

What Is Graduate School All About?

In contrast to undergraduate study which introduces you to a wide range of subjects, even though you major in one, a graduate program involves specialized knowledge and concentrated study in one area.

There are professional and research degrees at the master's and doctoral levels:

- **The Professional Master's** gives you a specific set of skills needed to practice in a particular field, such as education, business, engineering or other profession requiring specialized training. It is generally a final or "terminal" degree, and often involves an internship, practicum or field work.
- **The Research Master's** provides experience in research and scholarship, and it may be a final degree or a step toward the Ph.D. A master's degree usually takes one or two years of study.
- **The Professional Doctorate.** The M.D. for medical practice or the J.D. for law are the most common professional degrees.
- **The Research Doctorate.** The Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), is the primary credential for college level teaching. The Ph.D. typically involves both course work and a major research project. The Ph.D. usually takes a minimum of four to six years of full-time study.

Career Options with a Graduate Degree

- **The Master's Degree.** The Master of Arts (M.A.) or Master of Science (M.S.) can be an entry point for new and better job opportunities in business, industry, government, and education.

In education, for instance, it can open doors to teaching, administration and staff positions in elementary and secondary schools, community colleges and other institutions of higher learning.

- **The Doctorate Degree.** The traditional career for recipients of the doctorate degree is college teaching and research. The Ph.D., however, can lead to a wide variety of career options in corporations where research and development of new products or services are important, or with government agencies where the skill to analyze large amounts of complex data is essential.

For example, statisticians work for the Census Bureau, psychologists work for advertising firms, historians work for museums, and chemists, engineers, physicists and other scientists may work in science-based industries.

Is Graduate School Right For You?

What are your motivations for attending graduate school? Be honest with yourself. Do not go to graduate school out of fear of having no other options. Choose graduate school because you are working toward a goal, not looking for "an easy way out".

Graduate school will probably turn out to be a satisfying and valuable experience if:

- You have a clear sense of the career you want to pursue, and if an advanced degree is the ticket to entry into that field. College and university teaching and research, law, medicine and dentistry are areas in which education beyond the baccalaureate level is required.
- You want to immerse yourself in the study of a particular academic discipline purely for the love of it, and would never forgive yourself if you did not at least give it a try. Remember, you will be spending several years studying and doing research and work in that academic field.

Think twice if you're considering grad school solely for one of the following reasons:

- You haven't decided what kind of career you want to pursue and regard the campus as a sheltered place to "find yourself".

This view is common and acceptable for undergraduates. It can present a real problem at the postgraduate level where students are expected to have clearly defined interests leading to an area of specialization.

- You're getting pressure from your friends, parents or professors. Your interests and motivation in attending graduate school are what's really important.
- You're doing it simply to postpone the inevitable job search. Remember, a graduate degree is no guarantee of a job.
- You think there's nothing you can do "with a major in..." Regardless of your major, keep in mind that your undergraduate education has equipped you with many skills that are highly valued in the workplace, such as research and analysis, critical thinking, and communications.

In deciding whether to pursue an advanced degree, you may wish to carefully consider some important questions:

- What do I want to accomplish in my lifetime?
- What are my long-term and short-range professional goals?
- Is graduate school necessary for me to achieve these goals?
- Do I have the interest and ability to succeed in a graduate program?
- By going to graduate school, am I simply delaying my career planning and decision-making?
- Will the amount of time and money spent on a program ultimately translate into greater career mobility and financial possibilities?
- Am I willing to meet the extensive research, course work and major paper demands of another academic program?

Would continuing education alternatives, such as University Extension, vocational school and community college courses, or professional seminar and workshops assist in achieving my goals?

Graduate School: Now or Later?

Should you go straight to graduate school? There are no hard and fast rules. It is a good idea to talk with faculty, prospective employers, and students currently pursuing programs of interest to you, in order to hear their perspectives on the advantages of immediate vs. delayed entry into graduate school.

