



Graduate and Professional School

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Planning

Planning for graduate/professional school is a long-term process and should begin about two years before the semester you intend to begin a program. Because many graduate programs have fall application and financial aid filing deadlines, planning should start during the junior year.

Researching and Choosing a Graduate or Professional Program

- ◇ Determine whether or not graduate or professional school is for you
 - Discuss your career goals with faculty, mentors, and career professionals
 - Is a graduate degree required in order for you to meet your career goals? Be sure that your answer is yes before taking on more education loans
 - Choose the specialty that is right for you based on your career goals and interests
- ◇ Create a list of CRITERIA for your graduate program
 - Record your criteria using *The Decision Making Process* worksheet at the end of this handout
- ◇ Research careers, institutions, and programs
 - Attend area Graduate and Professional School Fairs
 - Refer to graduate school guides such as Peterson's
 - Visit institutions. While on campus, talk with faculty, students, and admissions staff
 - Use the web for accurate and updated information
 - ~ Visit general graduate school web sites
 - ~ All accredited graduate and professional programs: <http://petersons.com/>
 - ~ Rankings for most areas of study: <http://www.usnews.com>
 - ~ Comprehensive graduate information: <http://www.gradview.com/>
 - ~ Visit institutional and program web sites
- ◇ Choose about five programs and institutions that meet your criteria
 - Make note of application requirements and timelines for the institutions to which you will apply

Preparing Application Materials

Most graduate programs use an on-line application process. You will be required to create a username and login. You will be able to submit most application materials on-line.

◇ **Develop calendar of deadline dates**

◇ **Sign up to take required admissions exams**

- General graduate programs: GRE: <http://www.gre.org>
- Law School: LSAT: <http://www.lsatsat.org/>
- Medical School: MCAT: <http://www.aamc.org/stuapps/admiss/mcat/start.htm>
- Business School: GMAT: <http://www.mba.org/>
- Professional program testing: KAPLAN <http://www1.kaplan.com/>

◇ **Gather application materials**

• **Application form**

- ~ 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.

◆ **Personal essay or “statement of purpose”**

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 personal 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.

◆ **Non-refundable fee**

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.

◆ **Separate financial aid application**

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.

◆ **Transcripts**

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 but check with your specific program.

◆ **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 letter writers 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.

◆ **Standardized 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.

◆ **Personal interview** (if applicable)

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 you and 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.

After You Have Submitted Your Applications

- Call all institutions to ensure they have received your complete application materials
 - Possibly interview for assistantships or entrance into programs and institutions
- ◇ WAIT for notification from schools
- You may receive replies as early as March or April or as late as June. In some cases, you may be placed on a waiting list from which you may be selected as vacancies occur. These could be filled as late as immediately prior to the beginning of a new term. Before you begin receiving acceptances and rejections, rank the schools according to your preferences. As soon as you receive two offers, politely decline the less attractive one. Continue this process until you make your final choice. This may make it difficult if you have heard from School #2 but are still awaiting a response from School #1.
 - Before being pressured into sending a fee to a second-choice program, try to speed up the first-choice school with a polite inquiry about the status of your application. If they intend to notify applicants shortly, try to stall the other school. If there will be considerable time between the deadline for one school and the notification date of another, you may have to decide if you're willing to pay for a guaranteed spot you may not use.
- ◇ **CELEBRATE your acceptance to the program of choice**
- Send deposit to the institution of your choice
 - Notify other institutions of your decision, allowing them to accept others in your place
 - Send thank you notes to your letter of recommendation writers and inform them of your plans

Tips

- **Number of schools:** 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.
- **Paying for graduate school:** You will rarely have to pay for grad school Fellowships & Grants. These awards, granted on the basis of academic achievement, normally include a stipend for living expenses, and pay registration fees and tuition. They can be either portable (i.e., offered by an organization for study at any institution of the student's choice) or institutional (i.e., offered by the university or department for study there).
- **Assistantships:** Teaching and research assistantships usually involve working 10-20 hours per week in exchange for a stipend or monthly salary and/or tuition reduction. Requests for information on assistantships and applications should be made directly to the department of program of interest to you.
- **Resident Assistantships:** Some institutions have programs in which graduate students earn a stipend, room and board, or both by working as assistants in undergraduate residence halls. To inquire about such possibilities, contact the school's director of residence halls.
- **Long-term Educational Loans:** About 75% of all graduate financial aid is now in the form of loans. In addition to major financial programs such as Stafford Student Loans (formerly Guaranteed Student Loans), Perkins Loans, and Plus Loans, each graduate discipline has loan and aid programs tailor-made to suit the situation. Many private lenders have entered the loan market. Decisions are made according to pre-set policies and formulas and are based on a student's financial need. The institution's financial aid office will be able to explain these loan programs to you.
- **Employer-financed Schooling:** Many companies provide partial or full tuition reimbursement depending on the grades the employees achieve and the relevance of the course work to their current jobs.
- **Part-time Employment:** Check with the career center on your graduate school campus for part-time employment opportunities.
- **You will be poor in grad school.**
- **Have fun the summer before you go!**

Name of school or organization	Quality 1	Quality 2	Quality 3	Quality 4	Quality 5	Quality 6	Quality 7
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