

Graduate School Handbook

Factors to Consider

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS:

- Includes dental, medical, veterinarian, law, paralegal and business schools.
- Many professional schools do not require applicants to have a specific undergraduate degree; however, specific (related or rigorous) undergraduate courses may be an important factor. Typically, professional schools are interested in how academically challenging your previous coursework was.
- Professional schools often evaluate applicants heavily according to responses to application essay questions and/or a personal statement. They are concerned with responses to ethical/philosophical and scenario questions.
- Professional schools are interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and association involvement, work experience, and the result of tests such as the LSAT and MCAT.
- More students go directly into professional schools (immediately following undergraduate education), than those that go directly on to graduate school.

GRADUATE SCHOOLS:

- There are many specialized paths to consider when applying to graduate schools. For example, a student interested in counseling could get a MEd. (Masters of Education) in Counselor Education, an MA (Master of Arts) in Counseling Psychology or a MSW (Master of Social Work). Each program may have an entirely different emphasis in terms of philosophical approach and may better prepare students for working in different areas of the market. For example, some programs prepare students for careers as professors or researchers, others prepare students for careers in varying areas of industry such as business or government. It is important to have a solid grasp of the specialty area you want to pursue and the industry area you wish to work in when choosing a graduate program.
- Graduate schools are interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and association involvement, work experience and the results of standardized tests. (Some programs require both general and subject area exams and have minimum standards for admittance.)
- Some graduate programs may require you to obtain a credential file (typically education and pharmacy programs).
- Graduate degrees may or may not increase salaries depending on the academic area. (Investigate career paths.)
- Many students take time off between undergraduate and graduate studies in order to acquire valuable work experience and further confirm their specialty area of choice. (Some industries and graduate schools prefer this.)

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN CHOOSING A PROGRAM:

- **Geographical area:** Consider whether you can afford in-state vs. out-of-state tuition, how much you can spend on travel expenses, how far you want to be from loved ones and how far-reaching the reputation of the program is.
- **Finances:** Consider how much can you pay toward tuition, books, housing, living expenses, etc. Are you interested in fellowships, scholarships, tuition waivers or graduate assistant stipends, and are they available?
- **Experiential Learning:** Does the school offer graduate assistantships? If so, are they related to your studies and will they afford you related practical or professional experience, or only teaching assistant experience?
- **Reputation:** Are the programs you're looking at accredited by the appropriate accreditation boards?
- **Quality:** Consider the quality of the academic courses, the library, the equipment or labs, the advising system, etc.
- **Demographics & Culture:** Consider these factors for both the student body and the faculty. What is your impression of faculty/student interaction? How is morale of the department? Do you "fit" with the environment?

- **Publications and research of faculty:** How well known are professors in the academic marketplace? Do you wish to study or conduct research under a particular “expert” in the field who teaches at a particular institution.
- **Requirements:** How many credit hours (or years) is the program? Does the program require students to take comprehensive finals (final exams which cover the entire curriculum), or research and write a thesis?
- **Preparation/ Placement Record:** What types of positions have previous graduates of the program gone on to hold?

Graduate School Application Process

JUNIOR YEAR: FALL AND SPRING

- Attend graduate school fairs sponsored by local universities or academic colleges.
- Determine your financial resources. Consider how this may affect your choice of programs in-state versus out-of-state (tuition differences), how many programs you will apply to (application fees) and whether or not you will need to obtain a paid assistantship or other paid work while in school.
- Determine areas of special interest and whether you desire an academic- or professional-based program.
- Research related institutions and programs (*Peterson's Guides* and professors are both good resources).
- Talk to advisors / professors about the application process.
- Register for appropriate graduate admissions tests (i.e. GRE, MCAT, LSAT). Take practice exams if desired.
- Write resume and have it critiqued at the Optimal Resume. You may wish to include this in your application.
- Ask supervisors / professors for letters of recommendation. Provide a copy of your resume to assist them.

