

CONSIDERING GRADUATE STUDY: A GUIDE

Counselors at the Office of Career Service are available to assist as you consider all of your career choices including the option to attend graduate school. This guide presents an overview of graduate study to help you in your planning.

GETTING STARTED

The critical and fundamental step in considering graduate study is to understand WHY you want to pursue a graduate degree. To set the stage for careful decision making, it is important to establish a clear idea about your reasons for pursuing a graduate degree, your goals for study, and the realities of your intended academic career path. Consider the following questions:

What are your MOTIVATIONS?

- How have you come to the decision to attend graduate school? What factors are motivating you to begin advanced studies?
- Do you love to learn about and have an intellectual passion for a particular field of study?
- Has a professor or mentor encouraged you to pursue a graduate degree?
- Do you feel ready for graduate school or are you responding to expectations from family, friends, or peers?
- Are you considering graduate school as an exciting intellectual and professional challenge or is it a way to delay entering the “Real World” or avoid a job search?

What are your GOALS?

- Have you engaged in a process of self assessment? Do your skills, interests, values, and future career interests correspond to the goals and orientation of the degree program you’re considering?
- Have you identified some important personal and professional goals? How will a graduate degree move you towards them?
- How will graduate school prepare you for the next step in your career, whether in an academic or nonacademic position?
- Is a graduate degree a prerequisite to enter your field of interest or will it help you to transition into a new field? Could you accomplish the same goal(s) simply by taking a few specialized courses and/or relevant professional experience?

What are your EXPECTATIONS?

- Have you researched the academic responsibilities, life-style, and financial and personal obligations of graduate school? Among other things, these include the investment of time and resources (including lost earnings during the program), the pressure to be self-motivated, and the vagaries of independent study and research.
- Is your perception of the relationship between the degree you seek and your career goals accurate? Are you aware of the marketability of your degree and the job prospects following completion?
- Are you prepared to work independently on a specialized subject within your area of interest for several years?

TIMING of APPLICATION and ENROLLMENT

When is the right time for you to pursue advanced study? Enrollment in graduate school should be your decision, springing from an academic interest in a particular subject area, the need for specialized training and education for professional advancement, and/or a desire for personal enrichment. Delaying a job search, peer or family pressure, or confusion over “what to do next” are not optimal foundations for advanced study. Timing depends on a number of factors:

- Do you need real world experience before starting graduate school in your area of interest, or does your field encourage enrollment directly after completing a bachelor’s degree?
- Do you need to prepare first for your proposed studies, for example, by taking introductory or leveling courses, sitting for standardized tests, or “testing” your interest in the field through an internship or entry-level work in order to create a stronger application?
- Are you prepared to embark on a concentrated period of study?
- What current financial, personal, academic, and/or employment obligations must be fulfilled before embarking on graduate studies?
- Some degree programs offer both full time and part-time enrollment, some enroll students only in the fall while others allow students to begin in any semester. Which is right for you?
- Graduate programs in some fields allow students who are admitted to defer their enrollment for a year, but many others do not and advise individuals to “apply when you’re ready to come.” Are you ready?

CONSIDERING DIFFERENT DEGREE OPTIONS

The degree you choose – master’s, professional degree, or doctorate – corresponds to your personal and career needs, interests, resources, and goals. Here is general information about each type.

MASTER’S DEGREE (e.g. MA, MS, MPP, MPH, MFA, EdM)

- Generally a master’s degree takes one to three years to complete.
- Master’s degrees tend to focus more on the practical application of knowledge and skills.
- Master’s programs may or may not offer direct career preparation or advancement.
- Students usually end their studies after the master’s degree but some programs prepare students to apply to pursue a professional degree or doctorate.
- Master’s degrees are not usually funded – you would be responsible for tuition and fees, possibly taking out student loans to supplement your own resources.
- You may be able to pursue your program full or part-time.
- Some programs offer job placement and networking opportunities.
- Because these programs are relatively short, it is important to investigate the level of career services you will be eligible for, and whether that applies to alumni.

PROFESSIONAL DEGREE (e.g. in Law, Business, Medicine)

- Generally, professional degrees take two to four years (but can be slightly longer if a professional practicum is required) and are the most focused training leading to specific career paths.
- Professional degrees are generally “terminal” degrees that do not lead on to doctoral programs.
- Professional degrees are not usually funded – you would be responsible for tuition and fees, possibly taking out student loans to supplement your own resources.
- In some, but not all, fields you may be able to pursue your program full or part time.
- Some programs offer job placement and networking opportunities.

DOCTORAL DEGREE (e.g. PhD, EdD, DFA)

- A doctoral degree takes four to seven years (or more) and allows a student to pursue original research and scholarship in a specific area.
- Doctoral degrees are designed as preparation for a career in university teaching, research, or advanced positions in certain professional fields.
- A doctoral program is very different from the undergraduate experience in that it is often a solitary and narrowly focused experience.
- Conducting research and writing a dissertation are rigorous undertakings that can be intellectually, emotionally, and socially exciting but also exhausting, isolating, and challenging.
- Doctoral programs in competitive departments are often (but not always) funded with a combination of grants, fellowships and teaching or research assistantships.
- Doctoral programs are often full time, but some may allow part time enrollment.