You may want to consider these questions before making your decision:

- Are you reasonably sure of your career goals, or is there a strong possibility that you could change your mind after a taste of the working world?
- Would related work experience help you clarify ambiguous career goals?
- Is an advanced degree a prerequisite to your chosen career? The doctorate is mandatory for practicing medicine or law, for example.
- How much will your job and salary prospects be enhanced by a graduate degree? The master' degree recipient almost always commands a higher yearly rate of pay. A \$3,000-\$4,000 differential is common, while in some technical disciplines \$6,000-\$8,000 is not uncommon.
- Would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after a break?
- Do you have a strong GPA? Would work experience enhance your application credentials by offsetting mediocre grades or test scores? In the case of some professional schools, admissions committees are generally as interested in your work background as in your "numbers".
- Will it be easier to enter grad school in your field directly after college or after gaining work experience?
- What are the direct and indirect costs of graduate school? Include the cost of the program and books, living expenses and loss of income while you're in school.
- Is there a possibility that a future employer might pay for you to attend graduate school?

Combining Work and Graduate School

Many recent graduates, strapped with sizable debts from their undergraduate college years, forego the pursuit of an advanced degree and look for employment as soon as possible.

The solution is finding employment with major corporations that offer tuition assistance programs as part of their benefits package. These programs allow employees to take courses and earn master's degrees at nearby colleges or universities while they advance their careers.

Numerous corporations provide 100% assistance for tuition and fees for credit courses. Interestingly, tuition reimbursement remains an underused benefit. A recent survey by Hewitt Associates shows that only 7 percent of employees take advantage of company plans that pay for job-related courses.

Some companies combine the tuition assistance benefit with a "front-pay" option that allows direct billing from the college to the corporation, eliminating the need for out-of-pocket expenses. Other companies allow employees to apply for upfront advances on 50 percent of tuition costs.

Usually, classes must be taken during evenings or weekends to qualify for assistance.

Selecting A Graduate School: Look Before You Leap!

Once you're certain that grad school fits into your career and life plans, you need to find out as much as possible about the program you have in mind. Early in your junior year, begin to explore schools offering the type of program you want.

A common concern deals with which institution has the "best" program. There is no single reliable ranking of graduate schools. National rankings do exist, however each is based on different criteria. Therefore, it may be more meaningful to talk to faculty in your field and see which professors are doing research and publishing.

While actual rankings may be somewhat misleading, comparative information about various programs is readily available. As you attempt to gain an overview of the many graduate and professional school programs available, you may find the following directories particularly helpful. They are probably available in your Career Resources Library.

- **Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study**, published in six volumes, profile over 1400 accredited institutions offering masters and/or doctoral programs. Many profiles list faculty and their research interests.
- **The Guide to American Graduate Schools**, describes post-baccalaureate study opportunities at more than 685 accredited institutions. Sections include: admission and degree requirements, tuition, degrees conferred, enrollments, fields of study, and financial aid opportunities.
- **The Directory of Graduate Programs**, published by the Graduate Record Examinations Board. This four-volume publication contains information on U.S. graduate programs in over 80 major fields.

Additional Ways to Evaluate Programs

- **Review Graduate Catalogs.** Your Career Resources Library should have a comprehensive collection of in-state college and university catalogs, with selected holdings of out-of-state institutions. The Microfiche College Catalog Collection, which encompasses most U.S. and foreign colleges and universities, may be available in your student library.

You may also request catalogs directly from the Admissions Office of the institutions you are considering.

- **Talk with Graduate School Admissions Representatives.** An annual Graduate & Professional School Information Day is held on most campuses each fall. You may confirm the date with the Graduate Affirmative Affairs Office.

Other annual events where you'll be able to meet representatives from grad schools across the country include the GRE Forum, Law Forum and MBA Forum. Information on dates and locations is available at the Placement and Career Planning Center.

- **Visit the Campus.** Perhaps nothing can help you get a better perspective than an actual campus visit. There you'll have a chance to observe the following: Do students and faculty interact productively? Is faculty easily accessible? Do the school, campus and community satisfy your lifestyle and extracurricular needs?

Criteria for Evaluating Graduate Programs

These criteria may help you to decide which graduate programs are best suited to your talents, your ambitions, and at a time of soaring college costs, your pocketbook:

Admission. What are admission requirements? How important are GPA and test scores? What criteria is used to evaluate and select students? Will it be easier to get accepted after gaining work experience? What types of students does the program attract? Some schools attract highly competitive people while others foster teamwork.

Programs Offered. What specializations are available? Does the program focus on theory and original research, or does it stress the practical application of knowledge and skills? Does the program provide real work experience such as practicums or internships? Is the curriculum structured or flexible? Are there opportunities to work on research projects? What resources, such as computers and laboratories, are available?

