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 clearly defined their career goals. Ask yourself the following questions to help assess your needs, interests, values and goals.

• What are my short-range and long-range career goals?
• Do my professional plans require further education?
• Am I mentally and physically prepared to undertake another long-term academic commitment?
• 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?

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? Not necessarily, a program should meet your individual needs, interests, and goals. Consider this information about each program:

• Departmental courses and offerings
• Information on student outcomes
• Accreditation and length 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
• Consult Career Development library resources, general 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
• Visit institutions and interview, if possible
• Attend graduate school fairs and forums

Key websites to research include:

• [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)
• [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)
• [www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)
• [www.usnews.com/rankings](http://www.usnews.com/rankings)
• [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org)
• [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)
• [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)
• [www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com)
The Application Process

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 print or make copies for your records before sending.

References:
- 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
- Plan on asking three individuals to act as references for you unless the graduate school application indicates otherwise
- Provide a copy of your resume to recommenders so they are able to get a good sense of your skills and background
- If it needs to be uploaded to a URL, give them the web address when you ask them to provide you with a letter
- Allow the recommender ample time to complete your letter and always follow up to be sure it has been done
- Be sure to thank those who have written letters for you

Transcripts: Reference [www.geneseo.edu/registrar/transcript-information](http://www.geneseo.edu/registrar/transcript-information) to learn how to request your official transcripts

Essay/Personal Statement:
- Most graduate schools will tell you what they want addressed in the Personal Statement. Be sure to address all points!
- Admissions officers read thousands of personal statements during application season; make yours stand out!
- Get personal! Admissions officers are trying to learn who you are, what you will bring to their program, and why you’re different than other applicants
- This is an opportunity to demonstrate your writing skills, motivation, energy level, creativity, and commitment
- Invite faculty members and Career Development staff to review and critique your personal statement

Graduate Admissions Deadlines/Testing:
- It is imperative to know deadlines and related time requirements for submitting applications, test scores, financial aid information and other materials for each school. It is also critical to check with each school to ensure all materials have arrived before the deadline.

NOTE: Be aware that financial aid deadlines are usually earlier than the comprehensive application material. Many programs will not communicate these deadlines without your proactive inquiry.

Financing Your Graduate Education

Fellowships and Grants:
- These types of financial aid consist 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.

Graduate Assistantships:
- These individual department awards usually carry partial tuition remuneration or stipend - apply once you are accepted
- 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
- Check for postings on school job search databases and financial aid websites
- 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.
Resident Assistantships:
• Some graduate programs offer financial assistance in the form of residence assignments involving room, board, and a tuition reimbursement by working as RA’s in undergraduate residence halls.
• These opportunities may be the most beneficial because some schools will also include tuition remuneration.
Inquire about these opportunities at the institution’s residence life or student affairs office.

Loans:
• Remember: most undergraduate loans 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.
• Explore FAFSA

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. May I have some bibliographies of recent publications by faculty? Which professors have won awards and grants lately (and presumably need graduate assistants)?
11. Can you tell me about types of jobs obtained by recent graduates? (Avoid relying on testimonials and anecdotal evidence and try to see actual reports with statistics.)
12. 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.)
13. How can I be a strong candidate for a program like this?

The Three Best Ways to Stand Out
1. Contact the professors ○ Ask for a clarification of the program offerings ○ Comment on a recent publication

2. Visit the department ○ Make your own appointments with professors ○ 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

4. Get a professor to review the work sample first!

Adapted from Graduate Admissions Essays by Donald Asher (Ten Speed Press, 2000)
Graduate School Application Checklist and Timetable

Junior year/Summer before Senior year:
• Start to identify programs of interest.
• Contact programs to request catalogs/applications or bookmark web sites for further review.
• 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 with Interfolio.
• Attend graduate school events on campus.

November/December of Senior year:
• Finalize personal statement; have it critiqued by a faculty member or career counselor.
• 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 have your placement file sent; time receipt for AFTER your application arrives.
• Continue to research financial aid opportunities.

January/March of Senior year:
• Submit applications at least one month before deadlines; earlier for programs with rolling deadlines. Check to ensure all materials have arrived.
• Contact schools regarding the opportunity for a visit/interview.