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## The Graduate Application Process

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## **Introduction**

The process of applying to graduate school can be an overwhelming process IF you do not take the necessary steps to prepare for this process. This guide will provide you with information on *why, how, where, and what*, to consider in the graduate school application process.

## **Why Attend Graduate School?**

This is the most important question you will need to ask yourself before you begin the process of applying to Graduate School. Consider the following information in order to make the best decision for you. A graduate degree should be pursued if:

- it is required for entry into a particular field (medicine, law, counseling)
- you have a strong interest in a particular area
- it is required to advance (professionally/financially) in your career of interest.

On the other hand, if your interest in attending graduate school consists of avoiding the job search, pleasing someone else, or simply not knowing what else to do, then there may be other questions to ask yourself and determine what your next step really should be.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself before continuing your education:

- Where do I want to be in the next 3 – 5 years?
- Do I need a graduate degree to get there?
- How long will it take to complete a typical program in my area of interest?
- What is the content of the courses?
- What are the graduates in my program of interest doing?
- What is the attrition rate (how many students stick with the program)?
- Who are the faculty and what are their research interests?
- What do I expect to be the results of this degree?

Considering your responses to these questions may assist in determining whether or not graduate school is right for you, at this moment. Going through this process may also assist in finding the appropriate program for you and your interests.

## **Graduate School: Now or Later?**

Should you go to graduate school right after receiving your undergraduate degree or should you take time away from school? There is no clear answer to this question. By talking with professors, prospective employers, and professionals in your field of interest you may gain a better perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of immediate versus delayed entry into graduate school. You may also consider the following questions before making your decision.

- Are you reasonably sure of your career goals, or is there a possibility that you could change your mind?
- Would related work experience help you clarify ambiguous career goals?
- Do your career goals require a graduate degree?
- Would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after a break?

- Once you start to earn a regular paycheck, will it be difficult for you to give all or part of that up to become a student again?
- Do you have a strong GPA? Would work experience enhance your application credentials by offsetting a mediocre GPA?
- Will it be easier to enter graduate school in your field directly after college or would gaining work experience give you a more competitive edge?
- Is there a possibility that a future employer might pay for you to attend graduate school?

### **Selecting a Graduate School**

When you are sure that graduate school will fit into your career and life plans, your next step is to find out about the programs you have in mind. As you attempt to gain an overview of the many graduate and professional school programs available, you may find the following directories helpful:

#### [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)

- Search for graduate programs by using the name of the program, location, area of study and search for program descriptions
- Provides tips on applying to graduate school

#### [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)

- Search for graduate programs by subject
- Provides information about the program as well as contact information index of university home pages

#### [www.gradschooltips.com](http://www.gradschooltips.com)

- Provides tips on the entire graduation school process. From deciding on a school, to testing, to financing your education
- Gives examples of graduate application essays

#### [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)

- Educational Testing Service Web Site
- Information on the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT
- Practice questions and tips on how to prepare and take each test
- Financial aid information is also included

#### [www.mba.com/us](http://www.mba.com/us)

- A great source of information on MBA programs

#### [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)

- Law School Admissions Council Web Site
- Links to law schools and testing
- Number one site for anyone interested in law school

#### [www.examfocus.com](http://www.examfocus.com)

- Study guides, general test information, and practice tests for various educational exams
- Covers GRE, GMAT, LSAT, and MCAT

## Criteria for Evaluating Graduate Programs

Now that you know where and how to research graduate programs, the next step involves identifying criteria to assist in evaluating whether a match between your interests and the graduate school exists. The following list is only a sample of criteria to consider during this step.

