

USFSP CAREER CENTER

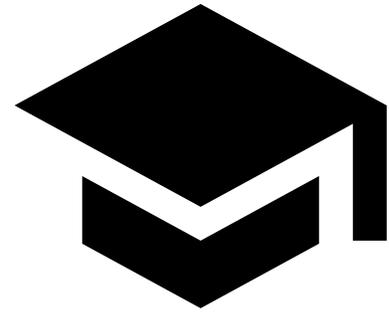
GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

Overview

Graduate school is a huge investment of your time and money. The key is to know what you want to get out of your education before you make the investment. To consider if graduate school is for you, you should approach it from two directions. First, look inward and analyze your personal strengths, weaknesses, situations, and goals. Second, research graduate programs that suit you and will help you achieve your goals. Thirdly, take the action steps necessary to apply and prepare yourself for graduate school.

This guide will review:

- Types of graduate education
- Making the decision to pursue graduate education
- Selecting a graduate school
- The application process
- Financial aspects of graduate school
- Timeline for application
- Graduate school resource websites



What types of degrees do graduate schools offer?

Master's Degree (M.S., M.A., M. Ed., M.B.A., M.M., M.F.A., M.S.W., etc.)

A master's degree generally requires one to three years to complete. There are usually four types of programs with differing graduation requirements.

- Course program: Students satisfactorily complete a required program of studies.
- Comprehensive exam program: Student is required to complete coursework at the end of which an examination must be passed.
- Thesis programs: Students complete required coursework and must submit a thesis (original piece of research)
- Proficiency program requirements: Require the student to demonstrate proficiency in order to graduate. This may be done through a portfolio, performance, or project.

Professional Degree (J.D., M.D., D.V.M., Pharm. D., D.D.S., D.M.D., etc.)

Professional degrees are awarded upon completion of programs of studies that prepare individuals to enter certain professions. Often these are terminal degrees, meaning the highest award in the field, some may have additional certification or degrees available. These programs often require some type of experiential learning component, clinicals, residencies, or volunteer work along with a culminating exam for certification.

Doctoral Degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., D.M., Psy. D. etc.)

These are the highest degrees awarded. The doctoral program is similar to the masters but the expectation level is raised in all areas. Self-discipline, motivation, and persistence are needed to get the Ph.D. because no one is supplying you with daily instructions, assignments, and deadlines. Two to three years of course work is followed by comprehensive exams. These exams are sometimes referred to as "orals" and are graded by a small group of faculty. Following the exams, original research is conducted in view of writing a dissertation. In addition to completion of an academic program of studies and a comprehensive examination, the majority require a dissertation, which is a significant work of original research. When the dissertation is drafted, your committee reviews it and makes suggestions. After the revisions you appear before the committee to orally defend your research, arguments, thesis, and conclusions.

Making the decision to pursue graduate school

There are many things to consider when making the decision on graduate education. Use the following questions to reflect on graduate school, your interests, values, and skills.

Questions to think about:

- Does the thought of more studying, reading, writing papers, and test-taking trigger anxiety and stress?
- Will a graduate degree be beneficial for better job offers, higher initial starting salaries, and advancement opportunities in my chosen field?
- What types of graduate and professional degree programs exist for my chosen field and where are they?
- How long do I have to complete the program?
- What is the cost of tuition, housing, health insurance, etc?
- How will you finance it?
- Are assistantships available? Do I need one to attend?
- Will I participate in an internship, practicum, or field experience?
- Are you confident enough in your decision to make the necessary commitment in time, effort, and resources?
- Will this advanced degree lead you to where you want to be professionally or personally?
- How will attending graduate school affect your family or relationships?
- Do the programs you are considering require or recommend related experience before entry?

Good Reasons for Choosing Grad School:

- Satisfying intellectual curiosity
- Enjoy research
- Plan to remain in the academic environment
- Obtaining career entry or advancement in a job

Bad Reasons for Choosing Grad School:

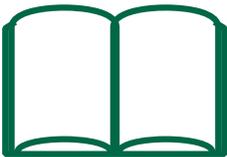
- Unsure of career goals
- Postpoing the job search
- To make others happy
- Avoiding the "real world"

Selecting a graduate school

Like any important decision, selecting a graduate program is often complex. If possible, start early to give yourself a year or more to explore and choose. (Use the Graduate School Program Evaluation Sheet at the back of this document.)

