

# Graduate School – Planning Ahead

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*(adapted from The University of Alabama Career Center)*

## Graduate Education Overview

Graduate school is a huge investment of your time and money. The key is to know what you want to get out of your education before you make the investment. To consider if graduate school is for you, you need to approach it from two directions. First, you have to look inward and analyze your personal strengths, weaknesses, situations, and goals. Second you need to research to find graduate programs that suit you and will help you achieve your goals.

### Questions to ask yourself:

- Does the thought of more studying, reading, writing papers, and test-taking trigger anxiety and stress?
- Will a graduate degree be beneficial for better job offers, higher initial starting salaries, and advancement opportunities in my chosen field?
- What types of graduate and professional degree programs exist for my chosen field and where are they?
- Which school offers my field of study and where is it located?
- What are the application process and admission requirements?
- Will the program require a thesis or dissertation? How long do I have to complete the program?
- What is the cost of tuition, housing, health insurance, etc.?
- Are graduate assistantships available?
- Will I participate in an internship, practicum, or field experience?
- What is the placement rate into full-time employment?

## Master's Degree

A master's degree generally requires from one to three years to complete. You must take courses in certain areas and then choose a specialization within your subject area. Some masters programs require exams (oral and/or written) to demonstrate your mastery of the field, and in some programs original research is required for a thesis.

## Doctoral Degree

The doctoral program is similar in some ways to the masters but the bar is raised in all areas. Two to three years of course work is followed by comprehensive exams. These exams are referred to as "orals" and are graded by a small group of faculty. Following the comprehensive exams original research is conducted in view of writing a dissertation. Self-discipline, motivation, interpersonal skills and persistence are needed to get the Ph.D. because no one is supplying you with daily instructions, assignments, and deadlines. When the dissertation is drafted, your committee reviews it and makes suggestions. After the revisions you appear before the committee to orally defend your research, arguments, thesis, and conclusions.

# Planning Ahead for Graduate School: a Timetable

## Junior Year (Fall and Spring Semesters):

- Do a self-assessment, for instance, Myers Briggs Type Indicator
- Determine your area(s) of interest and long-term goals
- Seek advice and guidance from professors, coworkers, employers, friends Identify appropriate programs and universities by looking at directories, guidebooks and websites Learn about application requirements (exam, personal statement, letters of recommendation, etc.
- Read current research journals in your field
- Join professional associations in your field Look for summer internships
- Try to find a part-time job, research work, or volunteer experiences in your field
- Maintain good grades
- Prepare for required standardized tests (register for a prep course, buy a practice book, etc.)
- Register for the appropriate graduate admissions exam
- Organize all your materials and information in one place
- Identify individuals whom you will ask to write letters of recommendation and be diplomatic in approaching them for your request
- Prepare a résumé or personal fact sheet and give to those who will write letters of recommendation
- Write to schools for the appropriate catalog and write to departments in which you are interested for further information
- Type or print neatly all materials and keep copies for yourself

## Summer (before Senior Year):

- Take the required graduate admissions tests (MAT, GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT)
- Be sure that your test scores are being reported to all the schools to which you are applying in advance of deadline
- Send for application materials. You may be able to apply electronically.
- Make photocopies of application forms and begin to complete them
- Begin drafting your personal statement
- Visit colleges and universities of interest
- Begin collecting financial aid, fellowship, and assistantship information

## Senior Year (Fall Semester):

- Finalize your list of schools
- Meet with faculty members and request that they write letters of recommendation
- Provide them with the reason for applying to each place and what they need to do.
- Provide them with a copy of your résumé that highlights your academic, professional, and personal accomplishments
- Provide them with recommendation forms all in one packet.
- Take graduate admission exams (if you haven't already)
- Double-check all application deadlines
- Request official transcripts be sent well in advance of the deadline
- Finalize your personal statement

## Senior Year (Spring Semester)

- Follow up to be sure that application packets were received for early deadlines
- Mail completed applications to remaining schools
- Try to visit colleges and universities that accept you before you accept them
- Call or write notes to accept or decline offers
- Send a deposit to the university of your choice
- If you plan to live in university housing, apply for space
- Evaluate your financial situation once you know the aid you will or will not receive, continue to research funding options, look for employment, etc.
- Write a note to people who wrote recommendations and tell them the good news and thank them
- Check with all institutions before the deadline to make sure your file is complete.

## Research and Evaluate the School

### Programs

Programs offer a wide variety of courses and disciplines:

- Is it especially strong in certain areas?
- How large are the classes?
- How often are the courses given?
- Is the curriculum challenging and up-to-date?
- Does it emphasize what interests you?
- Does one school of thought or approach to research dominate?
- Are there ample opportunities for field work or research?
- What internships are available?
- Are the school and program accredited?
- How many hours are needed for a degree?
- Will the school prepare you for the changes in the economy and the work force that will come about in the next twenty years?
- Is a thesis required?
- Is there a time limit in attaining a degree?
- What is the program's track record in finding its graduates positions?
- What types of jobs do they get?
- What percentage of graduates takes jobs in business, industry, government agencies or non-profits

### Faculty

Information about the full time faculty backgrounds are found in the school catalogs

- Where did they study?
- What have they published?
- How current is their work?
- Does the faculty have professional experience outside the academic community?
- Are some of the teachers recognized as authorities in their field?
- Are the mentoring prospects good?
- Do they work closely with their students and involve them in their work?

