

Applying to Graduate and Professional Schools

Career Services

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Applying to Graduate School

Is a Graduate School or Professional Program for You?

The decision to attend graduate school is important. Application to graduate school should reflect an affirmation to your career choice and not as a way to avoid important life-work decisions.

Some questions to consider are:

- Are you certain about your career interests? Or should you wait and acquire more experience?
- Does your chosen field require an advanced degree? Will it enhance your marketability?
- Do your achievements and academic background reflect the ability to successfully complete a graduate program?
- Do you have the motivation and commitment to engage in a course of study that will take at least two years at the master's level or five to six years at the Ph.D. level?
- What resources do you have available for financing a graduate degree?

Choosing a Graduate School

Here are some factors to consider as you decide where to apply for graduate school:

Location/Size:

- Do you want to attend a large or small school?
- Do you prefer a large or small program?
- In what geographic area would you like to attend school?
- Would you like the school to be located in an urban or rural setting?
- What activities does the community offer?
- Is graduate housing available?
- How difficult is it to find off-campus housing?
- What public transportation is available?

Admission Requirements:

- How competitive is admission?
- Do you meet the admission requirements (GPA, work experience, classes, test scores, etc.)? You may want to apply to a couple "safety" schools and a couple more competitive schools.
- Does the program favor applicants with work experience or those who are recent graduates?

Curriculum:

- Does the curriculum meet your educational and professional goals?
- Is a thesis required?
- Is there some type of practical experience or internship included?
- How long is the program?
- How many credits are required?

Reputation/Quality of Program:

- What is the reputation of the school and program?
- Is the program accredited, and if so, by whom?

Faculty:

- What is the faculty/student ratio?
- Is the faculty accessible to the students?
- Are the faculty members committed to teaching, research, or both?
- Do most professors share the philosophy of the department?
- Are the faculty members well known?
- Have they published recently?
- If you are attending graduate school for research in a specific discipline, are there faculty members with similar interests?

Placement:

- How many students in the program complete it?
- How many of the graduates find employment in their field?
- Does the department assist students in finding employment?
- What kinds of employment do graduates find?
- Where do most graduates find jobs?

Cost/Financial Aid:

- What is the cost of the program?
- What are the hidden costs?
- Is the cost expected to increase in the future?
- How much financial assistance is available in the form of assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, and loans?

Application Process

The application generally has five parts: Application Form, Transcripts, Statement of Purpose/Personal Statement, Graduate Admission Tests, and Letters of Recommendation. Some graduate programs require an interview.

Application Form:

- For many schools, application forms can be completed online or downloaded and printed for completion at a later time.
- Provide complete and accurate information.
- Check for typos, spelling, or grammatical errors.
- Check to see if additional forms or a departmental application are required to be submitted.

Transcripts:

- Graduate programs require official transcripts from all colleges and universities where you earned credit.

- At Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, transcripts are ordered through the Registrar's Office. Requests are not accepted via email or telephone, as a student's signature is required. There is no charge for up to 10 transcripts in a 6 month period if you attended classes or graduated from the Winona Campus. If more than 10 transcripts within a 6 month period are requested, there is a \$5 charge per transcript.

Statement of Purpose/Personal Statement:

- Almost all applications to graduate school require that you write an essay or a personal statement. It is a chance to introduce yourself to the graduate admissions committee and allow your personality to shine.
- The personal statement is also a way to measure your writing ability, so check for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Answer any specific question that is asked in the application.
- Explain any glaring inconsistencies in your academic record. Don't offer excuses; just state what you have done to repair the damage.
- Be creative in sharing your story to stand out from other applicants.
- State the reasons you are interested in attending a specific graduate program. It should demonstrate your understanding of the department and the potential contribution you could offer.
- Highlight how you became interested in the field and related experiences that have solidified your interest. Discuss your undergraduate degree, extracurricular activities, accomplishments, responsibilities, and strengths.
- Indicate what you intend on doing with the degree in the future.
- Show motivation and capacity to succeed in graduate education.
- Personal statements are typically 2 – 3 pages typed, double-spaced, and should be of the highest quality (use the guidelines given in the application for length).