Step I: Research possible programs

Identify programs in your chosen field. There are various resources available, including many that are available in the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library or the USFSP Career Center.

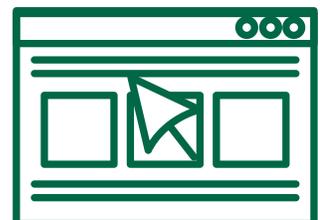


Reference books:

Peterson's Guides to Graduate and Professional Programs
The Official GRE/CGS Directory of Graduate Programs
Field Specific books

Websites:

www.gradschools.com
www.graduateguide.com
www.petersons.com/gradchannel



Step II: Choose where to apply

Your initial search should help you identify a manageable number of programs that you want to consider further. Now it is time to select the programs where you intend to apply. Your satisfaction depends on the compatibility of the department and programs with your goals and purposes. The kind of information you will need to determine this may or may not be in print. Often a visit to the program is a good way to acquire the information you need.

Consider the following questions when evaluating programs:

Program Components:

1. Is it especially strong in certain areas?
2. How large are the class sizes?
3. How often are the courses given?
4. Is the curriculum challenging and up-to-date?
5. Does it emphasize what interests you?
6. Does one school of thought or approach to research dominate?
7. Are there ample opportunities for field work or research?
8. What internships are available?
9. Are the school and program accredited?
10. How many hours are needed for a degree?
11. Is a thesis required?
12. Is there a time limit in attaining a degree?
13. What is the program's track record in finding its graduates positions?
14. What types of jobs do they get?
15. What percentage of graduates take jobs in business, industry, government agencies or non-profits?

Financial:

1. How much will the degree cost and what forms of assistance are available?
2. Are there assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, or other forms of institutional awards available that would help meet your expenses?

Location and Environment:

1. Is the school the only major institution in a small college town or urban campus among several in a city?
2. What facilities, including libraries, laboratories, and computers are available?
3. What is the quality of the facilities?
4. Are library collections large and up-to-date?
5. What support services does the university offer students?
6. Does the program attract scholars and practitioners from around the world?

Faculty:

1. Where did they study?
2. What have they published?
3. How current is their work?
4. Does the faculty have professional experience outside the academic community?
5. Are some of the teachers recognized as authorities in their field?
6. Are the mentoring prospects good?
7. Do they work closely with their students and involve them in their work?
8. Are the faculty members active in their field and do they involve students in their professional endeavors (research or application)?

Student Body and Culture:

1. How do faculty, staff, and students get along with one another?
2. How do your qualifications stack up against the competition? What are your chances?
 - Select a graduate school where you will be challenged by your classmates
 - Select a school where your graduate admission test and GPA will not be significantly different from those of your fellow students
3. On your visit to the campus ask students about the graduate opportunities available.

Employment:

1. How long does it take graduates to find jobs?
2. Where are the graduates being hired?
3. What is the average salary of the graduates?

*Be sure that the schools you choose align with your values!



The Application Process

Admissions Criteria

The specific criteria and their relative weights vary, depending on the academic discipline, the institution, and the number of applicants. Typical criteria included:

- Transcript of grades
- Grade point average
- Admission test scores
- Resume
- Application
- Letters of recommendation
- Interview
- Relevant work experience
- Undergraduate research experience

Graduate Admissions Test

Colleges and universities usually require a specific admission test and sometimes departments, also, have their own requirements. Review the department and university requirements at the schools you plan to apply.

- DAT (Dental Admission Test)
 - Dental programs
 - <http://www.ada.org/dat.aspx>
- GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)
 - Graduate programs in Business
 - www.mba.com
- GRE (Graduate Record Examination)
 - Most other programs
 - www.gre.org
- LSAT (Law School Admission Test)
 - Law schools
 - www.lsac.org
- MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)
 - Medical schools
 - www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm



When should I take the test?

