Graduate School Guide
GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

How can you determine if graduate school is the next logical step for you? Some students pursue post-graduate studies merely because they lack a sense of direction. They see it as a way to put off dealing with a career choice and a job search.

Graduate study should NOT be a postponement of the inevitable entry into the working world, but should be clearly related to your career and life goals. The graduate degree should be important to entry into or increasing your opportunities in a particular field.

The decision about whether or not to attend graduate school is an important one. In order to understand your reasons for pursuing a graduate education, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you clarified your career goals?
- Is it probable that you would change course after gaining some experience in the working world?
- Would a break from campus life benefit you? Or would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after a break?
- Would a post-graduate degree enhance your job and salary prospects in your chosen field?
- Will it be easier and/or beneficial to enter graduate school in your field directly after college or after gaining experience?
- How much will graduate school cost (i.e. tuition, room, board)? Will you need to add to your debt burden to pay for it?
- Is there a possibility that a future employer might pay for you to attend graduate school?

It is absolutely essential to specify and clarify your goals regarding graduate study before applying. Graduate school applications will include questions about your career choice and why this degree will assist you in reaching your goals. You need to be able to respond effectively to these questions.

As you investigate your possible choices after graduation, be sure to consider the fact that gaining relevant work experience can help you clarify your goals and enhance your application to graduate study.

Consider making an appointment with a Career Counselor to clarify your career goals and deciding if graduate school is right for you.
SELECTING & RESEARCHING A FIELD OF STUDY

The first step in the graduate school decision process is choosing a specific field of study. There are two types of graduate study programs:

◊ **Academic** programs focus on in-depth study of a given field. These are often research oriented.

◊ **Professional** degrees stress the practical application of knowledge and skills required for a particular career field (i.e. M.B.A., M.D., J.D.)

Before you begin the application process, you need to make two important decisions:

- In what specialization or area are you most interested?
- What degree do you wish to earn?

In the decision making process, your professors can be your most valuable resource. Also consider speaking to friends or family who have completed or are currently enrolled in graduate study as their first-hand experience may give you some valuable insights.

Additionally, the following resources in the career library can help you with your decision-making.

| 📚 Graduate Study in Psychology |
| 📚 Best 301 Business Schools |
| 📚 Best 168 Medical Schools |

**FACTORs TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING A GRADUATE PROGRAM**

**Geographic Location:**

- In what part of the country do you want to study?
- Do you prefer an urban or more rural area?

**The Institution and the Actual Degree Programs Offered:**

- Accreditation of the university
- National standing of the program *
- Current happenings at these institutions
- Alternate programs that will enable you to achieve the same objective
- Philosophy and general atmosphere
- How selective are they? How many candidates apply and how many are accepted?
*While national standing is an important factor to consider when choosing a graduate program, do not base your decision on this alone. The criteria that these reports use may not be the same criteria that are important to you.*

Understand the Pre-requisites for Acceptance into a Program:

- Undergraduate major
- G.P.A.
- Specific course requirements
- Required academic skills
- Required standardized testing
- Required related work experience

What do they look for in candidates? Do you meet these basic pre-requisites? If not, what can you do?

Faculty:

- Academic training
- Research activities
- Recently published work
- Reputation in the field (critical factor in a doctoral program)
- Size of department
- Concern for student development
- Types of mentors and their availability to students
- Philosophy and orientation
- Ability to support graduate students through research grants

This is an important factor because as you do your research you will be working closely with and monitored by the faculty. Be sure to inquire if faculty you are interested in working with will be staying at the institution during your course of study (some faculty might be there only temporarily or leaving on a sabbatical).

Students:

- Academic abilities and skills
- Achievements
- Diversity and geographic representation
- Age/work experience
- Student groups and organizations
- Satisfaction with the program
- Living/working conditions

What is the level of success of graduates upon completion of the program?