Faculty. Who are they? What are their credentials? Do they hold degrees in fields of expertise from leading universities? What awards, grants and special recognition have they earned? What have they published? What research projects have they conducted? Do they hold chairs or professorships? Does the department have nationally or internationally known scholars in the field? Do the top scholars in the program teach, or are they primarily involved in research? Do they actively participate in the graduate school community? Is there diversity? What is the faculty/student ratio?

Philosophy of Education. What is the average length of time spent in the program? Do opportunities exist for specialization in areas of your own interest? Is the approach theoretical or pragmatic?

Reputation. Is the university accredited? Is the program nationally ranked in terms of excellence? Is the program well established or relatively new? Who has graduated from the program and what are they doing now? What is the attrition level?

Multicultural Opportunities. What is faculty and student composition? Will you have an opportunity to work with students from other cultures? What foreign exchange programs are available? Is it possible to study foreign languages? What multicultural experiences does the faculty bring to the classroom? Are international concerns substantially integrated into the curriculum?

Library. Is there a comprehensive reference collection in your area of specialization? How many volumes? What special collections? Is the material accessible? Is a computerized system available? How many trained staff members are there?

Physical Facilities. Are there adequate study facilities? Sufficient classrooms and seminar rooms? Are there areas for student interaction? Are the surroundings attractive and pleasant enough to endure throughout the program?

Cost. What are the tuition and fees? What financial aid is available in the form of loans, scholarships, internships and work study funds? What about teaching and research assistantships? How much is a non-resident tuition?

Geographic Location. Considering the weather and political/social climate, do I want to live here for several years? Would I be happier in a small town or a large urban area? Does the area offer cultural and recreational activities? Is this a place where I might want to stay? What kind of impact will this location have on my family and friends? What are the employment opportunities in the area?

Size. Look at the size of the department as well as the university. A large institution will have more extensive facilities and libraries; a smaller school will offer more personal attention and a sense of community.

State Regulations & Residency Requirements. Many state universities are required by law to give admission preference to in-state residents. These regulations apply to your legal residence and may affect the cost of your tuition.

Career Assistance. What career planning and job search assistance is available through the department? Is there an on-campus career center that offers counseling, job search training, employment leads and library resources? Does the program provide real work experience such as practicum's, cooperative programs or internships to give you solid work experience? Are career services offered to alumni?

Networking Contacts. If you hope to develop relationships with industry leaders, select a school that prides itself on real-world orientation and opportunities to mingle with living legends. If you want a program that encourages graduates to network, seek a school with a well-developed alumni relations office.

The Graduate School Application Process

How It Works

The application process varies from school to school. In many cases an admissions committee of faculty and administrators makes the selections, using criteria beyond just grades and test scores. They may also set goals for in-state versus out-of-state candidates, gender, and other desirable ratios.

At the other extreme, individual faculty may select candidates that match the department's needs for certain expertise or interests.

It is important that you find out the selection procedure for each school to which you apply and tailor your application to show how you fit.

General Procedures

Request Information. Call or write for applications, catalogs and financial aid information approximately one year before you intend to enter graduate school.

Application requirements differ substantially among institutions and programs. Read each school's material conscientiously to make sure you file a complete and timely application.

Some institutions use self-managed applications which mean the applicant is responsible for obtaining and submitting all supporting documents, such as transcripts and reference letters.

Apply Early. Application deadlines can range from August 1 (before your senior year) to July (after your senior year for schools with rolling admissions). Admission and financial aid decisions are often made well in advance of stated university deadlines. Departments in heavy demand may close applications as early as October. If admissions are handled on a "rolling" basis (i.e., qualified applicants are accepted as they apply) it is to your distinct advantage to apply at the earliest possible date to receive maximum consideration.

Since approximately one-half of graduate school candidates apply during the last month before deadlines, an early application can set you apart from the competition.

The Application Package

- Application form, including personal essay or "statement of purpose"
- Non-refundable fee
- Separate financial aid application
- Transcripts
- Letters of recommendation
- Standardized test scores
- Personal interview

How To Apply

For graduate school, you apply to a specific program or department, even though you may send your materials to a central admissions office.

A General Rule of Thumb: apply to at least two or three departments with programs that match your interests. Select at least one highly prestigious and highly competitive research university, and one major university with fairly large graduate programs where you feel you have a reasonable chance of being accepted. As insurance, apply to an institution where you feel certain you will be accepted. If you are accepted at more than one, so much the better. You will have choices.