Early! Keep in mind application deadlines and leave enough time to allow you to retake the test if necessary. Some tests can be taken multiple times and the scores may be averaged. Most programs will not accept scores more than five years old.

Applications

A common recommendation is to apply to five schools, reflecting the following categories:

- One program that is extremely desirable, with very competitive admissions.
- Three programs that are realistic in terms of admissions standards and that meet your criteria.
- One program you are confident about getting into which meets your criteria.
- Keep in mind each application is costly in terms of time and money.

Application Deadlines

Many graduate program deadlines are in January or February. For some schools, it is best to apply in November or December of your senior year for admission the following Fall. The more competitive the program, the earlier applications need to be submitted. Contact schools to determine application deadlines.

Transcripts

Admissions committees require official transcripts of your grades in order to evaluate your academic preparation for graduate study. Contact your college registrar to have your transcript sent to graduate institutions.

Application Essays or Personal Statements

A committee will read your essay and look for evidence that you are prepared for graduate school, have demonstrated intellectual or professional growth, and are focused in a particular field. They can tell a lot about you from your writing ability, so be sure your writing is clear and conveys your ideas effectively.

Suggestions for writing the essay include:

- Writing a strong opening statement to grab their attention
 - Your interest in the field and why you think you are suited to it
 - Describing your immediate and long-term personal and professional goals
 - Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution
 - How your educational background, skills, and personal characteristics will contribute to success in this field
 - Research or professional experiences that have contributed to your growth
 - Any unusual experience that distinguishes you from other applicants
 - Personal uniqueness – what you will add to the diversity of the entering class
- Get more information about writing application essays from the USFSP Career Center Handout on Personal Statements.

Letters of Recommendation

Recommendations from faculty members are essential for academically oriented programs, professional programs may seriously consider nonacademic recommendations from professionals in the field. A good reference will meet at least one of the following criteria:

- He or she has a high opinion of you
- Knows you well in more than one area of your life
- Is familiar with the institutions to which you are applying
- Has taught a large number of students and can make a favorable comparison of you with your peers
- Is known by the admissions committee and is regarded as someone whose judgment should be given weight

Interviews

Prepare for a graduate school interview as you would for a job interview. Interviewers will be interested in the way you think and approach problems and will concentrate on questions that enable them to assess your thinking skills, rather than questions that call upon your grasp of technical knowledge. Get more information about interview preparation from the USFSP Career Center Handout on interviewing.

Financial Aspect of Graduate School

Ideally you should begin researching sources of financial support early in the application process. This is because many funding organizations have applications due in the fall for the following year.

Fees

Depending on the number of schools you apply to, the application process can get a bit costly. Expect to pay for admissions tests, application fees, and official transcript delivery. Some institutions offer application fee waivers for a variety of reasons. Determine if there are application fee waivers by visiting department websites or contacting the schools and requesting a waiver.

Monetary Awards (Grants, Fellowships, Scholarships)

Most grants and fellowships are cash awards, sometimes known as “gift aid”, provided by a department, university or outside organization. Often they cover the cost of tuition and fees plus a stipend to cover living expenses. Some are based exclusively on financial need, some exclusively on academic merit, and some on a need and merit.



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- Fellowships: Prestigious awards, often quite substantial. They are competitive and based on academic achievement. Do not usually require work.
 - Grants: A sum of money given by an organization, esp. a government, for a particular purpose. Grants often include follow up compliance reports and budget breakdowns. Science organizations, for instance, may award a grant for completion of a student research project.
 - Scholarships: These are gifts of money. They may be unrestricted scholarship money with no obligation for work or repayment, or they may be for a specific purpose.

Work Programs (Graduate Assistantships)

Assistantships are a type of part-time support, including teaching, research, and administrative, which require recipients to perform a service for the university in exchange for a salary or stipend. Often a full or partial tuition waiver is provided. Larger universities usually hire teaching assistants for general education classes and others. Research assistants help a faculty member with his or her research and are most often offered to students in the hard sciences and social sciences. Administrative graduate assistants work part-time in one of the university's administrative or support services departments.