The Facilities:

- Financial support it receives
Research facilities: library, computer and laboratory
Housing
Health, fitness and food services
Graduate Services
Career Services

Curriculum:

- Purpose of the department
- Degree programs offered in field of interest
- Sub-fields
- Joint degree programs
- Scope of course offerings:
  - Are there enough courses in the branch of the field that you are interested in?
- Types and nature of course offerings
- Frequency of course offerings
- Requirements for the master's degree
  - Number of credits
  - Comprehensive examination and/or thesis
  - Fieldwork/Internship
- Requirements for the doctoral degree
  - Language proficiency test
  - Course work
  - Selection of major professor
  - General knowledge test
  - Prospectus
  - Candidacy
  - Research
  - Dissertation
- Student-faculty ratio
- Kind of interaction between professors and students
- Interdisciplinary and interdepartmental offerings
- Opportunities for internships, teaching and research assistantships
- Successful placement of graduates upon graduation

Do they offer what you are looking for in a program?

Cost of Study:

- Tuition
- Housing: on or off-campus
- Fees
- Cost of living in the area
- Availability of financial aid
- Opportunities for fellowships, assistantships, work-study, loans, part-time work in the area
WORLD WIDE WEB - GRADUATE SCHOOL RESOURCES

The web is now among your best resources for exploring graduate school options. Most graduate schools have web pages with program information, much like an on-line catalog. Here you can research schools, contact the admissions office, request applications, course catalogs and much more! We would recommend spending an afternoon browsing the web pages of any schools in which you might be interested.

ENHANCING YOUR GRADUATE SCHOOL CANDIDACY

If you are still in school, you can enhance your chances of acceptance into the graduate school of your choice by becoming involved with related undergraduate research and activities which reflect your interest in this field of study.

- Review your course selection, and with the help of your advisor, identify classes which could potentially strengthen your background academically.

- **Training and research experience** can complement a solid academic performance. By taking advantage of independent research projects, collaborating on work with faculty members, or engaging in your own thesis construction, you can demonstrate a willingness to undertake in-depth research in a field of your choice and grow to know members of your department quite well.

- **Serving as an undergraduate teaching or laboratory assistant** will not only help confirm your own career goals, but also indicate a level of commitment to your academic field. For example, University of California, Merced has opportunities to become tutors, research or lab assistants.

- **Getting to know your professors** can increase your comprehension of the classes and subject matter, as well as provide a means through which to strengthen your letters of recommendation. By working with individual faculty members on projects, participation in clubs and academic societies (i.e. Vanguard), or attending other events involving faculty-student interaction, you can become better acquainted with faculty in your department.

- Many disciplines have **professional organizations** in which you can become a student affiliate. In some of these organizations, you receive journals with recent developments in the field and information on preparation programs. In addition, you will learn of upcoming conferences, conventions, and possible job openings. This type of professional involvement will enhance your resume for assistantships.

- You should also consider **related community service opportunities or internships**. These experiences provide invaluable practical knowledge.

- Consider becoming involved in **extracurricular activities** which demonstrate a high degree of dedication and leadership potential.
APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

APPLYING TO SCHOOLS

The number of schools you should apply to will depend on your own qualifications and the type of programs you are trying to enter.

Based on your budget and your qualifications, determine the number of schools you can apply to. Consider:

- Applying to at least one prestigious or highly competitive school and to at least one larger university that offers many programs and accepts a large number of students.
- Applying to as many as you can whose requirements you meet.
- NOT applying to programs you know you will NEVER attend! It will waste your time, energy, and money!

PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Questions to ask yourself before you write:

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field--through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (i.e. integrity, compassion, persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school--and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

General Advice:

- Compose the essay carefully, asking professors and friends to critique your writing.
- Be brief, concise, and stick to the information requested.

- Organize the essay in thematic and/or chronological order. Provide specific examples for each point you make.

- Avoid use of slang and words too elaborate for the purpose at hand.

- Don’t use too many “I’s”.

- Communicate why you wish to attend graduate school, what you hope to gain from the experience and what your future plans are. Tailor the essay to each school’s philosophy and requirements. Describe which parts of the program appeal to you and why you have chosen to apply to this school. DO NOT USE THE SAME ESSAY FOR EACH PROGRAM YOU APPLY FOR!

- Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember that your audience is made up of professionals in your field, and you are not going to tell them how they should act or what should be. You are the amateur.

- Establish your voice. Choose a voice/tone that is confident without sounding arrogant. Usually a straightforward tone will serve you best. If you need to explain poor GPA or GRE scores, do so without making excuses. Just state what affected your performance and follow-up with what you did to improve the situation.

- Project a positive attitude – confident and enthusiastic.

In summary, the reader should be able to:

- Ascertain the origin of your interest in a field of study.

- See the growth of that interest over a period of time (as illustrated by experience).

- Clearly see that, for the applicant, attending graduate school is the next logical step in the sequence toward a specific goal.

Visit the Career Services Center and have a Career Counselor read your personal statement before submitting it.

For further information, look in the Career Services library for:

- Essays that Worked for Business School

- Essays that Worked for Law School

- Essays that Worked for Medical School
STANDARDIZED TESTS

Almost all graduate schools require that you take an entrance exam. Here are websites where you can find information about the following entrance exams:

- **Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT - required of most MBA programs)** - http://www.gmac.com/gmac/thegmat/
- **Graduate Record Exam (GRE)** - http://www.ets.org/gre/
- **Law School Admission Test (LSAT)** - http://www.lsac.org/lsat/about-the-lsat.asp
- **Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)** - https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/
- **Optometry Admission Test (OAT)** - https://www.ada.org/oat/index.html
- **Dental Admission Test (DAT)** - http://www.ada.org/dat.aspx

*Test Prep Courses*

Some students benefit from taking test prep courses to prepare for their exams. For students who need this type of structure and accountability, test prep courses might be the way to go. The Career Services Center does not recommend or endorse any of these courses.

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPTS

Admissions committees always require official transcripts (as opposed to a student copy) from each college or university attended. Typically the cost for these is $2.00 to $7.00 ($7.00 at UC Merced for a regular delivery) and they must be mailed directly from the University Registrar to the institution to which you are applying.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

One benefit of being at a small institution is the strong relationships you can build with faculty. Use this to your advantage! Visit your professors during their office hours beginning your freshman year. This will pay off immensely when it comes time to apply for graduate schools.

Letters of recommendation are an essential component of your application. Make sure to ask professors and previous employers to write these letters early in your application process (Be aware of busy times in the year for faculty members – i.e. midterms, finals, etc.). Your references should speak to your ability to do graduate level work, your academic accomplishment and skills. Do not send in more letters to an institution than were requested.

The Career Services Center maintains a Letters of Reference Service which will send letters to educational institutions to support your admission to graduate and professional school. For more information about the Letters of Reference Service, please see the “About Letters of Reference Files” handout or drop by the Career Services Center for more info.

*Establish Strong Contacts*

Start early in establishing strong contacts with professors, faculty members, and supervisors. By making conscientious and sincere attempts to get to know faculty members in your field of study, you are increasing your chances for a stronger, more meaningful, and informed recommendation.
letter for your applications. There are many ways to establish such contacts; the ones listed below are the more popular means of doing so:

- **Courses** – Take smaller classes to allow for increased interaction and familiarity. Smaller classes make it easier for the professor to remember you. You can also take multiple courses by the same professor and attend office hours to increase your interactions. And as always, make sure you maintain strong academics.

- **Office Hours** – By attending professors’ office hours on a normal basis, you show that you are a proactive learner and make it easier for the professor to remember you. These office hours are good opportunities for you to speak with faculty about course material, information related to the course not covered in class, or the professor’s research. Attending TA office hours is important to your learning although letters acquired from TAs are not as strong as those from faculty.

- **Individual Study (199s)** – These courses allow students to be involved in research. This is a great opportunity to work with faculty and their graduate students and to gain experience in the research arena. Being involved in this shows your intellectual curiosity and your work style through your performance in the lab.