## Student Body

- Select a graduate school where you will be challenged by your classmates
- Select a school where your graduate admission test and GPA will not be significantly different from those of your fellow students
- On your visit to the campus ask students questions about the graduate opportunities

## Location and Environment

- Is the school the only major institution in a small college town or one urban campus among several in a large city?
- What facilities, including libraries, laboratories, and computers are available?
- What is the quality of the facilities?
- Are library collections large and up-to-date?
- What support services does the university offer students?
- Does the program attract scholars and practitioners from around the world?
- Placement
- How long does it take for graduates to find jobs?
- Where are the graduates being hired?
- What is the average salary of the graduates?
- Visit institutions that accept you.

# Meeting Application Requirements

## Graduate Admission Tests

Colleges and universities usually require a specific admission test and sometimes departments, also, have their own requirements. Most programs will not accept scores more than five years old.

## Admissions Criteria

The specific criteria and their relative weights vary, depending on the academic discipline, the institution, and the number of applicants. Typical criteria include:

- Transcript of grades
- Grade point average
- Admission test scores
- Relevant work experience
- Undergraduate research experience
- Résumé
- Application essay
- Letters of recommendation
- Interview

## Applications

A common recommendation is to apply to five schools, reflecting the following categories:

- One program that is extremely desirable, with very competitive admissions
- Three programs that are realistic in terms of admissions standards and that meet your criteria
- One program you are confident about getting into which meets your criteria
- Keep in mind each application is costly in terms of time and money

## **Application Deadlines**

Many graduate programs deadlines are in February or March. For some schools, it is best to apply in November or December or your senior year for admission the following fall. The more competitive the program, the earlier applications need to be submitted. Contact schools to determine applications deadlines.

## **Transcripts**

Admissions committees require official transcripts of your grades in order to evaluate your academic preparation for graduate study. Contact your college registrar to have your transcript sent to graduate institutions.

## **Application Essays**

A committee will read your essay and look for evidence that you are prepared for graduate school, have demonstrated intellectual or professional growth, and are focused in a particular field. They can tell a lot about you from your writing ability, so be sure your writing is clear and conveys your ideas effectively. Suggestions for writing the essay include:

- Writing a strong opening statement to grab their attention
- Your interest in the field and why you think you are suited to it
- Describing your immediate and long-term personal and professional goals
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution
- How your educational background, skills, and personal characteristics will contribute to success in this field
- Research or professional experiences that have contributed to your growth
- Any unusual experience that distinguishes you from other applicants
- Personal uniqueness – what you will add to the diversity of the entering class

## **Letters of Recommendation**

Recommendations from faculty members are essential for academically oriented programs, professional programs may seriously consider nonacademic recommendations from professionals in the field. A good reference will meet at least one of the following criteria:

- He or she has a high opinion of you
- Knows you well in more than one area of your life
- Is familiar with the institutions to which you are applying
- Has taught or worked with a large number of students and can make a favorable comparison of you with your peers
- Is known by the admissions committee and is regarded as someone whose judgment should be give weight
- Has good communication skills

## **Interviews**

Prepare for a graduate school interview as you would for a job interview. Interviewers will be interested in the way you think and approach problems and will concentrate on questions that enable them to assess your thinking skills, rather than questions that call upon your grasp of technical knowledge.

# Basic Types of Financial Aid

## Monetary Awards (Grants, Fellowships, Scholarships)

Most grants and fellowships are outright cash awards, sometimes known as “gift aid”, provided by a department, university or outside organization. Often they cover the cost of tuition and fees plus a stipend to cover living expenses. Some are based exclusively on financial need, some exclusively on academic merit, and some on a need and merit.

## Work Programs (Graduate Assistantships, College Work Study)

Certain types of support, such as teaching, research, and administrative assistantships, require recipients to perform a service for the university in exchange for a salary or stipend: sometimes tuition is also provided or waived. Large universities need teaching assistants particularly in English and Psychology Departments. Research assistants help a faculty member with his or her research and are offered to students in the hard sciences and social sciences. Administrative assistants work part-time as an assistant in one of the university’s administrative or support services department

## Loans

Loans, an important source of support for graduate students, should be approached carefully. Finding free sources of funding should be your first goal. You should check with the financial aid officer of the school you wish to attend before applying for a loan to determine if the school may offer a financial aid package that makes borrowing unnecessary. You can then borrow only what you really need once the school has made its aid offer. Various federal and private loan programs are available for graduate study. For more information contact your school’s financial aid office, the graduate academic department and check websites.