

Gearing Up for Grad School

Why should I go?

There are many reasons you might choose to pursue a graduate degree...

- ...You're mentally and emotionally ready for a new challenge
- ...You're pursuing a career in academia,
- ...You need the credential to get professional licensing,
- ...You're looking for a career change (e.g. switch from practitioner to administrator)
- ...You're looking for career/salary advancement.
- ...It's the next logical step for you professionally

It's important to recognize that taking on graduate school is a big commitment. Because it requires devoting a lot of time and can drain your financial resources, the best reason to pursue a graduate degree is because you love what you do!

When should I go?

You've planned on attending graduate school, but with graduation just around the corner, are you ready for another three to eight years of graduate education? Should you take time off before graduate study? This is a personal decision and there are no definitive right or wrong answers. However, if you have any doubts about your educational and career aspirations take your time and rethink your goals. Don't be afraid to ask professors or professionals in your field for recommendations. Do they wish they had pursued experiences prior to commencing graduate level study? What are your reasons for taking time off before attending graduate school? Here are some things you might want to consider:

You're Exhausted

Are you tired? Exhaustion is understandable. After all, you've just spent 16 or more years in school. If this is your primary reason for taking time off, consider whether your fatigue will ease over the summer. You've got 2-3 months off before grad school starts; can you rejuvenate? Depending on the program and degree, graduate school takes anywhere from three to eight or more years to complete. However, if you're certain that graduate school is in your future, perhaps you want to keep up your academic momentum.

You Need to Prepare

Many good reasons exist for taking time off. If you feel unprepared for grad school, a year off may enhance your application. For example, you might take a prep-course for GRE or other standardized tests required for admission.

You Need Research Experience

Research experience will usually enhance your application. Maintain contacts with the faculty at your undergraduate institution and seek research experiences with them. Such opportunities are beneficial because faculty members can write more personal letters of recommendation. Plus you gain insight into what it's like to work in your field.

You Need Work Experience

Another reason for taking a year or two off between undergraduate and graduate school is to gain work experience. Some fields, such as nursing and business, recommend and expect some work experience. In addition, the lure of earning an income and the chance to save is hard to resist. Saving money often is a good idea because grad school is expensive and it's unlikely that you'll be able to work many hours, if any, while you're in school. Internships and work experiences can also be extremely informative about the true nature of the work in your prospective field and can help you decide if that particular line of work is a good fit for you!

Many students worry whether they'll return to school after a year or two away from the grind. That's a realistic concern, but take the time that you need to be sure that grad school is right for you. Graduate school requires a great deal of motivation and the ability to work independently. Take time to hone your professional and research interests and to find faculty whose lines of research or professional accomplishments align with your own. Generally, students who are more interested and committed to their studies are more likely to be successful. Time off may increase your desire and commitment to your goals.

Finally, recognize that attending grad school several years after completing the BA is not unusual. More than one-half of grad students in the US are over age 30. If you wait before going to grad school, be prepared to explain your decision, what you learned, and how it improves your candidacy for admission. Time off can be beneficial if it enhances your credentials and prepares you for the stresses and strains of grad school.

What is the best degree for ME?

There are two traditional categories of graduate degrees -- master's and doctoral -- although there are also numerous hybrid combined-degree and certificate programs at many universities.

Master's (1-3 years to complete)

Master's degree programs are growing and evolving, with degrees offered in just about all fields. Master's degrees can be professional or academic. Professional degrees, such as a Master of Business Administration (MBA), are designed for employment or advancement within a given field. Academic degrees, such as a Master of Science, are designed for intellectual growth and (sometimes) a prerequisite for doctoral work within a given field.

Doctorate (3-6 years to complete)

Doctoral degrees, the highest possible earned academic degree, can also be professional or academic. Professional doctoral degrees, such as the Doctor of Medicine (MD) and the Juris Doctor (JD), stress the practical application of knowledge and skills. Academic doctoral degrees, the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), focus on advancing knowledge through original research in a given academic field.