JUNIOR YEAR: SUMMER

- Investigate national scholarships.
- Take required graduate admission tests.
- Write schools of choice for application materials (both for programs of study and assistantships).
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible. If not, call to discuss programs with appropriate program coordinators.
- Write your application essay. Have it critiqued by the Career Center and / or a writing professor.
- Check on application deadlines vs. rolling admissions policies (both for programs of study and assistantships).
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.

SENIOR YEAR: FALL

- Obtain letters of recommendation.
- Request copies of transcript from the Registrar's office and send separately, or with application, as requested.
- Take graduate admission tests if you have not already done so.
- Apply for financial aid or student loans, as well as scholarships, if desired or necessary.
- Send completed applications.

SENIOR YEAR: SPRING

- Check with institutions before deadlines to make sure files are complete.
- Interview at institutions that require and interview for either program admittance or assistantships.
- Visit institutions that accept you, investigate housing options, and make final decision.
- Talk to students currently enrolled in the program.
- Send deposit to institution of choice.
- Make housing arrangements (such as completing application for graduate housing or an off-campus apartment).
- Notify others institutions that accepted you so that they may admit students on their waiting list.
- Send thank you notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters, and informing them of your success.

You may not be able to adhere to this timetable if your application deadlines are very early, as is the case with medical schools, or if you decide to attend graduate school at the last minute. In any case, keep in mind the various application requirements, and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.

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Writing the Graduate School Essay

Writing an essay or personal statement is often the most difficult part of the application, as well as the most distinguishing. It is the one portion of the application that allows you to really set yourself apart and tell the admissions committee what you have to offer that is unique from other applicants. It should be something that only you could write and does not resemble what all other applicants are likely writing. It should be well thought out, well written grammatically and a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of your goals.

Types of essays:

Some programs request only one to two paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study. Others require five or six separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about your motivation for graduate study, your strengths and weaknesses, your values and philosophies on a given topic, your greatest achievements, an influential life event and solutions to hypothetical problems. Business schools are notorious for requiring several time-consuming essays.

Content:

- A graduate school essay should be essentially a statement of your ideas or goals. Usually it includes a certain amount of personal history, but you do not have to supply autobiographical information unless required by the school. In deciding whether or not to include personal history consider its influence on your future plans and ability to distinguish you further from other applicants.
- Keep your essay positive and upbeat. It is better not to mention low grades or test scores unless specifically asked to. If you wish to explain anything that could be construed as negative to help you avoid being eliminated from consideration, do this on a separate sheet of paper as an "Addendum" or address it in your cover letter. Be short and to the point. Avoid long, tedious excuses. You may also wish to ask one of your references to address this issue in their recommendation letter.

The admissions committee may be trying to evaluate some, or all, of the following things from your essay:

- A clear reflection of your writing abilities (both grammatical and creative).
- The clarity, focus and depth of your thinking.
- Level of maturity.
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution.
- Motivation, commitment and enthusiasm to pursue a particular field of study.
- Major area of special interest.
- Expectations you have with regard to the program of study and career opportunities.
- Immediate and long-term goals.
- Previous research or work experience and how they relate to your future plans.
- Educational background and how it relates to your future plans.
- Personal uniqueness. What you can add to the diversity of the entering class, and the reputation of the program.

Approaches/Tips:

- Outline the points you want to cover and then expand on them (more likely to yield a well-organized, essay).
- Jot down ideas on paper as they come to you, go over them, eliminate certain sentences, and move others around until you achieve a logical sequence (more likely to yield an inspired piece of writing).
- Concentrate on the opening paragraph. It is here that you either grab the readers' attention - or lose it.
- Tell a story. Even if it includes autobiographical information, it does not have to be written chronologically.
- Use a catchy title that's alluded to in the essay and gives your statement a "theme," tying it all together.
- Have an angle or a "hook" that emphasizes a distinguishing characteristic about you or an event in your life.
- Open or end with a quote that has particular relevance to you, your philosophies or the field.

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