

GRADUATE SCHOOL PREPARATION

OFFICE OF CAREER SERVICES

Graduate school (or grad school) includes schools that award advanced academic degrees (i.e. master's and doctoral degrees) with the general requirement that students must have a previously earned undergraduate (bachelor's) degree. There are two types of graduate school:

- Professional schools prepare students for specific careers and to obtain a professional qualification or license. Law, medicine, physical therapy, and veterinary are all examples of professional schools.
- Academic schools prepare students to become scholars for academic research or professional practice in a discipline. Most postgraduate degrees offer a blend of both, allowing students to develop a varied set of skills applicable to a wide range of careers.

It can be hard to know if grad school is the best option without proper planning and self-assessment of your goals. Graduate school is a significant commitment of time, money, and resources, so it should be planned versus a default move. Make sure the program you are considering aligns with your career goals and the needs of your chosen profession. Don't be in a hurry. Assess the time commitment needed to complete the degree. A typical Master's program (MA/MS) will take between 1-3 years to complete. A Doctoral program (Ph.D.) will take 3-7 years to complete and does require a written dissertation. Be objective regarding your skills and abilities as a student. Graduate school will be more challenging and the majority of graduate programs require that students maintain at least a 3.0 average.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING GRAD PROGRAMS

- Accreditation (institutional and program-specific): While accreditation is not so much an indicator of quality, you could face negative consequences if the program isn't accredited. Bottom line, do your research!
- Admission Standards: Choose a program with admissions standards that are more challenging. You are looking for a quality program. Look for the number of applicants compared to the number of acceptances and admission requirements.
- Culture: Identify schools that fit your style and comfort-level to increase your probability of success.
- Degrees Offered: If your program isn't offered at a school that interests you, move on in your search. Don't compromise and settle for a degree that you don't truly want just because it's at a university you'd like to attend.
- Faculty: A graduate program is only as good as the faculty who teach in it. Work with faculty who are respected and known in your field.
- Location: Just as with undergraduate selection, location is an important factor to consider.
- Multicultural/Diversity: Better programs tend to be diverse; leading to a broader world view.
- Physical Facilities: Make sure the program offers the types of facilities you need to be successful.
- Reputation/Ranking: While rankings are an important measure of quality, investigate the source of the rankings.
- Research/Academic Focus: Fully research faculty interests and research areas to examine program strengths.
- Size: Evaluate the size of the program and of the entire university. You need to find a size that works for you.
- State Regulations & Residency Requirements: Examine admission requirements and costs for instate versus all other applicants at state schools.
- Surrounding Community: Know if you are looking for an urban, rural, or suburban setting. You're going to live there for a number of years, so feeling comfortable there is important for academic success.
- Research Other Schools: While it may seem natural to transition from undergraduate to graduate studies at the same university, consider your options.

TYPICAL APPLICATION MATERIALS

- **Application Forms** include sections where you list personal information relevant to your education. Most schools prefer online applications, but some portions may be submitted on paper.
- **Application Fees** are almost always part of the application process, ranging from \$50 - \$150 or more per school. These fees typically are not refundable.
- **Transcripts** are your official records of coursework taken at an institution. Official copies are provided by the Registrar and will be required to make your application complete. Be sure to provide enough time for processing to meet application deadlines.
- **Letters of Recommendation** provide the program with insight into you as a person. These are usually professors, whom you know well and who can speak to your abilities and academic goals. Make sure to get permission in advance and provide plenty of advance notice for completion.
- **Personal Statement or Essay** is your opportunity to speak up for yourself. Consider your qualities and who will be reading your statement. Focus on your educational and occupational experiences that led you to apply, but don't rely only on emotional motivation (such as "I want to help people."). If the program requires an essay on a specific topic, make sure you provide what they are asking for in your statement.
- **Standardized Test Scores** such as the GRE may be required for admission. Law, medical, and business schools require different exams. Take tests early (Spring or Summer before you apply) to ensure scores arrive before admission deadlines.
- **Interviews** may be part of your application process. If an interview is required, make sure your appearance is professional. Prepare like you would for a job interview and do your homework. Have prepared questions to ask the interviewer or panel keeping in mind that they are probably more interested in your character than how much you know.

TYPICAL APPLICATION TIMELINE (FOR FALL ADMISSION)

Junior Year:

- Begin researching potential schools and take a graduate school admission practice test to determine how much preparation you need.
- Prepare and register for your graduate exam (i.e. GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc.)
- Research (and possibly visit) schools that you are considering.

August: Take your graduate exam, and if you're not happy with your scores, plan to repeat it. Start drafting your personal statement.

September: Finalize your list of prospective schools and contact your list of recommenders.

October: request official transcripts and send your recommenders instructions and materials.

November: Get honest feedback on your personal statement from a professional. Take the GRE subject test if required.

December: Complete and submit all applications, keeping copies for your records. Verify that all materials have been sent.