Where should I go?

It's always a good idea to talk to your faculty about your decision to go to graduate school. After all, faculty have been through this process and can offer meaningful advice. You might also take note of journal articles in your subject of interest and ask yourself, who is doing the writing and where are they teaching? Other resources you might look into are: *Peterson's Guide to Graduate Programs*, *The Gourman Report*, *The Princeton Review*, and *US News & World Report*.

Another helpful way to decide where to go is to select professional programs that fit into your big picture career and personal plan. If you don't know anyone personally who can talk with you about graduate programs, you can seek out advice from LC alumni. Use the Lewis & Clark College Alumni Career Corps (ACC) or LinkedIn (information about both of these resources is found on the Career Center website) to find professionals with whom to connect in your field of interest.

Choosing the Right Graduate School: Objective and Subjective Criteria

A list of criteria can be very helpful for evaluating graduate school programs. The following factors are adapted from Howard Figler's PATH: A Career Workbook for Liberal Arts Students. (Additional academic, geographical, and personal factors can be incorporated)

Make a list of desirable traits including the following criteria:

- Determine the fit of the program with your career goals
- Availability of practical/professional experience
- Review the success of graduates in your intended discipline
- Program's purpose/goals
- Success of graduates in obtaining professional positions
- Size of classes
- Faculty to student ratio
- Faculty reputation
- Diversity of faculty and student body
- Availability of financial aid (and alternative funding resources, such as graduate assistantships)

After compiling a list:

- Prioritize a list of desirable traits. Keep in mind your personal specific criteria.
- Contact the programs you are interested in.
- If possible, visit schools to get a better idea of the campus environment, faculty, and program.
- Meet with graduate admissions officers.
- Request to speak with a current student in the program.
- Talk to alumni in your intended field.

How Do I Get In?

Unlike applying to undergraduate programs where you can submit one application to many schools (aka the common application), each graduate program often has a unique application process. It's important to keep your eye on deadlines – they can creep up on you! Be sure you follow instructions carefully and pay attention to the details. Most applications will require a combination of the following:

- Statement of Purpose:
 - A written statement that answers: Why me? Why this program? How do you fit in? What do you hope to contribute?

- Standardized Examinations
 - Official scores are required by most programs
- Letters of Recommendation
 - 3 letters are usually required
- Official Transcript(s)/Academic Records
 - From each institution you've attended and earned college credit from

Statement of Purpose

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant who should be chosen. Whatever its purpose, the content must be presented in a manner that will give coherence to the whole statement.

Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out. Be sure to answer any questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following matters, although the form of the question(s) and the responses may vary:

Your purpose in graduate study.

- Think this through before you try to answer the question---aim to be concise yet specific and articulate!
- The area of study in which you wish to specialize.
 - Learn about the field in detail so that you are able to state your preferences using the language of the field. This common language is especially important. Can you mirror any skills that they seek with ones that you possess in your application?
- Your intended future use of your graduate study.
 - Include your career goals and plans for the future.
- Your unique preparation and fitness for study in the field.
 - Correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate. This can also be helpful to demonstrate that your intended topic of study has been a consistent passion.
- Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores, such as a bad semester.
 - Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities. In some instances, it may be more appropriate to discuss this outside of the personal statement.
 - Discuss how you overcame an obstacle and how you are ultimately a good (or perhaps an even better) fit because of it!
- Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application, such as a significant (35 hour per week) workload outside of school.
 - This, too, should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
- You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?"
 - Research the school and describe its special appeal to you. You should have a specific and unique rationale for each school.
- Above all, this statement should contain information about you as a person.
 - They know nothing about you unless you tell them. You are the subject of the statement. *Don't be afraid to flaunt your strengths and qualifications!*

Standardized Examinations

Arrange for the appropriate testing agency to report your scores directly to the graduate school. Register early! (Program specific handouts about each exam can be found in the Career Center)

[Graduate Record Examination \(GRE\)](http://www.ets.org/gre) <http://www.ets.org/gre>

In most cases, the GRE General Test is required of all applicants. In addition, several departments and programs require particular GRE Subject Test scores. Check to determine whether Subject Test scores are necessary for programs you're interested in. The GRE general test includes questions that closely reflect the kind of thinking you'll do in graduate school. These questions target: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing.