- Admissions – what are the admission requirements? How important are GPA and test scores? What criteria is used to evaluate and select students?
- Programs Offered – what specializations are available? Does the program focus on theory and research, or does it stress practical application of knowledge and skills?
- Faculty – who are they? What are their credentials? Do they hold degrees in fields of expertise from leading universities? What research projects have they conducted?
- 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?
- Reputation – is the university accredited? Is the program nationally ranked in terms of excellence? What is the attrition level?
- Physical Facilities – are there adequate study facilities? Sufficient classrooms and seminar rooms? Are there areas for student interactions?
- Cost – what are tuition and fees? What type of financial aid is available?
- Geographic Location – would I be happy in a small town or a large urban area? Does the area offer cultural and recreational activities?
- Size – consider the size of the department, as well as the entire university.
- Career Assistance – what career planning and job search assistance is available? Does the program offer real work experience such as practicums, cooperative programs, and/or internships?

## Financing Your Education

Essentially there are six methods for financing your graduate education:

- Teaching assistantships allow individuals interested in the teaching profession to gain valuable experience while continuing their education. These assistantships are very competitive and you must apply to a department as a whole. A minimum of twenty hours per week is usually required.
- Research assistantships provide you with the opportunity to gain practical research experience. Research assistantships are usually awarded to second year graduate students. You should contact the academic department in your area of study to describe your research interest.
- Graduate assistantships allow you to gain valuable experience in your area of study. This type of assistantship usually requires you to work at least twenty hours a week in an academic or non-academic department and provides you with a small stipend for living expenses. In exchange for your work, graduate assistantships may provide the cost of your tuition.
- Fellowships and scholarships provide other excellent ways to fund your graduate education. In order to qualify for a fellowship or scholarship you must meet specific

criteria. Financial need is not usually a factor in determining your eligibility for fellowships or scholarships.

- Grants provide financial assistance based on financial need, academic merit, or a combination of financial need and academic merit. Grants cover your cost of tuition and no service is required.
- Loans may be obtained through government loan programs. Other loan money may be obtained through private lenders.

### **The Application Process**

Once you have researched graduate schools and programs, you should narrow your search to at least three schools, so you aren't putting all of your eggs in one basket. Researching the Admissions page of the school website, or contacting the schools of your choice for application materials, is the next step in the graduate application process. The application package may include some, if not all, of the following: application form, personal essay or statement of purpose, non-refundable application fee, financial aid application, transcripts, letters of recommendation, standardized test scores, and a personal interview. The following timeline will provide a brief description of the steps to take to complete the process.

#### ***JUNIOR YEAR, Fall & Spring semester***

- Register and prepare for Graduate Admission Test
- Investigate Financial Aid resources and prospects
- Begin the process of obtaining letters of recommendation

#### ***JUNIOR YEAR, Summer***

- Take the required graduate admission test (GRE, GMAT, MCAT, etc.)
- Send for application materials
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible
- Begin writing your personal statement
- Have the draft of your personal statement reviewed by a career counselor
- Verify application process deadlines for targeted schools of interest and rolling admission policies
- For Medical, Dental, Veterinary, Osteopathy, Podiatry, or Law School, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use

#### ***SENIOR YEAR, Fall***

- Complete the process of obtaining letters of recommendation
- Complete your personal statement
- Have a career counselor review the final draft of your personal statement
- Take the required admission test if you have not done so already
- Obtain financial aid forms (FAFSA)
- Mail completed application materials

***SENIOR YEAR, Spring***

- Check with institutions before the deadline to make sure your application file is complete
- Visit institutions that accept you, if possible
- Send your deposit to the institution of your choice
- Notify other colleges and universities that accepted you of your decision so that they may admit students on their waiting list
- Send “Thank You” letters to individuals who wrote your recommendation letters informing them of your success
- Notify the Experiential Learning and Career Development Center of your success!!

**Final Words of Advice**

If you are thinking about graduate school do it, do not wait until you are unhappy in a job before you decide to begin the graduate school application process. The counselors in the Experiential Learning and Career Development Center can help you determine whether a graduate degree is appropriate for your field of work. The Experiential Learning and Career Development staff is ready to assist you with all aspects of the application process.