



Preparing for Graduate School

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Graduate school is both time-consuming and expensive; therefore, you should seriously consider your motives and goals for pursuing an advanced degree before beginning the extensive application process. There are numerous reasons people choose to attend graduate school; the following are eight of the more common ones:

1. See graduate school as a way to put off looking for a job.
2. Consider graduate study because everyone else is pursuing advanced degrees.
3. Have not decided what type of career to pursue and therefore opt to stay in school.
4. Believe there are no available jobs.
5. Are interested in specializing in a particular field of study.
6. Are pursuing a professional position requiring an advanced degree.
7. Hope to earn a higher salary with an advanced degree.
8. Need graduate courses to fulfill professional continuing education requirements.

Although these are all valid arguments for attending graduate school, reasons five through eight are some of the more pertinent ones. Naturally, an advanced degree can never guarantee you will land a higher profile position, earn a better salary, or gain personal fulfillment; but the rationales are certainly more legitimate than allowing fear, peer pressure, or laziness to dictate your future.

The most logical reason for pursuing an advanced degree centers around the need to possess an advanced degree in order to enter a particular position, occupation, or career field. Therefore, it is best to have a clear understanding of such career goals before applying for graduate schools and programs. Having an understanding of your career goals includes being aware of such variables as your personal interests, abilities, skills, and values.

If you are unsure about such variables or your specific career goals, feel free to consult the Career Consultant in your College.

Once you have discovered the type of occupation of interest to you, you will want to examine and select a graduate program that is right for you. When examining potential programs, consult college professors or individuals working in positions of interest to you on their opinions regarding the graduate schools and programs you are researching. Also, if possible, visit the campuses of those schools you are considering, and talk to both professors and students in your targeted programs. When researching programs, be sure to identify the following points:

- How many years will it take to obtain your degree?
- What types of courses will you be required to complete?
- Does the program require you to complete a thesis or major research project?
- Does the program require you to complete an internship in your field?
- Does the program offer fellowships, scholarships, or graduate assistantships?
- How many credit hours does the program involve?
- Is the program accredited, and if so, by whom?
- Will the program provide you with credentials and/or enable you to complete certification or licensure requirements needed for your particular position, occupation, or career field?
- Will the program limit your career goals in any way?
- Is the school conveniently located? If not, will it be necessary to move in order to attend?

Resist the temptation to base your decision to attend a particular institution solely on its reputation. The prestige and reputation of a particular graduate school will not mean anything if the school, program, and faculty do not accommodate your career-related goals. It would be wise to research the faculty who will be teaching and supporting you in your graduate studies. Find out what types of research they have completed, on which topics they have written articles or books, and the direction they would like your graduate program to take. Make sure that your interests coincide with their interests, or you may find yourself devoting hours to projects that are of no interest to you. Remember that the faculty in your graduate program will be your mentors; therefore, it certainly works to your advantage if you can get along with them!

Applying to graduate schools and programs is more involved than applying to undergraduate institutions. The process is more complicated and procedures more in-depth, depending on the schools and programs to which you apply. Unlike undergraduate institutions, graduate schools often require you to apply to both the graduate school and particular graduate program of interest to you. Therefore, you will want to contact both the Graduate School Admissions Office and the department of your chosen graduate program. Consult the Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs or catalogs from specific colleges and universities in the Career Center for phone numbers, addresses, and additional information on graduate schools and programs.

The following timetable, which has been adapted from Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs: An Overview, suggests an ideal timetable for most applicants:

Approximately 15 months before beginning graduate school:

- Research areas of interest, graduate schools, and graduate programs.
- Obtain information and application materials from graduate schools and programs.

- Register and prepare for required graduate school admissions tests.
- Investigate national scholarships and graduate school assistantships, if desired.
- Request letters of recommendation, if required.

Approximately three months before application deadline:

- Take required graduate school admissions tests.
- Confirm application deadlines and rolling admissions policies.
- Visit potential graduate schools and programs, if possible.
- Write application essays or compile portfolio, if required.
- Request required transcripts from your undergraduate institution.
- Register for national applications or data assembly service if applying to medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school programs where it is required and used.

Immediately prior to application deadline:

- Forward completed application packet to desired graduate schools and programs.
- Consult desired graduate schools and programs to ensure your application file is complete.

Upon learning that you have been accepted by your chosen graduate school and program:

- Inform other graduate schools and programs of your decision to attend another institution.
- Contact those people who wrote letters of recommendation for you to both thank them for their letters and inform them of your acceptance into a particular graduate school and program.