RESEARCHING GRADUATE SCHOOLS and PROGRAMS

Do not rely on hearsay in choosing the graduate school that's right for you – gather as much information as you can! Keeping in mind your academic interests and goals,...

- Have conversations with professors, mentors, and professionals with expertise in your field of interest. Ask them for suggestions of particularly strong programs and (for the doctoral degree) specific faculty whose research interests complement your own.
- Examine resources in print and on the internet to review programs of study, tuition and related costs, financial aid resources, and application requirements.
- Consult Peterson's Guide to Graduate Programs and field-specific references.
- Review professional journals to learn where professors are doing work that interests you.

Then...

- Consider the strength(s) of each program, the courses offered, and the work being done by its faculty, in light of your own interests.
- Speak with (or email) faculty, current students and, if possible, graduates of the program. Make every effort to visit the school(s) to get a first hand perspective on the campus, department, facilities, and people. Inquire whether there is a dedicated recruiting event for prospective or admitted candidate, or whether you could arrange your visit individually.
- Review the number of full time students, the number of degrees granted each year, and the average time it takes to complete the degree. You may need to request this information from the Department Administrator rather than from faculty.
- Explore questions of faculty accessibility and how often they meet with their advisees. What is the communication style of each potential advisor?
- Check out the graduate student facilities and organizations (housing, office space, computer facilities, libraries, labs, lounges, extracurriculars, support services – including career services, etc.).
- Find out what types of funding are available, including how, when, and for what purposes they are allocated. Do students receive departmental financial support for professional, academic, and/or career related development activities? Are internship opportunities available? Will the financial support continue for the duration of the program?
- Check out eligibility for research assistantships, teaching assistantships, fellowships or grants (internal or external).
- Find out what percentage of students are offered employment by graduation and the types of jobs and employers they attract.
- Does the institution as a whole, as well as the specific department, meet your needs as an intellectually and socially stimulating place?

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

As a result of your research you will create a “short list” of schools that meet your interests and goals and then begin the application process.

- Make careful note of all application requirements and deadlines (these can vary from school to school).
- Try to compile your documents and submit the complete package in a timely way – ahead of the deadline – to avoid a last minute rush.
- Solicit letters of recommendation from those who know you and your interests and abilities well, and who will provide the strongest support for your candidacy in your area of interest. They may be professors or employers, or a combination of both, depending on the type of graduate program you want to pursue.
- Provide recommenders with information about each graduate program you’ve chosen and suggest the academic and personal strengths you are asking them to highlight. Give recommenders ample time to write letters and follow up with them to ensure that letters are completed on time.
- If standardized test scores are part of the admission process, determine exactly which exams are required (e.g. GRE General, GRE Subject, LSAT, MCAT). Register for and take the tests well before the application deadline, ideally with sufficient time to retake the test(s) if necessary.
- Whether submitted electronically or by mail, some schools will not review your application until the package is complete, including: an application with bio data; one or more essays or a statement of purpose (see below); letters of recommendation (the school will indicate how many are required); test scores, if required; all academic transcripts; and perhaps a resume or CV.

Shepherd your application(s) with care and attention to deadlines and detail!

APPLICATION ESSAY(S) or STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The essay or statement of purpose is an important part of your application. It describes:

- your intellectual interest and academic preparation in the field
- why you are interested in this particular graduate program
- possible areas for in-depth study and research
- a sense of “who you are” as an individual as well as your potential as a student and, ultimately, as a professional in the field.

Some tips for composing your application essay/statement:

- Demonstrate motivation, enthusiasm, maturity and personal uniqueness, while articulating clearly why the program is a good match for your interests.
- Explain your passion for the field and note any connections to the department or program.
- Articulate long term goals, why you want to go to graduate school, why you've chosen this particular institution and department, and, if applicable, any specific faculty member(s) with whom you hope to work.
- Cite any previous work done in the field and/or discuss past research projects completed or papers published.
- For research-intensive degrees, propose specific questions that intrigue you, how you might approach them, and why pursuing this line of inquiry would contribute new knowledge to the field. You will likely not pursue this particular project for your thesis, but this mini-proposal illustrates your ability to think independently and creatively and allows you to demonstrate how your research interests fit with the department.
- Your essay is viewed as a writing sample - make sure it demonstrates excellent communication skills.
- If there are any deficiencies in your academic background explain them in the personal statement.
- Keep your statement(s) succinct, no more than two pages, single-spaced.
- Do not overstate or understate your qualifications.
- Try to support general statements with examples.
- Ask yourself if the statement is interesting and provides a compelling argument to the committee for your admission into the program.
- Proofread the statement carefully and ask professors, mentors, friends, and other advisers to critique it. Check for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors.

