

GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Graduate School Selection and Application

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I. INTRODUCTION

Continuing your education beyond a bachelor's degree is a worthwhile consideration. However, Graduate School is NOT simply an extension of the undergraduate experience. It is an opportunity to gain further education and to become an expert in a specific field or area. The first step is to clarify your interests in order to develop a clear picture of the type of graduate program (and specialty area) you wish to pursue and why.

Reasons to Pursue a Graduate Degree:

1. Your career goal requires an advanced degree.
2. You are passionate about a subject and want to specialize in that subject.
3. In your field of work, an advanced degree will open the door to additional career opportunities and salary increases (relevant to alumni).

A Few Questions to Start the Process:

1. Where do I want to be professionally in the next 3-5 years?
2. Do I need a graduate degree to get there?
3. Do I have a strong desire and commitment to study the subject matter?
4. What are the graduates of the program doing?
5. How long will it take me to complete the program and is that timetable feasible economically, professionally, and personally?

If you are unable to answer these questions you need to begin by clarifying your career interests and goals. Graduate School is not something to pursue unless you are committed to the field and completion of the program. Too frequently, college students pursue graduate school to avoid the job market, because they like the college environment or to please someone else. None of these are sound reasons to pursue a graduate program.

II. TIMING

Deciding when to go to Graduate School is also an important consideration.

A. Immediately After Graduation

- If an advanced degree is REQUIRED for you to meet your immediate career goals, it will be difficult to pursue that career without a graduate degree.
- Some individuals feel it is easier to continue the academic path without interruption in order to maintain the classroom/learning skills to be successful.

B. Delay For a Year or More

- In some cases, employers prefer employees with both related work experience and an advanced degree.
- Financially you may need to work for some time to save up for graduate school.
- Some graduate programs require or prefer work experience in order to be admitted.
- Some employers will assist with graduate school costs after a specified time of employment.

C. Attend Part Time While Working Fulltime

- Attending graduate school part time will take longer to complete.

- Some employers will assist with graduate school costs while you continue as an employee
- Pursuing graduate school and working fulltime presents lifestyle and scheduling challenge which everyone is not suited for.

III. RESOURCES

Books & Handouts (in Career Development Center)

Graduate School Checklist

Pre-Law Magazine (Free copies available in CDC)

The GradSource magazine is found on line at www.GradSource.com

How to get into the Right Law School

By Paul Lermack, Ph.D

(Can be found in Career Development Center)

Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice

By Donald Asher

Websites

<http://www.gradschools.com>

<http://www.petersons.com>

<http://www.gradschooltips.com>

Professional Associations

Most professions have professional associations that provide information, resources, and services related to the field. Sometimes these associations serve as “accrediting bodies” for graduate programs.

Gourman Report

Uses a standard system of rating graduate programs using hundreds of criteria including caliber of faculty and facilities, breadth of curriculum, program completion rates, etc. The Gourman Report rates 105 programs including top professional, medical and business areas.

IV. TESTING INFORMATION

Test results are typically valid for five years. It can be beneficial to take graduate tests while you are still in school as you are in the test preparation and taking mode. Late Junior or early Senior year is ideal.

LSAT (www.lsac.org) Law School

Paper based and offered 4 times per year (June, October, December and February).

GRE (www.gre.org) Graduate Record Exam (General and/or Subject)

General test is a computer based test and is available year round at test centers throughout the world. Subject tests are paper based with limited testing locations and dates.

GMAT (www.gmat.com) MBA Programs & Business Schools

Computer based test that is available year round at test centers throughout the world.

MAT (www.tpcweb.com) Miller Analogy Test

Administered through controlled testing centers.

MCAT (www.mcat.com) Medical School

Offered each April and August at established test centers.

V. GRADUATE ENTRANCE EXAM PREPARATION RESOURCES

It is strongly suggested that you spend a significant amount of time and energy preparing for the exam in advance. Each individual needs to determine the most appropriate and effective method based on his or her learning styles, studying habits, financial resources and the amount of time before the exam date.

