

Graduate/Professional Schools (Deciding, Choosing, & Applying)

The Decision to Attend Graduate/Professional School

Questions to Ask Yourself

Answers to these questions vary upon an individual's needs and concerns and the chosen field of study.

1. How genuinely interested are you in the field for which you are considering graduate school?
2. Is it better for you personally and/or in the field to work a few years after graduation?
3. Do graduate degrees in your field have prestige?
4. Can you find an appealing job with only your bachelor's degree?
5. Will long-term career options be brighter with a graduate degree?
6. Will your friends and family support your decision?
7. Does your past academic record show a potential for graduate study?
8. Can you handle the financial responsibilities of graduate school?

Doing the Research

The following can help you answer some of the previous questions and help with your decision as to whether to attend graduate school.

- **Talk to people who hold graduate degrees.** Ask them to recall their graduate school experience. What were good and bad aspects? How do they feel about their degrees today? Would they do it all over again? If not, what would they do differently?
- **Ask your professors for advice.** Encourage them to provide you feedback about your ability to handle graduate study.
- **Talk to professionals in your field.** Is a graduate degree beneficial in your field? Are there opportunities with only a bachelors degree? How do they view working a few years before attending graduate school?
- **Talk with your friends and family.** Based on their knowledge of you, what are their opinions about you attending graduate school? How will your decision affect them?
- **Visit a graduate school and talk with people who work there.** They can help you understand what life is like as a graduate student. Ask for catalogues and brochures. Ask about the financial commitment and available types of financial aid.

Choosing Graduate/Professional Schools

Questions to Ask Yourself

Depending on your own personal interests and needs you may have other criteria to add to this list.

- **Finding the best location:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of an urban or rural setting? What part of the country do you want to live in for the next few years? Have you considered attending graduate school in another country?
- **Choosing the ideal campus atmosphere:** Do you want the quiet and relative isolation of a small campus or the excitement (and potentially larger number of resources) of a larger campus?
- **Determining the strength of the program:** Does the program emphasize areas that fit your career interests and goals, such as research, theory, or practice in the discipline? Do the faculty have special academic reputations based on research projects and publications?
- **Determining the university's prestige:** How important is reputation to you versus other factors? How will the status of the institution where you receive your degree affect job prospects? Should you pay the extra cost of a private institution?

Doing the Research

- **Online graduate school directories**
 - Peterson's www.petersons.com/Default.asp?ShowTab=gr
 - GradSchools.com www.gradschools.com/
 - America's Best Graduate Schools www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/rankings/rankindex_brief.php
 - Distance Learning (online) Programs www.petersons.com/distancelearning/code/search.asp
- **Online career specific sites**
 - mba.com www.mba.com/mba/default.htm
 - Top MBA Programs www.businessweek.com/bschools/rankings/index.html
 - Law School Admission Council www.lsac.org/
 - Top Law Schools grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/grad/law
 - Association of American Medical Colleges www.aamc.org/students/applying/start.htm
 - Top Medical Schools grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/grad/mdr
- **Hard copy resources**
 - The UWM library, public libraries, and bookstores have comprehensive guides as well as program specific such as *Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study*, *Graduate Study in Psychology*, *The Official Guide to US Law Schools*, etc.
 - Professional associations sometimes publish information about graduate schools. For example, the American Psychological Association publishes *Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields*. Write or call associations in your field to inquiry about this information. Most libraries have the *Encyclopedia of Associations* which lists addresses and phone numbers of professional organizations.

Applying to Graduate/Professional Schools

Questions to Ask

- **When do I apply?**

Some programs have specific deadlines by which your materials need to be submitted and may admit students only during the fall semester where as other programs accept applications on a continual basis and admit students during all semesters. Generally, application deadlines for fall programs are between December and February and spring programs between August and October.

You will need to complete an application form for the graduate school and some schools will require you to submit another application form to the academic department.

- **How much are application fees?**

Application fees for each school are between \$30 and \$90. You should expect to apply to five or six schools and maybe more, depending on the level of competition in your area.

- **How will my GPA be calculated?**

Schools vary as to which years of your undergraduate degree they use to determine if you meet their minimum GPA requirements. Some will include all years, some may not include your freshman years, and other may just include your last two undergraduate years.

If you are concerned that your overall GPA will prevent you from getting into graduate school, try recalculating your GPA with only your upper division courses or the courses in your major. If this GPA is significantly higher than your overall GPA, you may want to address this in your application or essay.

Most universities will accept only an official transcript bearing the embossed seal of the undergraduate institution. Transcripts of your grades from all colleges you attended are usually required.

- **Who should write my letters of recommendation?**

These recommendations should come primarily from faculty, but some may also come from internship supervisors, job supervisors, or senior graduate students. Choose people who know your abilities both inside and outside the classroom. Graduate/professional schools require anywhere from two to four letters of recommendation, however, the average is three.

- **What do I need to know about admissions tests?**

The most well known admissions tests are the GRE (Graduate School), GMAT (Business School), MCAT (Medical School), and LSAT (Law School). Not all programs require admissions tests. Plan to complete tests well in advance of admission deadlines.

For test dates, test centers, and registration info see:

- GRE www.gre.org/ttindex.html
- LSAT www.lsac.org/LSAT/about-the-lsat.asp
- GMAT www.mba.com/mba/TaketheGMAT
- MCAT www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm

For tips, strategies, and practice tools see:

- Princeton Review www.princetonreview.com/
- Peterson's www.petersons.com/testprepchannel/graduate_entrance.asp

- **What should I include in my essay?**

The application essay may be referred to as an essay, statement of purpose, or personal statement. Usually the university will explain what they want you to address within your essay.

Generally, you'll be asked to write about the following:

- Reasons for pursuing this particular graduate degree
- Your motivation and commitment to the field of study
- Why you selected this university
- Your interests and background in the field
- Relevant skills or training you have acquired and academic awards or honors you have received
- Your long term career plans.

For tips on writing your essay see:

- www.psywww.com/careers/perstmt.htm
- owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html
- www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/workshop/writer_resources/writing_tips/personal_statements.htm
- gradschool.about.com/od/essaywriting/All_About_the_Graduate_Admissions_Essay.htm

For examples of personal statements see:

- owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/02/
- www.essayedge.com/graduate/essayadvice/samples/

- **Will an interview be required?**

Interviews may be of major importance for admission to some graduate programs, but may not be required for entrance to others. However, many schools encourage you to visit the campus and set up appointments to speak with admissions officers and individual faculty.

Remember, it is the total package of information that is being reviewed, not just one element.