comment on your capacity to do graduate level work. When requesting this service, be specific of your goals and purpose. Provide a copy of your resume to recommenders so they are able to gather a better sense of your skills and background.
- Use institutional forms if provided by the graduate school and provide the recommender with a stamped envelope.
- Allow the recommender ample time to complete your letter and always follow up to insure completion. Be sure to thank those who have written letters for you.

Transcripts:

- Allow the Records and Scheduling Office at least 5-10 working days to process your official transcripts for graduate school applications. Your request must be made in writing and signed by the individual requesting the transcript.
- Official transcripts are required by nearly all graduate schools and cost \$5.00 each.

Essay/Personal Statement:

- This portion of the application is extremely important. Create and develop your statement keeping in mind the following issues:
 - Why are you applying to graduate school?
 - What are your future goals?
 - What have you done to prepare for graduate school?
 - How can this program help you achieve your goals?
- The statement should be clear, detailed and concise. State your response in terms of how your background, skills, abilities and goals **match** the characteristics and opportunities of the graduate school/program.
- This is an opportunity to demonstrate your written communication skills, motivation, energy level, creativity, commitment and depth of response.
- Invite faculty members and Career Services staff to review and critique your personal statement.
- For additional information on writing essays, please visit the Career Services Library.

Graduate Admissions Deadlines/Testing

- It is imperative to research and discover the specific time requirements for submitting applications, test scores, financial aid information and other related material for **each** school.
- Please see relevant testing booklets available in Career Services for specific testing information.
- NOTE: Be aware that financial aid deadlines are usually earlier than the comprehensive application material. Many programs will not communicate these deadlines without your assertive inquiry.

Financing Your Graduate Education

Monetary obligations involved with graduate education can be a major concern and obstacle. Financial aid information can be found on-line or in most graduate school catalogs or specific departmental brochures. Obtaining the maximum financial aid requires pursuing a variety of financial aid avenues.

Fellowships and Grants:

- This type of financial aid consists of outright awards usually requiring no service to the institution in return. Awarded on a competitive basis, grants vary in terms of monetary amount and length of funding.
- Explore institutional, private and governmental fellowship opportunities. Do not limit your application to one type of grant because it may take several combined awards to fund your entire graduate education.
- Consult with faculty members and the resources available in the Career Services Office for information about fellowships and grants.

Graduate Assistantships:

- Individual departments award teaching and/or research assistantships. These awards usually carry full or partial tuition remuneration plus a stipend.
- The commitment normally involves a 10-20 hour per week workload dealing with teaching, tutoring, proctoring exams, developing lesson plans, and/or performing a variety of research activities.
- Competition for these awards is strong. Apply early and always submit a résumé with your inquiry. If possible, visit the department and arrange a personal interview. Be cognizant of deadlines.
- Be sure to specifically request assistantship information at the time you request application materials.

Resident Assistantships:

- Some graduate programs offer financial assistance in the form of residence assignments involving room, board, and a stipend by working as managers in undergraduate residence halls.
- These opportunities may be the most lucrative because some schools will also include tuition remuneration with the assignment.
- Again, competitively based, resident assistantships will involve utilizing your job search skills. Always include your résumé and cover letter, requesting an interview for available jobs.
- Inquire about these opportunities at the institution's residence life or student affairs office.

Loans:

- Remember: any undergraduate loan can be deferred while you are a full-time graduate student.
- Most institutions have loan programs for graduate students including private, state and federally sponsored Guaranteed Student Loan opportunities. Note: you automatically become "independent" as a graduate student on the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). This can be obtained at the Financial Aid Office.
- Explore GAPSFAS (Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service), offering low interest loans and financial assistance to graduate students.

Scholarships:

- Be sure to inquire about special offerings at your institutions of choice.

Questions To Ask Any Graduate Program

1. What is the largest and the most typical class size for a graduate class? Are classes restricted to graduate students or are undergraduates common in your graduate classes?
2. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of going to graduate school immediately after completing the undergraduate program? The advantages and disadvantages of waiting a few years? The best use of the interim time?
3. What are the criteria and process for selecting teaching assistants, research assistants, and fellows?
4. I will probably need financial assistance. Can you tell me how most students fund their studies here?
5. Will I get to develop my own topics, or will I be expected to work on a professor's ongoing research?
6. What is the mean time to complete (a) class work, (b) research, (c) dissertation? (I.e., what is the mean time to complete the Ph.D.? Ask about the program as a whole, but perhaps more importantly, *by professor.*)
7. What is your attrition rate? Of those who don't finish, what are their reasons?
8. What kind of student thrives in your program?
9. How reliable is your financial support year to year? Is the first-year offer always sustained given attainment of academic goals?
10. What is the age, race, gender balance, ratio of married/single, and geographical origin of graduate students in the program? (In other words: Are there any other people like me?)
11. May I have some bibliographies of recent publications by faculty? Which professors have won awards and grants lately (and presumably need graduate assistants)?
12. Can you tell me about your placement rates and types of jobs obtained by recent graduates? (*Avoid* relying on testimonials and anecdotal evidence.)
13. May I meet some currently enrolled students (in person or via phone or email)? (Be sure to ask about their research topics and *be sure to take notes on specific professors mentioned.*)
14. How can I be a strong candidate for a program like this?

Adapted from *Graduate Admissions Essays* by Donald Asher (Ten Speed Press, 2000)
1-800-841-BOOK or www.amazon.com

The Three Best Ways to Stand Out

1. Contact the professors

- ask for a clarification of the program offerings
- comment on a recent publication
- propose an area for further study

2. Visit the department

- make your own appointments with professors
- be sure to confirm a day ahead
- send a thank you note later!

3. Submit an outstanding work sample

- your best paper, lab, article, or writing sample
- make sure the sample is directly related
- get a professor to review the work sample first!

Graduate School Application Checklist and Timetable

Junior year/Summer before Senior year

- Start to identify programs of interest.
- Contact programs to request catalogs/applications.
- Make note of deadlines.
- Determine standardized test requirements.
- Prepare for standardized tests.

September/October of Senior year

- Continue to research programs.
- Take appropriate standardized tests.
- Write draft of personal statement.
- Research financial aid, assistantships and scholarships.
- Request letters of recommendation from faculty members and supervisors.
- Set up a placement file.
- Attend graduate school events on campus.

November/December of Senior year

- Finalize personal statement; have it critiqued by a career counselor or faculty member.
- Complete applications.
- Submit requests to have official transcripts sent from the Records Office; time receipt to graduate programs for AFTER your application arrives.
- Submit requests to Career Services to have your placement file mailed; time receipt for AFTER your application arrives.
- Continue to research financial aid opportunities.

January/March of Senior year

- Mail applications at least one month before deadlines; earlier for programs with rolling deadlines.
- Contact schools regarding the opportunity for a visit/interview.
- Fill out the GAPS FAS.

April of Senior year

- Review acceptances/wait list offers.
- Discuss opportunities with faculty members and/or a career counselor.
- Make decision and notify program.
- Withdraw applications from all other programs.