GRADUATE SCHOOL

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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.

A Few Questions to Start the Process:
1. Where do I want to be professionally in the next 3-5 years? Do I need a graduate degree to get there?
2. Do I have a strong desire and commitment to study the subject matter?
3. What are the graduates of the program doing?
4. 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. With thousands of different graduate programs to select from in an ever-changing professional and economic world, it’s essential to conduct comprehensive research of potential career paths. Additionally, it’s important to understand your strengths, interests, skills and values in order to match them with your chosen field. The FOCUS self-assessment program and O-NET (both available through the Career Development website) are good starting places.

Graduate school is not something to pursue unless you are committed to the field and completion of the program. And it’s very important to confirm that you are indeed pursuing the right program to meet your goals. 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 a portion of graduate school costs after a specified time of employment.

C. Attend Part-Time While Working Full-time
• 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 full-time presents lifestyle and scheduling challenges that some individuals would prefer to avoid.

III. RESOURCES

Services
Career Development staff members are available to review graduate school essays/personal statements and to conduct practice interviews for graduate school admissions. All of these appointments may be scheduled through Spartan Career Path.

Books & Handouts (in Career Development Center)
• Graduate School Checklist (suggested timeline)
• Graduate Colleges & Universities magazine
• U.S. News & World Report Best Grad Schools magazine
• Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice

Websites
• www.gradschools.com
• www.petersons.com
• www.gradschooltips.com
• www.GradSource.com

Professional Associations
Most fields have professional associations that provide information, resources, and services related to the area. 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 test-taking mode. Late junior or early senior year is ideal.
LSAT (www.lsac.org) Law School Admission Test  
Paper based and offered 4 times per year (June, October, December and February).

GRE (www.ets.org/gre) 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.mba.com) Graduate Management Admission Test  
Computer based test that is available year round at test centers throughout the world.

MAT (www.pearsonassessments.com) Miller Analogies Test  
Administered through controlled testing centers.

MCAT (www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/) Medical College Admission Test  
Offered year round except in December and February.

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 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 (e.g., 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 colleges and universities in the region.
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 (www.petersons.com)
- Specialty guides
- Academic journals
- Practicing professionals
- Professional associations
- College Navigator (nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator)
- Gourman Report
- Business magazines

C. Your List
1. Generate a List:
Develop 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, career assistance, experiential education opportunities, degree requirements, etc.

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 4-6.

D. Getting More Information
1. About the Program
- A variety of traditional, on-line and hybrid formats are utilized
- Understand the requirements including thesis or independent research, comprehensive exams, certifications, licensing, and various accreditations
- Outcomes: make sure program graduates have been successful and in the areas that interest you

2. Search through institution and department web pages to find individual faculty pages
- Look for awards, publishing, grants etc.
- Identify 1-4 faculty with interests similar to yours and with whom you would like to study
- Review unique coursework or opportunities (e.g., experiential education, study abroad, collaborations with local organizations, etc.)
3. Write to Faculty and Currently Enrolled Students
   - Ask for some clarification of the program while demonstrating your knowledge/research of their program and the field
   - 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 submitted at least 2-3 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 requested to be mailed to programs through the Records Office at York College. Transcripts can be ordered online at http://www.ycp.edu/offices-and-services/records/transcripts/.

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 subject, including undergraduate prep in the 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; explain why this program is a good fit
   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
   f) Not having it reviewed by a Career Development staff member!

4. Recommendations
   a) Who – faculty in the field, work or research supervisors, alumni from the grad program who know you well academically or professionally
   b) Solicitation
      (1) Approach the potential reference for a meeting regarding your graduate school plans
      (2) Bring transcripts, paper or lab from that professor, list 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 (give the individual 4-6 weeks)
(5) Don’t disappear— follow up appropriately, but do not be demanding
(6) Send thank you notes afterwards

F. Costs and Financial Aid

1. How to Find Out
Ask the graduate program office at each institution and check finaid.org, as both may provide a variety of independent sources

2. Sources of Financial Aid
   a) Graduate Assistantships – given by campus offices; allow you to gain valuable experience while working in an institutional office or department
   b) Teaching Assistantships – given through academic departments; allow you to gain valuable teaching experience while continuing your education (very competitive)
   c) Research Assistantships – given through individual faculty; allow 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: confirm the location and individual(s) you will meet with, arrive early, dress professionally, research the program, and prepare for questions.

In-person mock interviews are available through the Career Development Center, and online mock interviews are available through Spartan Career Path.

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 grades 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 20 years and why?
   8. What will you do if you are not accepted to graduate school?

B. Questions To Ask About Any Graduate Program:*
   1. 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 the 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 processes 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 the career outcomes 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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*Avoid questions that clearly are addressed on the program’s website and/or in its literature.

### 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 a bibliography from the faculty member’s home page or departmental web site
- 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 informational interviews with professionals to gain a stronger understanding of field
- Discuss your interests with faculty members and advisor and begin to understand specialties of the field
- Learn about services and resources available to you and begin to generate a list of schools that interest you

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 fellowships, scholarships, and financial aid available within the field (not school specific)
- Register and prepare for graduate admission tests
- Develop a 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/save and collect letters of recommendation
- Make copies of all application materials
- Request transcripts
- Verify that 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.

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