

# Applying to Graduate or Professional School

Graduate education appeals to students who seek to extend their knowledge or research in a specialized area, as well as to students who seek to access careers that require education beyond the bachelor's level. Individuals pursue graduate education to support a desired career change, or to attain a greater level of leadership and responsibility, based upon one's experience and education. Depending on your career goals and readiness, you may choose to go directly to graduate school or work for a few years and then attend graduate school on a full or part-time basis. The following information will help you plan, prepare for, and move through the process of applying to graduate programs of all types.

## Identify your rationale for pursuing further education:

- Access to a career goal requires further education
- Extend knowledge or research of a particular area of study
- Pursue a new career direction or goal

## Obtain Information About Schools and Programs

- Admission requirements and deadlines
- Costs
- Sources of financial aid / how students pay for graduate education
- Faculty research and teaching interests
- Curriculum and degree requirements
- Opportunities for experiential learning (internships, practica, field-experiences, volunteer)
- Program accreditation and reputation of the graduate program within the academic and professional field
- The types of careers program graduates pursue after completing a graduate degree

## Ways to research graduate programs

- Graduate and Professional School Week ([careerfairs.psu.edu/gpweek](http://careerfairs.psu.edu/gpweek))
- Individual Graduate Program websites
- Faculty contacts and networks, beginning with faculty here at Penn State
- Professional and Educational Associations
- Accreditation agencies
- General Graduate School Websites ([Petersons.com](http://Petersons.com), [gradschools.com](http://gradschools.com), [gradprofiles.com](http://gradprofiles.com), [graduate-school.phds.org](http://graduate-school.phds.org))

An important element in exploring graduate programs is to speak with faculty and students currently involved with the program that you are exploring. Visit schools and programs if at all possible. This will give you a much better feel for the programs you are interested in attending. Make arrangements in advance to meet with faculty, the individual who coordinates the applicant review, and some graduate students. If you cannot visit a program, scheduling an appointment to speak with someone is another option to learn about program details, as well as share information about your interests and goals. Before contacting programs, take time to list and prioritize questions that can be asked of students and faculty members.

## Admissions Criteria

The specific criteria and their relative weights vary, depending on the academic discipline, particular educational institution, and number of applicants. Faculty contacts and program websites can provide specific information about grade point average and admission test score criteria. Certain programs have very high grade point average or test score cutoff points, while other programs prioritize work experience and evidence of success in relevant courses. Do not assume that you can never get into a discipline. Remember that admission requirements differ from one graduate program to another.

You generally do not need to have an undergraduate degree in the same or a closely allied field. However, graduate programs may have prerequisite coursework. At some universities you can complete these courses as a non-degree graduate student seeking to become qualified for a program.



If the programs you first investigate have admissions criteria that you cannot meet, look for related programs in other fields with less stringent criteria. You may discover a challenging, relevant program or field that you have not considered.

In addition to the complete application form, your application may include graduate admission test scores, transcripts, letters of recommendation, an essay or statement of intent and an application fee. The application process will differ slightly from program to program. Therefore, the first test of graduate school is to complete the admissions process in an organized and timely manner!

### **A note about application deadlines:**

When schools list priority deadlines for applications, those dates are often used for consideration of scholarships, graduate assistantships, and fellowships. It is in your best interest to send in your materials by this date if you need or want financial assistance throughout your program. Additionally, it is in your best interest to send in your application materials as early as possible. For rolling deadlines, students are accepted on a continuous basis and when the acceptance slots are full, the program will no longer accept applications. Sending in your application materials as early as possible will demonstrate a true interest in the program and will increase your chances of acceptance.

## **Graduate Admissions Tests**

The tests required vary by type of graduate study. The most common admissions tests include the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) for Business schools, and the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). Program websites will specify which test you need and will often indicate average scores needed to be competitive for acceptance. You should plan to take the appropriate test approximately one year before your anticipated matriculation date although many test scores are valid for three to five years.

Keep in mind that while schools primarily utilize graduate admission tests as requirements for acceptance, some schools also use test scores when considering students for scholarships or fellowships.

## **For more information on Graduate Admissions Tests**

- GRE:** [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)
- GMAT:** [www.gmac.com/gmat](http://www.gmac.com/gmat)
- LSAT:** Pre-Law office (118 Grange) or [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)
- MCAT:** Pre-Medical Office (213 Whitmore) or [www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/](http://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/)
- MAT:** [www.milleranalogies.com](http://www.milleranalogies.com)

Studying for these exams is best done by following the suggestions in the registration materials. There are many books and services available for practice and strategy development. Before you invest in costly study methods, decide if you learn better by reading and practicing independently (books) or by instruction and group practice (review course) and evaluate each method prior to purchase. GRE, GMAT, and LSAT prep courses are offered through Career Services. Visit our website for more information.