- **Directed Group Study (198s)** – This course for credit allows students to work in groups on a project under the guidance of a faculty member, thus enabling students increased contact with faculty.

- **Internships/Volunteer** – You can use the Career Services Center to look for internship and volunteer opportunities to gain experience in a field related to your career goals. These opportunities are great for learning more about the field and getting to know faculty or professionals in your field of interest.

- **Teaching and Research Assistantships** – By becoming a teaching assistant or researching for a professor that you have taken a course with, you show that you are academically strong and are a proactive learner.

- **Professionals** – Some professional schools require you to obtain letters of recommendation from professionals in the same field. Good ways to obtain strong recommendation letters from professionals is to work or volunteer in their office. If that is not possible, you can also shadow or observe them. Make sure you show your strong work ethic and interest in the career as those are the qualities that professional schools look for in your recommendation letters.

**How to Request a Recommendation Letter**

- When asking, be polite and ask in a manner that allows the potential recommender to decline your request. For example, you could ask “Would you be able to write me a strong letter of recommendation?” If the recommender declines your request for a strong recommendation letter, thank him/her because you can find an alternate source for a stronger letter.
❖ It’s best to ask in person. When meeting with the person who is writing your letter, make sure you have enough time to discuss your request and any questions that the recommender may have.

❖ Ask at least two months prior to the letter due date. Be aware of hectic times of the year (midterms, finals, etc.).

❖ Have the packet of information to give to your letter writer to assist in the letter writing process: cover note, unofficial transcripts, personal statements/autobiography, resume, any papers you did well in from that professor’s class, guidelines from the school on what to cover in the recommendation letter, addressed & stamped envelope.

❖ Always thank your letter writers, preferably by sending them a handwritten thank you note.

FINANCIAL AID

Application Fee Waiver Program

If you are currently receiving need based financial aid, you may qualify for the application fee waiver program that many institutions have. You should contact the admissions office at the institution to which you are applying to find out what you have to do. Usually, you will need a letter from the undergraduate financial aid office.

In applying for financial aid, you will probably need to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/).

You should also be aware that most graduate schools offer graduate or teaching assistantship positions which usually carry with them a stipend (the amount varies with the school and with the major field) and a fee waiver for your tuition costs. Application for these positions is generally handled directly through the academic department or a centralized office of graduate appointments.

You may want to consider assistantships or work opportunities in other parts of the university. Often residence life positions are available to graduate students from various majors. These positions often include a stipend as well as room and board. Hiring is handled through the residence life department.

RESUMES

Some schools require that you enclose a resume as a part of the application process. You can get assistance on resume writing in the Career Services Center. A resume should be submitted if you are applying for Graduate or Teaching Assistantships or other employment opportunities.

SELECTION INTERVIEWS

Many schools require an interview prior to acceptance into the program. Your effectiveness in such an interview is dependent upon your level of confidence, which in turn is dependent upon the amount of preparation. Consider participating in the Career Services Center Mock Interview Program and Interview Preparation Workshops.
APPLICATION DEADLINES

Application deadlines will vary. Most are between January and March, but some are as early as December. Many schools have a rolling admissions policy and will act on applications as they are received.

For highly competitive programs, applications should be submitted as soon as the institution starts to accept applications. (Check catalogs/websites for these dates.) In any case, it is wise to submit applications at least a month in advance of the stated deadline.

TIMETABLE FOR CHOOSING AND APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Use this timetable to review your choices and actions as you consider graduate school decisions. Plan to recheck this timetable at the end of each semester to make sure that you are progressing effectively in preparing for and applying to graduate schools. If you are applying to medical school, the timetable will be different. Please talk to the Pre-Health Advisor in the School of Natural Sciences or visit the Career Services Center for more information.

JUNIOR YEAR

❖ With the help of your advisor, select courses beyond the general college requirements which will enhance your graduate school preparation.

❖ Note your professors’ research areas. Get in touch with those professors whose research interests you and investigate ways in which you can get involved in learning more about it.