Completing the Application Form. It should be filled out clearly, accurately, and free of typographical and grammatical errors. Be consistent in spelling out your full, legal name on all forms.

The Personal Essay. Every graduate school application contains an essay portion or a "statement of purpose." Your essay should specifically address questions posed in the application, and express your enthusiasm for the field of study, your motivation, creativity, maturity, and person uniqueness. The essay is a key measure of your ability to communicate, so it pays to be meticulous about spelling, grammar and writing style.

Most applications will state the length of the essay or provide space. Keep your essay within these boundaries; a longer essay can work against you. Admissions committees evaluate the quality, not the volume of the essay. Use at least 10-point type or larger.

Application Fees vary, ranging from \$20-50 in most cases. Most schools have an application fee waiver for students with financial need. Call the admissions offices and ask how to get one.

Transcripts and Grades. Have your registrar's office send a transcript of your undergraduate work directly to the admissions office of the schools to which you are applying. The minimum GPA required at most universities is 3.0 on a 4.0 scale.

Grades are of overwhelming importance, but a GPA that does not quite meet that minimum can be offset with good letters of recommendation, high test scores, and a well-written statement of purpose.

If there is a valid reason why your GPA is low (e.g., your freshman year grades pulled down your overall average, you worked 30 hours per week in addition to a heavy course load, etc.), it may be advantageous to re-compute your GPA based on your last two years of study or course work in your major. You should discuss the recomputed GPA in your essay.

Undergraduate Grade Point Average (UGPA). Most institutions require the equivalent of a 4-year bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university prior to registering for your first term of graduate study. The admissions committee may consider several components of your UGPA when reviewing your transcript:

- Cumulative UGPA
- UGPA in your major/concentration
- Final 2-year UGPA
- UGPA in courses relevant to your intended field of study
- UGPA from year-to-year, or semester-to-semester

Graduate Grade Point Average (GGPA). If you have a master's degree, your GGPA will be an important consideration for doctorate program acceptance.

Financial Aid. An application for financial aid will generally come either as part of your application packet or in a separate mailing from a campus financial aid office. You may have to apply separately for fellowships and for loans. Since financial support varies widely from institution to institution, the best advice is to read all financial aid materials carefully and to file documents on time.

Letters of Recommendation. Most institutions will request between three and five letters of recommendation. It is best to obtain recommendations from faculty members and employers who are qualified to evaluate your academic and/or work potential and performance, based on personal observation. Approach your recommenders early in the fall of your senior year to give them time to write before their other academic pressures mount.

Give them the school's recommendation forms with stamped, addressed envelopes and enough supporting material to enable them to write detailed letters on your behalf. This may include a cover sheet reminding them of classes taken under them, projects you have done for them, a transcript, a resume, and a copy of your essay.

Be sure to discuss with them your reasons for going to graduate school and why you are applying to specific programs

Test Scores. Most schools require that you take one or more standardized admissions exams before they decide upon your application. The GRE (Graduate Record Examination), GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test), MCAT (Medical College Admission Test), and LSAT (Law School Admission Test) are among the more common standardized tests. The school's catalog will specify which test you need and will often give some indication of the score needed to be competitive for the program.

Due to increased competition for admission and financial assistance, it will work to your advantage to take the appropriate standardized test early in your application process. Test registration deadlines are well in advance of the actual test dates, and most are given only a few times a year.

Information bulletins with test dates and application procedures are available from the testing services listed below, as well as at the Placement and Career Planning Center.

Generally, you should plan to take the test approximately one year prior to matriculation.

Policies regarding taking the test more than once, whether scores are averaged or if the highest score alone is considered, and other related issues vary from institution to institution. It is appropriate to ask about the policy.

Personal Interviews. Some graduate and professional schools will grant an interview as part of the application process. The interview gives the admissions committee an opportunity to determine if there is a match between what their institution has to offer.

The interview provides an excellent opportunity to "sell yourself." In addition, take this opportunity to discuss your qualifications, personal goals, and why you think you're a perfect match for the program.

Here is some advice to help you make a strong impression during your personal interview:

- Don't ask questions that are answered in the school's brochures or catalogs.
- Be prepared to answer standard questions, such as "Why do you want to attend graduate school?" "What are your long-range goals?" and "What makes you believe that you will be successful in the program?"
- Save the preferred school for last. If you have interviews at several schools, you'll improve your interviewing skills as you go along.
- Follow up with a thank you note. It can be quite short, but mention something specific about the interview or your qualifications.