All test takers will benefit from increasing their vocabulary and reading comprehension. An effective method of doing this is to read more, and to read challenging materials from different sources than the reading you complete through your regular coursework. *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* are both highly recommended for their reading and vocabulary levels, availability and variety of topics covered in each issue. They are available through paper based or on-line subscriptions, the reference sections of most libraries and large grocery and bookstores.

Additional Resources Include:

- 1. Sample tests through the testing organization** Each of the testing websites has information on ordering sample tests. These are helpful throughout your preparation because they require you to simulate the testing experience in terms of time restrictions and stamina.
- 2. Preparation books and software** Many groups have developed preparation books and software. Keep in mind that you should always do some preparation or sample tests in the same format that you will take the actual exam (ie. General GRE is computer based, so software sample tests would more accurately simulate the testing environment; LSAT is paper based so paper based sample tests would more accurately simulate the testing environment).
- 3. Preparation courses** There are a number of national and regional groups that offer preparation courses for a cost of anywhere from \$200 - \$2,000 per course. Research the options in your area, as well as courses offered by area colleges & universities.

VI. THE RESEARCH AND SELECTION PROCESS

A. Establish a Target

Identify a subject and degree (Masters usually take 1-3 years and Doctorates are 4-5 years minimum)

B. Research Graduate Schools and Programs

Sources:

- Faculty
- Alumni and currently enrolled students
- Peterson's Guides
- Specialty Guides

- Academic Journals
- Practicing professionals
- Professional Associations
- Research and Doctoral Programs in the U.S.
- Gourman Report
- Business Magazines

C. Your List

1. Generate A List:

Come up with a list of 5-10 schools you would be happy to attend. Ideally you should not limit yourself geographically.

2. Rank Programs:

Criteria to consider: Admissions standards, programs offered, faculty, philosophy of education, reputation, facilities, cost, location, size, and career assistance.

3. Divide into 3 categories: Safe, Probably/Maybe and Reach based upon probability of acceptance

Apply to a minimum of 4 programs: 1/3 in each category with at least 2 Safe Schools. Average number of applications should be 4-10.

D. Getting More Information

1. Through the Internet, search through institution and department pages to find individual faculty pages

- Look for awards, publishing, grants etc.
- Identify faculty with interests similar to yours
- Identify 1 – 4 faculty at each institution with whom you would like to study or unique coursework or opportunities available

2. Write to Faculty and Currently Enrolled Students

- Ask for some clarification of the program
- Comment on something the professor has written
- Propose a research study topic, if it is directly related to their research specialty

E. Application Materials

Have materials reviewed to be sure that all information is sent out several weeks before due dates. Follow directions carefully and answer all questions thoroughly. Reread your drafts several times and have someone else proof read them. Maintain copies of everything you have submitted.

1. Undergraduate Grades Transcript

Undergraduate transcripts can be obtained from the Records Office at York College

2. Essay – Opportunity for you to concisely express your intent and background.

Be aware of your language and term usage, be sincere, and show your knowledge of the profession.

Key Components:

- a) Trace history of your interest in the area and subject including undergraduate prep in area and relevant research
- b) Insight into your academic and career goals and motivations

- c) Discuss your capacity to perform at the graduate level and fit for the program
- d) State details of what you want to study and under whom; why this program
- e) Demonstrate your writing ability

3. Common Mistakes in the Essay:

- a) Careless errors
- b) Vague generalities
- c) Repeating from resume
- d) Irrelevant or redundant information
- e) Gimmicks

4. Recommendations – always have an extra recommendation

- a) Who – faculty in field, work or research supervisors, alumni from grad program who know you well academically or professionally
- b) Solicitation
 - (1) Approach the potential reference for a counseling session regarding your graduate school plans
 - (2) Bring transcripts, paper or lab from that professor, table of undergraduate research, resume or curriculum vitae, all envelopes, forms and postage needed
 - (3) Ask, “Would you be comfortable making a strong recommendation for me for a graduate program in...?”
 - (4) Tell the person when you are going to apply, not the deadline (allow the individual 4-6 weeks)
 - (5) Don't disappear– follow up appropriately, but do not be demanding
 - (6) Send thank you note afterwards

