

APPLYING TO GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

Graduate study has become an increasingly popular career choice for students in all fields. Many college graduates pursue graduate degrees because of the value of these degrees in the marketplace and because many fields are becoming so specialized that graduate study is essential. Graduate education also serves society's needs in technical and professional ways, as well as provides a major source of intellectual leadership for society. The shortage of graduates from these programs has become a nationwide concern, especially in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Regardless, graduate study is a rich experience for students wishing to delve further into a particular subject and embark on a life-long rewarding career. Graduate studies can be divided into two types of educational experiences: professional-oriented degrees and research/scholarship-oriented degrees.

Professional programs prepare students to enter fields, e.g., engineering, law, or medicine; obtain certification to work in a particular field, e.g., teaching or counseling; and increase the employment opportunities for higher level positions, e.g., business administration. Although many master programs are professional degrees, master programs also can be precursors to doctoral programs.

Doctoral programs prepare students to conduct research and engage in scholarship. This preparation enables doctoral students to become college professors or professional researchers in industry and government. Doctoral programs

typically consist of five to eight years of study culminating in a doctoral degree (usually a Ph.D. or D.Ed). Many doctoral programs are available immediately after you complete a baccalaureate degree; others you can enter after you have completed a master's degree.

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.

Obtaining Information About Schools and Programs

The single most effective method is talking to professors and graduate students. Since many of them have studied or worked with professors at other schools, they know about the reputations and research orientations of departments across the country.

You will want to attend the Graduate and Professional School Week, where recruiters from nearly 200 institutions come to Penn State to introduce you to their programs, hand out materials and applications, and answer questions

you may have about their programs and institutions. There are also opportunities to learn about the graduate school admission process and taking the required tests as part of both of these fairs. For more information, call 814-865-5131.

2011-2012 GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL WEEK

Law School Day, October 18, 2011
Medical School Day, October 19, 2011
Grad School Day, October 20, 2011

Guides to graduate study are located in the Career Information Center in the Bank of America Career Services Center as well as Pattee Library. Some books describe graduate admissions and education in specific disciplines such as medicine, law, business, and psychology, while others are directories for a wide variety of graduate programs and institutions of higher education. These guides identify and briefly outline academic programs, financial aid resources, costs of study, application requirements, and other helpful information.

Some undergraduate program offices, such as pre-law and pre-medicine,

If graduate school is a part of your plans, start the application process as early as a year before you plan to attend.

have small information centers with pamphlets, books, graduate school bulletins and other resources.

One quick and effective way to begin researching various types of graduate schools is through accessing the following websites:

www.gradschools.com

www.petersons.com

www.gradprofiles.com

www.usnews.com/sections/rankings

Visit some schools 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, call someone there. Request specific information about the research being conducted, course content, and admissions criteria.

Admissions

The specific criteria and their relative weights vary, depending on the academic discipline, particular educational institution, and number of applicants. Faculty, books, and articles 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 for others work

experience and evidence of success in relevant courses are much more important. Do not assume that you can never get into a discipline. Remember that course 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. Check to see what courses are required, however. The course work can be taken subsequent to graduation, if necessary. 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, items required by you for application might include graduate admission test scores, transcripts, letters of recommendation, an essay or statement of intent.

The application process will differ slightly from program to program. Therefore, it is important that you create a system to keep you organized so that you can keep track of your application materials. As graduate schools are seeking independent and highly motivated individuals, the first test

of graduate school is to complete the admission process in an organized and timely manner! The following sections include general considerations for most programs but make sure you read the specific admissions requirements for each program you apply to. Some programs will require you to complete applications online, others will request hard copy applications, and some will require a combination of online and hard copy applications.

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, while a program may either provide a late deadline such as a date in April or a rolling deadline, it is in your best interest to send in your application materials as soon 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). You can register for many of these tests online.

The schools’ catalogs 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. You can obtain test information from the websites listed.

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.

| TEST | INFORMATION LOCATIONS |
|--------|---|
| GRE | www.gre.org |
| GMAT | www.gmac.com |
| LSAT | Pre-Law Office (118 Grange) or www.lsat.org |
| MCAT | Pre-Medical Office (213 Whitmore) or www.aamc.org/students |
| MAT | www.milleralogies.com |
| Others | Contact Career Services |

You may need to brush up on your test-taking knowledge and skills. Studying for any of these exams is best done by following the suggestions in the registration booklet. There are many books and services available for practice and strategy development. Before you buy a book or enroll in an often costly review course, decide if you learn better by reading and practicing independently (books) or by instruction and group practice (review course). If you can, evaluate the content and style of the books or programs you are considering to see if you can understand them and can learn from them. GRE, GMAT, and LSAT prep courses are scheduled each semester in the Bank of America Career Services Center. Please check our website for the schedule and more details.

GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL APPLICATION ACTION PLAN

Fall and Spring, year prior to when you want to start

- 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, year prior to when you want to start

- Take required graduate admission tests.
- Work on your application materials.
- Visit institutions of interests, 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 prior to when you want to start

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

Spring prior to when you want to start

- 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.

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 to have your transcripts sent; anticipate a fee for this service.

Letters of Recommendation

Ideally, you should begin to think about this a year before applying to graduate school in order to ensure that professors and other relevant professionals have gotten to know you well enough to write good references. Most graduate programs require that two or three recommendation letters be sent. Some

programs enclose evaluation forms to be filled out by each referee.

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 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 you better than a full professor, for example, s/he may write a better, stronger reference.

When approaching people for reference letters, ask each person if s/he knows

you well enough to write a meaningful letter. Also provide as much "lead time" as possible, a month or more if possible. If the individual appears reluctant, politely say you can find someone else.

To help the person write a relevant, favorable letter, it is best to provide a copy of your resume, your goals for graduate school, the schools to which you are applying, and any forms the person has been requested to complete. Also include a stamped, addressed envelope unless the school has specified a different procedure.

Don't be afraid to check with each referee one or more times prior to the deadline to see if the letter has been sent. Many people with good intentions get busy and forget the deadline.

Application Essay

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 licensed psychologist) 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 your adviser or your recommendation letter writers as they will be able to tell you what to stress and what to minimize or delete. Take your time

developing your essay(s); they are often the most crucial part of your application.

For additional assistance, please visit the Career Information Center to use resources such as *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement*. You may also talk to a Drop-In Counselor who can review your essay and application materials. Drop-In Counseling is available weekdays between 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. and until 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday evenings.

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. *Peterson's Guide to Graduate and*

Professional Programs: An Overview, located in the Career Information Center, provides a detailed description of each type of financial aid.

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 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 involve assisting ongoing research and can

evolve into conducting your own research project for a thesis. Administrative assistantships are much less common and can involve managing a small facility such as a computer lab.

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.

For additional information on financial aid, check out FinAid: The Financial Aid Information Page (www.finaid.org) or the Department of Education's Student Guide (www.ed.gov/finaid.html).