❖ Try to talk to recent alumni who are now graduate students. Ask them what graduate student life is like, what kind of study load you can expect in their specialties, which professors can provide detailed information about graduate school and which professors you should work with on research projects.

❖ Begin preparation and register for the appropriate graduate school entrance test(s). By taking these tests in the spring of your junior year, you will have the assurance that your scores have reached all programs before the deadline. Also, you will have more time during your senior year to work on other parts of the application.

BEGINNING OF SENIOR YEAR

❖ Check with the Office of the Registrar and your advisor to confirm your eligibility for graduation.

❖ Speak with faculty who are knowledgeable about graduate schools in your areas of study. Bring a copy of your transcript and resume so that they can recommend schools which may best match your interests.

❖ Request bulletins, brochures, assistantship information, financial aid forms and department application forms from schools that you are considering.
Register for and take (in October) the entrance exam if you have not previously taken it. Remember scores are not immediately available after you have taken the test – it often takes up to 6 weeks to get them. Plan ahead!

With the help of the Career Services Center staff, prepare a resume to supplement your graduate study and assistantship application.

Request a student copy of your transcript from each undergraduate institution you have attended. Check for errors since any changes may take a while. Don’t wait until the application deadline to do this! You may either miss the deadline or be forced to submit an incomplete transcript. Obtaining a transcript from another institution may take weeks!

**NOVEMBER OF SENIOR YEAR**

Narrow down your list of possible schools. Check the application deadline for each school.

Graduate schools generally require from 3 to 5 letters of recommendation. Remember to ask professors and supervisors for these early!

Begin working on your personal statements and other required essays.

Request that your entrance test results be sent to all schools to which you have applied.

**DECEMBER OF SENIOR YEAR**

Prepare final copies of application materials. Everything should be mailed at least one week before the deadline. Be sure to include the necessary fees with your applications.

Have the Office of the Registrar send your transcript to all institutions to which you are applying.

**JANUARY-APRIL OF SENIOR YEAR**

Prior to the deadline, call to verify that your application materials, references, transcripts, etc., were received. Some institutions will allow you to include a self addressed postcard that they will return to you upon receipt of your application.

Carefully consider the options available and make your decision.

**ACCEPTING AND DECLINING OFFERS**

You may be notified by phone or in writing that you have been accepted for admission into a given program or that you are an alternate on a waiting list. Consider the following:
As soon as you have acceptances from your primary schools, decide which one is better for you and notify the others of your decision not to accept their offers.

One method for dealing with making your final decision is fairly simple. When you have received two acceptances, decide which of the two is best for you and send a letter to the other school letting them know of your decision. Repeat this comparison and decision process as you receive each new offer.

As soon as you have a satisfactory offer from your most preferred school, accept it and advise the other schools to which you have applied of your decision. They will appreciate your thoughtfulness in opening the way for another student.

After you have accepted, do not take your commitment lightly. Reneging on your decision for anything other than a very serious new life development may negatively affect your reputation with other institutions and with your sponsors.

Deferring Enrollment

Some graduate schools will allow you to defer your attendance for one or two years. Since deferment guidelines vary widely among programs and institutions, contact the department chairperson or dean of the graduate college to obtain specific deferment policy information.

Deferral is not generally recommended, as it may result in you being perceived as less than serious about your education. If you have an emergency in the family or a difficult illness, the school may consider you for the next year, provided you can show them how the problem that originally made you defer is not an ongoing one. Being awarded a fellowship such as the Watson would be another acceptable reason for deferment.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU DON'T GET INTO GRADUATE SCHOOL

It can be disappointing to be turned down by the schools you were hoping would accept you. Here are some things you can do to increase your chances of getting accepted in the future:

- Apply earlier (avoid the last 6 weeks before the deadline).
- Apply to more safe schools.
- Visit the school. Talk with a faculty members you'd like to work with (be absolutely certain to read some of their recently published work first).
- Take one class at a time in the targeted subject and do well.
- Get volunteer or internship experience in the targeted field (even part-time or unpaid).
- Work in a "real job" in the targeted field.
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