SO YOU'VE BEEN ADMITTED – CONGRATULATIONS!

The work you've done to select programs that match your needs has prepared you well to decide: 1) if you will go ahead and enroll in graduate studies, and 2) if you received more than one offer of admission, where you will ultimately pursue your degree. As you consider these questions, review the information you gathered about the faculty, courses, graduate student support and resources, location and environment, social life, and financial requirements (including aid packages, if available) at each school. Revisit your reasons for going to graduate school, identify your priorities, assess your current situation (it might have changed since you applied), and consider the pros and cons of each option. Your decision should feel right to you!

Come in to the Office of Career Services and meet with a counselor to discuss graduate school issues or to have your statement of purpose reviewed.

To make an appointment, call OCS at 617-495-2595.

Applying to Graduate School – Resources

The Chicago Guide to Your Academic Career, John A. Goldsmith, John Komlos, and Penny Schine Gold. The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Chapters 1 and 2, “Deciding on an Academic Career” and “Entering Graduate School,” are useful reading for the student considering and applying for graduate school. Find info on academic careers, traits of successful graduate students, differences between undergraduate and graduate training, preconditions for a graduate education, and more. *Reading Room Stack Location: A4*

Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student’s Guide to Earning a Master’s or a Ph.D., Robert L Peters. Noonday Press, 1997.

This book could be known as, “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Graduate School, but Were Afraid to Ask.” It is the classic guide to choosing and applying to graduate programs, and to making the most of your graduate experience. *Reading Room Stack Location: A4*

The Graduate School Funding Handbook, April Vahle Hamel, Mary Morris Heiberger, and Julia Miller Vick. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

A great overview of types of funding for graduate school, as well as detailed descriptions of better-known graduate and post-doctoral level grants and fellowships. *Reading Room Stack Location: B4*

Peterson’s Guide to Graduate and Professional Schools, Peterson’s, 2002.

This comprehensive guide gives thumbnail descriptions of graduate and professional programs in the U.S., including application requirements and dates, contact information, and program descriptions. An on-line version, with less information than the print version, but allowing keyword searches, is available at: iiswinprd01.petersons.com/GradChannel/
Reading Room Stack Location: B5

The Real Guide to Grad School: Volume One, The Humanities, Edward Batchelder and John Palattella, eds., Lingua Franca, 2001.

In addition to the overview of the application process, there are also candid descriptions of the state of different fields in the humanities, as well as some of the better-known departments. *Reading Room Stack Location: B5*

Graduate Admissions Essays, Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press, 2000.

Advice on and examples of essays for grad school applications. Also, Chapter 1, “Should You Go to Grad School, and How Are You Going to Pay For This?” and Chapter 2, “Choosing a School or Program” are very useful in developing your thought process about applying to grad school. *Reading Room Stack Location: B5*

Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School, Phil Agre, UCLA:

dliis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/grad-school.html He “tells it like it is” to help you decide whether graduate school is right for you, as well as giving excellent advice for applying to grad school.

Everything You Need to Know About Getting a PhD, Rick Bruce and Beth H. Stickney:

www.phdinfofind.org/ This site acts primarily as a “portal,” with links to other sites full of information, along with information gleaned from years of experience guiding undergraduates through the graduate school decision-making process. A great resource.

Getting In: An Applicant’s Guide to Graduate School Admissions, Dave Burrell:

dave.burrell.net//guide/ This site encourages applicants to go beyond their assumptions that grades, GRE scores, and recommendations are the most important factors in the application process, and gives specific suggestions as to how to make your candidacy stand out in a professional manner appropriate for graduate school.

Graduate Student Resources on the Web, Dan Horn, University of Michigan:

www-personal.umich.edu/%7Edanhorn/graduate.html A great “jumping off point” to explore web resources on applying to and “surviving” graduate school.

Graduate School Survival Guide: “So Long and Thanks for the Ph.D.!, Ronald T. Azuma:

www.cs.unc.edu/~azuma/hitch4.html Written from the perspective of a PhD in computer science, this site is relevant for ALL FIELDS, especially the sciences. This guide is full of insightful advice gleaned from personal experiences before, during, and after the PhD.

GRE-Graduate Record Exam:

www.gre.org Explore this site to learn about the GRE, order practice materials, register for the exams, and answer all your GRE questions.

Questions to Ask When Thinking About Pursuing a PhD, Chris M. Golde, 2001

www.phd-survey.org/advice/advice.htm A no-nonsense guide to finding a “good fit” in a PhD program. Provides insightful questions to ask of yourself, questions to ask about a specific program and questions to ask a particular faculty member with whom you want to work. Important advice to utilize *before* entering a PhD program.

PhD Comics, Jorge Cham

www.phdcomics.com For a disarmingly humorous yet frighteningly accurate look at grad student life, check out the archives of this comic strip.