Loans

Loans, an important source of support for graduate students, should be approached carefully. Finding free sources of funding should be your first goal. You should check with the financial aid officer of the school you wish to attend before applying for a loan to determine if the school may offer a financial aid package that makes borrowing unnecessary. You can then borrow only what you really need once the school has made its aid offer. Various federal and private loan programs are available for graduate study. For more information contact your school's financial aid office, the graduate academic department and check websites.

Financial Resources:

Federal Student Aid Information Center at 1-800-433-3243

- www.federalstudentaid.ed.gov
 - Provides general information about graduate aid and access to FREE scholarship searches.
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Timeline for Application

The following timeline may need to be adjusted depending on application deadlines, enrollment/start dates, and your anticipated graduation date. The timeline is for a planned fall enrollment in graduate school. Use the timeline as a guide to assist you with planning the graduate school application process.

Junior Year (3-4 semester prior to graduation)

January- April

- Reflect and affirm your decision to attend graduate school and create short and long term career goals.
- Begin researching and evaluating programs of interest.
- Begin preparation for admissions test (sign up for prep classes and/or practice tests).
- Draft grad school budget based on cost of attendance, cost of living, and financial assistance available.
- Meet with faculty members, academic advisors, and career center staff to assist you with the process.

May-July

- Draft your personal statement or application essays.
- Update your résumé /curriculum vitae.
- Take appropriate admissions tests and request your scores be sent to appropriate schools.
- Request materials from schools which you have interest in their programs.

Senior Year (1-2 semester prior to graduation)

August-September

- Re-take admissions tests if necessary.
- Determine the schools you will apply to:
 - Create a checklist of required materials for each application.
 - Get organized by creating a file (hard copy or digital) with all the required documents for application.
 - Retain copies of all documents for your records
- Attend graduate school fairs or visit schools with programs of interest.

October

- Finalize personal statement and résumé.
- Request letters of recommendation from faculty members (Provide each with a copy of your personal statement and résumé).
- Arrange for transcripts from all post-secondary institutions to be sent to the schools you are applying.

November-December

- Submit your application materials. (Best to submit one month prior to deadline to allow for delays and processing). Be sure to follow application instructions closely!
- Remind your references/recommenders of letter due dates.
- Contact schools you applied with to verify your application is completed and all requirements

Senior Year (Spring) (semester of graduation)

January-March

- Prepare and complete admission interviews.
- Schedule campus visits
- Write and send thank you letters to faculty and supervisors who interview you.
- Develop a contingency plan and begin steps necessary in case graduate school does not work at this point in time. (Attend job fairs, apply to positions opening in May/June)
- Wait...

April

- Decide! Accept admission/assistantship offers with the program you choose.
- Mail in acceptance letters and deposits as necessary
- Contact other schools to notify them you have made a decision and will not be attending. This will allow a student from their wait list to be admitted.
- Send a thank you to references and advisors and let them know of your decision.



Grad School Resource Websites

Association for Support of Graduate Students:	www.asgs.org
Grad Profiles:	www.gradprofiles.com
College Confidential:	http://talk.collegeconfidential.com/professional-graduate-school/
Graduate Guide:	www.graduateguide.com/
Graduate Record Examination:	www.gre.org
Graduate School:	www.gradschools.com/
Nationally Coveted Scholarships and Fellowship:	http://scholarships.kachinatech.com/scholarships/scholars.html
Petersons Educational Center:	www.petersons.com/
Princeton Review:	www.review.com
Scholarship Resource Network:	www.srnexpress.com
University of South Florida Graduate School:	http://www.grad.usf.edu/
U.S. News College Rankings:	http://www.usnews.com/rankings

Resources used in creation of this document:

Florida State University Career Center:	http://career.fsu.edu/Images/PDFS/Guides/GoingToGraduateSchool.pdf
Bowling Green State University:	http://www.bgsu.edu/downloads/enrollment/file74878.pdf
Purdue University:	http://www.gradschool.purdue.edu/downloads/students/prospective/Timeline%20for%20Web.pdf

NEED HELP?!?

Visit the Career Center - SLC2300

- Meet with a Career Coach to assist with the application process
- Stop by Drop-In Hours for a quick review of application materials

Visit the Student Success Center - DAV 107

- Get assistance with creation of your Statement of Purpose
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