## **The Application Process Transcripts**

Official transcripts of your undergraduate work and any other graduate work you have completed must be sent to the graduate schools. This may be done at the end of your junior year or in the middle of your senior year or, for those going on later, at any point after you have graduated. Contact the registrar's office or login to eLion to request transcripts; anticipate a fee for this service.

## **Letters of Recommendation**

Letters of recommendation are endorsements of your capacity to succeed as a graduate student and also as an emerging professional within your field. Consider seeking letters from people who have observed you in field-related classes or work settings. Most graduate programs require that two or three recommendation letters be sent. These letters are frequently submitted to programs directly by your reference providers, often electronically.

Schools prefer and sometimes require that at least one and sometimes two references be on the faculty or staff of a university or college, preferably in the same department where you are currently studying and/or in the same field in which you are applying to do your graduate study. If you have worked in a job related to the field, a workplace supervisor may provide an excellent reference.

When choosing referees, an important consideration is how well and in what depth the individual will describe you in the letter. If a doctoral teaching assistant knows your work more thoroughly than a full professor, for example, s/he may write a better, stronger reference.

**When approaching people for references, keep the following in mind:**

- Offer enough time: Three to five weeks in advance of a deadline is often recommended.
- Share a resume and any additional information that will help the referee to understand the context of your goals and experience. Be willing to meet to discuss your motivation to go to graduate school, your related experience, and how your interaction with the reference has contributed to your potential to succeed in graduate school. Share a list of the programs you are pursuing, with information about deadlines and how the reference will be delivered to the program.
- Remember to ask the reference if s/he is willing to be a reference. If there is hesitation or a refusal to write a reference, know that this individual may be encouraging you to seek someone else who could write more positively or comprehensively on your behalf.
- Don't be afraid to check with each referee one or more times prior to the deadline to see if the reference has been sent. Many people with good intentions get busy and forget the deadline.

**Application Essay / Personal Statement**

Most schools will require that you write an essay or statement on your background and interests as they relate to your field of study. These are often used as an opportunity to see you "beyond the numbers" in the admissions criteria. Many schools will also ask you to provide short answer essays to specific questions within

your field to assess your knowledge and understanding of the field you are entering. These essays are one measure of your ability to write, to build arguments, and to think critically. They also assess your enthusiasm for the field of study, creativity, maturity, and uniqueness.

For most personal statements or letters of intent, schools will expect you to be clear about your career goals and your reasons for applying to that institution. In your essays, you want to demonstrate that you have specific career goals (e.g., to become a lawyer) and understand how that particular program will assist you in achieving your career goals. It can be helpful to incorporate into your essay specific research being conducted by faculty members or particular classes you are interested in from that institution.

Have someone review your essay for content, grammar, and spelling. Often the best people to critique your essay are people who understand your field and have some awareness of your background and current work, (e.g., your references). Take your time developing your essay(s); they are often the most crucial part of your application.

**Financial Aid**

Three kinds of financial aid are available:

- 1) work programs, such as graduate assistantships and college work study programs;
- 2) monetary awards, including grants, fellowships and scholarships; and
- 3) loans, usually administered through banks, the government, or the educational institution.

Because every graduate school has its own application process and system of awarding aid, you must obtain that information directly from each of the institutions to which you are applying. You can check with both the financial aid office and the graduate academic department.

Graduate assistantships often pay tuition and a stipend for living expenses. Most are administered by academic departments and involve either 10 or 20 hours of work per week. Teaching assistantships involve assisting a professor with grading, office hours, and recitation sections or being responsible for the entire teaching of one or more courses. Research assistantships provide the opportunity to participate in ongoing research and can evolve into conducting your own research project for a thesis.

Loans and college work-study programs are awarded on the basis of financial need. To determine need, many graduate schools require that the applicant submit the FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Education. To obtain the most up-to-date information on these options, talk with a graduate financial aid officer, or visit [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov). For additional information on financial aid, check out *FinAid: The Financial Aid Information Page* ([www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org)) or the Department of Education's Student Guide ([www.ed.gov/finaid.html](http://www.ed.gov/finaid.html))

*Programs of study I am considering:*

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*Institutions I am considering:*

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*Letters of recommendation to request:*

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## Application Action Plan

### Fall and Spring of your Junior year

- Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs.
- Talk to advisers about application requirements.
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission tests.
- Investigate national scholarships.
- If appropriate, obtain letters of recommendation.

### Summer between Junior and Senior year

- Take required graduate admission tests.
- Work on your application materials.
- Visit institutions of interest if possible.
- Write your application essay.
- Check on application deadlines and rolling admissions policies.
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.

### Fall of your Senior year

- Obtain letters of recommendation.
- Take graduate admission tests if you haven't already.
- Send in completed applications.
- Complete the FAFSA, if required.

### Spring of your Senior year

- Check with all institutions before the deadline to make sure your file is complete.
- Visit institutions that accept you. Send a deposit to your institution of choice.
- Notify other colleges and universities that accepted you of your decision so that they may admit students on their waiting list.
- Send thank-you notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters, informing them of your success.