[Graduate Management Admissions Test \(GMAT\)](http://www.mba.com/us) <http://www.mba.com/us>

Some programs of the graduate school may require the GMAT. Such requirements will be listed in the program description under Special Admissions Requirements.

[Medical College Admission Test \(MCAT\)](https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/) <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/>

This exam is required for all students applying to Medical School. The MCAT is a standardized, multiple-choice exam designed to assess your problem solving, critical thinking, and knowledge of natural, behavioral, and social science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine.

[Law School Admission Test \(LSAT\)](http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat) <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat>

The LSAT is an integral part of the law school admission process in the United States. It provides a standard level of measuring skills of applicants. The LSAT is designed to measure skills that are considered essential for success in law school: the reading and comprehension of complex texts with accuracy and insight; the organization and management of information and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from it; the ability to think critically; and the analysis and evaluation of the reasoning and arguments of others.

[Test of English as a Foreign Language \(TOEFL\)](http://www.ets.org/toefl) <http://www.ets.org/toefl>

The TOEFL is required of all applicants whose native language is not English. This requirement is waived only for applicants who will have received a baccalaureate degree, or its foreign equivalent, prior to matriculation, from a college or university where English is the primary language.

[International English Language Test System \(IELTS\)](https://www.ielts.org) <https://www.ielts.org>

The IELTS may be substituted for the requirement to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Test of Spoken English (TSE).

Special Admissions Requirements

Many departments and programs have special admissions requirements, many require the identification of a concentration or sub field of study and several encourage interviews. Review the graduate school application process to determine special admissions requirements such as a particular standardized subject test, writing sample, or language requirement.

Letters of Recommendation

Although it can vary, generally, you will be asked for three letters. We recommend that you send only the number of letters requested. Admissions committees do not have enough time to read extra credentials.

The best letter writers are those that know you well and can provide an evaluation of your ability to perform and succeed at the graduate level. First, make a list of professors and/or supervisors who will be your best advocates. Then, set up an appointment to discuss your request in person. Do not make the request for a recommendation via email. Be prepared to articulate your interest and reasons for attending graduate school. Letters of recommendation are written strictly on a voluntary basis. The best approach is to ask potential letter writers if they are willing to write you a strong letter. If you sense reluctance or the answer is no, ask someone else. Professors and supervisors are generally pleased to write on your behalf; however, they are usually involved in many activities. Be considerate of your letter writers' time and approach them at least two months before you need the letter. Don't wait until you want to apply to graduate school to ask for letters!

Letters of recommendation are required for almost every graduate school application and are a very important part of the application process. Usually grades and test scores factor in most heavily; however, your letters of recommendation could be the deciding factor in the admission process.

Since your best letters will come from those who know you well, make an effort to get to know your professors and/or supervisors. The best strategy you can use to get a good letter of recommendation, particularly if a professor hasn't known you long, is to provide your letter writer with ample information about you. You can help your letter writers write enlightening letters by giving each of them a portfolio comprised of:

A cover note that includes:

- Information on how to get in touch with you in case they need to reach you
- What you would like emphasized in each letter
- A list of schools to which you are applying, and due dates, with the earliest due date at the top
- Any other information that is relevant
- Open and close your note with thanks and acknowledgement that the letter writer's time is valuable and that this letter is important to your professional future.

