

SELECTING & APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate and professional school opportunities are very diverse. If you are interested in a specific field of study or career field, exploring educational opportunities beyond the bachelor's degree could be valuable to you.

However, graduate school is not the avenue for you to pursue in order to delay or postpone the job search process. You should have clearly defined interests in a particular field before beginning the application process. An advanced degree may not necessarily increase your chances of initial job search success.

Assessing Your Interests and Goals

Deciding to attend graduate school is not a decision to be made hastily or with a limited information base. Making an informed decision about pursuing a graduate degree requires in-depth self-assessment combined with long-term goal setting. Before applying for further study, you need to be aware of the working conditions, employment prospects, and requirements of the field you plan to pursue. Secondly, the more immediate demands of a graduate school experience, such as research, course work, papers, teaching, etc., must also be considered. When giving consideration to these issues, you must look for a match between these demands and your interests, needs, skills and career goals.

Some of the questions you should consider before deciding to pursue graduate school are:

- What do I want to accomplish in my lifetime?
- What are my long-range and short-range career goals?
- Is graduate study necessary for me to achieve these goals?
- Do I have the interest and abilities to be successful in a graduate program?
- What type of value, if any, do I place on attaining a graduate degree?
- Am I mentally and physically prepared to undertake such a long-term academic commitment?
- At the present time, do I have other needs that conflict with pursuing a graduate degree?
- Do I have enough information about this career field to determine if I want to make a long term commitment of pursuing a graduate degree?
- Can I realistically invest the time and money required to pursue another academic degree?

Selecting the Right Program

Once you have decided to apply to graduate or professional school, you will need to identify the programs that interest you most. Individuals considering graduate education are often concerned that they need to attend the "best" program of study, but that is often hard to define. National rankings are available for review from a number of resources, and most often, each ranking is based on different criteria. No single, reliable ranking of graduate schools and programs exists. Is the national recognition that a school or program has received the most important factor to consider when selecting a program? As discussed earlier, a program should meet your individual needs, interests and goals. In order to identify these programs, information about various schools and programs are available for review and comparison. Information about each program to consider includes:

- Departmental courses and offerings
- Theoretical or pragmatic approach to the subject matter
- Specific specialties and interest of the faculty
- Philosophical and professional attitudes of the faculty members and the department
- Current research, publications and professional involvement of the faculty
- Flexibility of the curriculum and length of the program
- Prominence and/or accreditation of the program
- Availability of placement services and placement outlook
- Size, geographic location, type and availability of housing, and community environment
- Application requirements (test scores, essays, interview, etc.) and required background and credentials of students
- Financial Aid opportunities, cost and residency requirements
- Ability to gain practical experience during the program (assistantships, research, etc.)

The Application Process

Applying to graduate school can become complex, time consuming and difficult if you are not well organized and prepared. In some cases, you may complete two applications for an institution: one application for the specific academic program and one application to the Graduate School at the institution in question. ***Each program has its own unique requirements, procedures, and deadlines***, but the following are general requirements associated with the application process for many programs.

Application Forms

- Follow instructions carefully and accurately while completing all requested information.
- Some programs require paper application forms, but the use of online applications is increasing.
- Tailor your communication to the specific aspects of the graduate program.
- Include all requested documents and materials: resume, fees, autobiographies, etc. It is recommended to mail all application materials by registered or return receipt requested mail for documentation purposes.
- Always make copies for your records before sending.

Reference Letters

- Select individuals who know you well enough to write detailed letters about your academic abilities and/or professional skills. When requesting a letter of recommendation or reference, be specific about your purpose and provide the writer with a copy of your resume and/or transcript.
- Use institutional forms if provided by the graduate school.
- If the recommendation needs to be sent directly to the program, provide the recommender with an addressed, stamped envelope.
- Allow the recommender ample time to complete your letter and always follow up to ensure completion.

Transcripts

- Request official transcripts from the Registrar's Office of each undergraduate institution you attended. Some schools will require your request in writing, while others will allow transcript requests online.
- Most institutions will charge a small fee for sending your transcript.