F. Costs and Financial Aid

1. How to Find Out

Ask the Graduate Program Office at institution and check findaid.org as both may provide a variety of independent sources

2. Sources of Financial Aid

- a) Graduate Assistantships – given by campus offices, allows you to gain valuable experience while working in an institutional office or department
- b) Teaching Assistantships – given through department, allows you to gain valuable teaching experience while continuing your education (very competitive)
- c) Research Assistantships – given through individual faculty, allows you to gain practical research experience
- d) Fellowships – available through school or external groups and have specific criteria
- e) Grants – smaller monetary amounts than fellowships, but more abundant, based on financial need, academic merit or a combination of both
- f) Loans – obtainable through government programs or private lenders

VII. INTERVIEWS

Be sure to fully prepare for the interview including: confirming the location and individual(s) you will meet with, arrive early, dress professionally, research the program, prepare for questions.

A. Questions You May Be Asked:

1. Why are you interested in attending our school/program?
2. What other programs have you applied to and why?
3. Do you feel your grade represent your capabilities?
4. Tell us more about your research project(s) with...
5. Tell me about a time you had difficulty with a course or a professor and how you handled the situation?
6. What value will you bring to our program and classrooms?
7. What is the most significant development in this field over the past twenty years and why?
8. What will you do if you are not accepted to graduate school?
9. Questions about current research, events and issues in the discipline

B. Questions To Ask About Any Graduate Program:

1. What do you teach here and how do you distinguish your program from others?
2. What is your attrition rate? Of those who don't finish, what are their reasons?
3. How reliable is your financial aid support year to year? Is the first year offer always sustained given attainment of academic goals?
4. What is the mean time to complete the (a) class work, (b) research, (c) dissertation? (i.e., what is the mean time to complete the Ph.D.? Ask about the program as a whole, but perhaps more importantly, by professor.)
5. What is your age, gender balance, ratio of married/single, and geographical origin of graduate students in the program?
6. May I have some bibliographies of recent publications by faculty? Which professors have won awards and grants lately? (and presumably need graduate assistants)
7. What are the criteria and process for selecting Teaching Assistants (TAs), Research Assistants (RAs) and Fellows?
8. May I meet some currently enrolled students? (in person or via email; be sure to ask about their research topics and be sure to take notes on specific professors mentioned)
9. Can you tell me about your placement rates and types of jobs obtained by recent graduates? (avoid relying on testimonials and anecdotal evidence)
10. How can I be a strong candidate for a program like this?

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VIII. ASHER'S LAW

Thou shalt not visit, call, nor write any professor without having read some of his/her work first.

How to avoid this:

- Get faculty member bibliography from faculty home page or departmental web site
- Call the departmental secretary and ask for one
- Run a web search on the faculty member's name
- See a reference librarian for assistance

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IX. IDEAL TIMELINE- based on beginning of initial semester of enrollment

- 2 - 2 ½ years in advance
 - Research the discipline and related fields, conduct info interviews with professionals to gain a stronger understanding of field
 - Discuss your interests with faculty members and advisor and begin to understand specialties with the field.
 - Learn about services and resources available to you and begin to generate a list of schools you are interested in.
- 1 ½ - 2 years in advance
 - Get involved with research and internships and learn about professional organizations in the field. Attend conferences if possible.
- 1 year in advance
 - Investigate fellowship, scholarships, and financial aid available within the field (not school specific)
 - Register and prepare for graduate admission tests
 - Develop list of target schools and visit campuses
 - Begin to acquire letters of recommendation
 - Familiarize yourself with application materials, get started on personal statements and develop detailed timeline for deadlines.
- 8 - 9 months in advance
 - Confirm and collect letters of recommendation
 - Make copies of all application materials
 - Request transcripts
 - Verify your application materials have been received and your file is complete
 - Visit all programs you are accepted to and evaluate offers.
 - Notify all schools of your decision
 - Keep faculty and recommenders informed and send them thank-you notes.