To make it easy for your letter writer to complete recommendation forms in a timely manner, complete the following:

- Applicant information typed in
- Recommender's name, title, contact info (telephone, fax, address etc) typed in
- Your unofficial transcripts (note courses you took with them)
- A draft of your statement of purpose
- A copy of your best work in the course (with instructor comments on it), lab evaluations, projects, etc.
- Your resume

Financing

Financial Aid is available for graduate school. Most graduate students finance their education through a combination of funding sources such as:

Assistantships

Assistantships are usually campus-affiliated work assignments (e.g. graduate teaching instructor, research associate) that provide an individual a stipend and often waive tuition and/or other matriculation fees.

Fellowships

Fellowships are typically granted to individuals to cover their living expenses while they carry out research or work on a project. Awards may be single or multiple-year. Awards are usually based on an individual's merit as measured by grades, GRE scores, publications, and letters of recommendation.

Grants

Grants are most often awarded to cover expenses associated with carrying out research or other specific projects, such as travel, materials, or computers.

Loans

Loans are available from the government and other private sources. Students who meet federal eligibility requirements are able to borrow under the Stafford, Perkins and GradPlus federal loan programs. Students must be U.S. citizens or permanent residents and enrolled at least half-time in a degree-granting program. Find additional information on the Department of Education's website.

Scholarships

Scholarships are based on one or more of several criteria - merit, financial need, discipline of study, career goals or membership within a minority group.

Additional Resources

- 100 Minority Scholarship Gateway List
- [FastWeb](http://www.fastweb.com) <http://www.fastweb.com>: Free Scholarship and College Searches, & Financial Aid Tools
- Fellowships for University Students and Graduates
- [FinAid](http://www.finaid.org) <http://www.finaid.org>: The Smart Student Guide to Financial Aid

Graduate School Application Timeline

One of the initial steps in applying to a graduate or professional school is to research application deadlines so that you can develop a timeline of when to submit test scores, letters of recommendation, personal essays, etc. Below is a timeline to help you in planning your application process.

Junior Year

- Begin researching available programs
- Review grad school guides/directories
- Request promotional materials
- Visit schools' websites
- Talk to faculty/alumni/current students in the program
- Start exploring financial aid resources
- Sign up for required standardized test and take a practice test
- Identify potential letter writers
- Take the required standardized test

Senior Year - Fall Semester

- Write the first draft of your statement of purpose
- Request your letters of recommendation from faculty
- Order official transcripts
- Write final draft of statement of purpose
- Complete and mail your applications
- Apply for aid available through program; assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, etc.

Senior Year - Spring Semester

- Complete and submit financial aid applications
- Visit prospective campuses if possible, and talk to faculty/students to help you make your final decision
- Follow-up with schools to make sure your file is complete
- After receiving acceptance from the school of your choice, send in the required deposit, and contact other schools and decline acceptances
- Write thank you notes to people who helped you

Choosing a School

Perhaps you've made it through the application process, great work! Now it's time to choose a school. Philip S. Mack from the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work has created a decision making-model to help aid in this process. Attending graduate school can be as *a, b, C!* Emphasis has been placed on the "C" because there are 6 key factors to consider when selecting a school:

- Credentials

- Many professional degrees such as medicine, law, nursing, clinical psychology, and social work have national accreditation standards. Do your future career or licensing goals require a degree from an accredited program?
- Curriculum
 - Make sure that the courses that are offered will enhance your knowledge and skills in your particular area of interest.
- Campus Life
 - Most of us perform better academically when we are happy socially! Will you be most comfortable in an urban, suburban, or rural environment? What is housing like in the local community? Is there access to public transportation? Are there student organizations on campus that are of interest to you and how do you plan to go about participating in them? Does the campus have a diverse student/faculty population?
- Counseling
 - Refers to student support services—What type of advising will you receive? What level of supervision or guidance over your studies will be available to you?
- Costs
 - Refer to the “Financing Your Graduate Education” section
- Career Opportunities
 - What type of employment will you be able to find? What is the starting salary of someone with your level of educational attainment? Is there a career center to assist you in your employment search?

By weighing these factors, you should be able to make an informed decision! *Best of luck in your graduate studies!*