Essay or Personal Statement

- Some programs provide a list of specific questions for you to answer, or the topics that should be addressed in your statements. Others simply ask you to describe your goals and interest in their program.
- Organize the statement to be clear, specific, detailed and concise. Think of your response in terms of how your background, skills, abilities, goals, etc. match the characteristics and opportunities of that graduate program.
- Demonstrate your written communication skills, motivation, energy level, creativity, and commitment in your response.
- Invite critiques by faculty and Career Services staff members.
- Literature about writing personal statements is available in our Career Resource Library.

Interviews

- Some programs may require an interview as part of the admissions selection process. This can be helpful, especially if you feel your GPA, application, or written statement may not best represent your capabilities.
- As with any interview, you will want to be prepared and focused. Be able to express your goals, why you are seeking admission to this particular program and what you can contribute to the program.
- If you have concerns about interviewing, you may want to participate in a mock interview with Career Services.

Tests (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, MAT, DAT, etc.)

- Determine test requirements of each graduate school application. Some programs may require the general and subject GRE tests and/or multiple testing.
- Plan on registering for the test at least six weeks before the actual test date to ensure proper preparation, minimal costs, and applicant availability.
- Study and prepare to take the test(s). Utilize test preparation study books and resource guides to improve test scoring potential.
- Take these tests early, thereby allowing time to re-take them if necessary and providing adequate time for score reporting.

Deadlines

- Make sure you find out the application deadline for each program well in advance and submit all materials on time.
- Applying early will be to your advantage if the program uses rolling admission. It may also be helpful to apply early if you are seeking some form of financial aid.

Financing Your Graduate Degree

A major concern in pursuing an advanced degree is the expense. If you are willing to pursue a variety of financial aid avenues, most students can find assistance with the costs of graduate school. Check with each school you are applying to for more information about the following sources of financial aid.

Graduate Assistantships

- Teaching and/or research assistantships are common opportunities for financing your advanced degree. These awards usually carry full or partial tuition waiver plus a stipend.
- Your commitment normally involves a 10-20 hour per week work load dealing with teaching, tutoring, proctoring exams, developing lesson plans, and/or performing a variety of research activities.
- Assistantships are typically available through the specific department to which you are applying; however, many related areas of study may also have opportunities available.

Fellowships and Grants

- 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 degree.

Resident Assistantships

- Graduate programs also may offer financial assistance in the form of resident assignments involving room, board and stipend by working as managers in undergraduate residence halls.
- These comprehensive opportunities are many times the most lucrative because some schools will also include tuition waiver with the assignment.
- Inquire about these opportunities at the institution's residence life or student affairs office.

Loans

- Remember that any undergraduate loan repayment 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.

College Work-Study Programs

- Eligible students have opportunities for part-time jobs on campus. These federally funded programs are usually administered by the institution's financial aid office.

Graduate School Application Timelines

Researching and applying to graduate schools can be a very time consuming process, especially as you prepare for application and test deadlines while still completing your undergraduate education. This timeline **assumes** that you are applying for fall admission upon graduation from college. Check with individual institutions to obtain their specific deadlines for admission.

Junior Year

- Research areas of interests, institutions and programs.
- Get to know your professors and consult their expertise.
- Talk to advisers about application requirements.
- Receive information about appropriate graduate admission tests. Register and prepare to take exams during the spring or summer of your junior year or during the fall of your senior year.
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible.

Senior Year

- Obtain letters of recommendation.
- Take graduate admission test(s) if you have not already.
- Apply for assistantships, fellowships, grants, etc.
- Complete all application materials, including personal statement.
- Register for the FAFSA - the Free Application for Federal Student Aid - if required.
- Have transcripts and letters of recommendation mailed.
- Check with institutions before the deadline to ensure your file is complete.
- Evaluate offers of admission and make your decision.
- Send thank you letters and follow-up letters to people who wrote your recommendation letters, informing them of your success.

You may not be able to adhere to this timetable if your application deadlines are early, or if you decide to attend graduate school later in your college career or during your senior year. Keep in mind the application requirements and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.

Resources for Research, Information, and Assistance

Utilize the links and resources provided in the "Graduate School" section of the Career Services web site to find more information about selecting and applying to programs. Faculty members in your area of study are also a valuable source of information about graduate study. For specific information about deadlines, program requirements, course prerequisites, and financial aid, you must check with each school to which you are applying.