Graduate Admission Tests:

- Many graduate programs require you to submit your scores from a graduate admission test such as the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), Law School Admission Test (LSAT), or Miller Analogies Test (MAT).
- Scores are used in evaluating the likelihood of your success in a particular program.
- Allow plenty of time to study and prepare.
- Familiarize yourself with test styles by answering sample questions.
- Consider taking a Kaplan course to help prepare.
- When taking the test, pace yourself and focus on accuracy. If taking on the computer, you may not be able to go back and change your answer.
- Try not to leave questions unanswered.
- Registration materials can be found in Career Services.

Letters of Recommendation:

- Most graduate schools require two or three letters of recommendation. Depending on the requirements of the program, letters may come from faculty, internship supervisors, employers or others who can confidently discuss your potential. Select recommenders from a discipline most relevant to the graduate program of study.
- A good recommender should know you well in more than one aspect of your life, have a high opinion of your potential, and be regarded as someone whose opinion and judgment should be given weight.

- Always ask your recommenders if they feel that they can write a positive recommendation.
- Give recommenders plenty of time to write the letter and provide the date by which you need the letter.
- Provide recommenders with supporting materials such as a resume or transcript.
- Many graduate programs require waived recommendations, which mean you have given away your right to see what is included in your recommendation letter. These are the most popular because it allows your writer the opportunity to be completely honest about your abilities and performance.
- Keep checking back with your recommenders to ensure your letter is done. When it is, write them a thank-you note.

Interviews:

- If interviewing, you may be asked to address such topics as your motivation for graduate study, personal philosophy, career goals, related research, work experience, and areas of interest.
- Interviews can be an opportunity for borderline candidates to convince an institution of their potential success. It can also be a chance to see how you react to stress and handle pressure.
- Prepare and dress as you would for a job interview.
- Read the website, catalog, and other brochures to help you prepare.

Application Timetable

Junior Year:

- Research areas of interest, institutions and programs.
- Clarify personal objectives.
- Talk to faculty, advisors, career services & internships, and others to discuss graduate programs and application requirements.
- Investigate financial aid/scholarship opportunities.
- Study for and take the required graduate admission test.

Summer After Junior Year:

- Request application and financial aid information from graduate schools.
- Research, visit, and select graduate schools to apply to, noting the application deadline.
- Prepare several versions of a statement of purpose and/or personal statement.
- Chose those to write letters of recommendation

Senior Year – Fall:

- Complete and submit applications and all supporting materials 6 – 8 weeks prior to stated deadlines.
- Confirm that application file is complete.
- Apply for financial aid.

Senior Year – Spring:

- Reevaluate schools and make selection.
- Notify schools of decision.
- Send thank you letters to recommenders.

Financing Graduate School

One of the most common questions graduate school applicants ask is “How do I pay for graduate school?” There are three main types of financial aid available: fellowships, assistantships, and loans. Applicants should contact the schools they are applying to determine what support is available and to obtain financial aid application forms.

Fellowships:

- Fellowships provide a tuition and living expense stipend, and are designed to bring the most qualified students into graduate programs, as they are generally based on academic merit.
- Portable fellowships are offered by a sponsor and given to applicant to use at the institution of his/her choice.
- Institutional fellowships are awarded by a school or specific department.

Assistantships:

- Assistantships offer a reduced or waived tuition and some stipend for living expenses.
- Assistantships are awarded by the school.
- Popular assistantships are offered in teaching and research.

Loans:

- Loans can be taken out from any lending institution; however, there are federal loans with low interest rates that are designed for students.
- The Perkins and Stafford Loan are both need-based, and are applied for by completing a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form.

Graduate School Questions to Ask

Source: Career Services, University of Minnesota <http://www.clacareer.umn.edu/gradschool/questions.html>

Questions about Admissions:

- What application deadlines should I be aware of?
- What is the undergraduate GPA range and preference for this program (referred to as middle 50%)?
- If an entrance exam is required, what is the preferred test score? (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, or MCAT)
- What percentage of students who applied last year were admitted?
- What additional factors most impact acceptance into this program?
- What previous experience/knowledge (if any) is preferred for this program?

Questions about the Program:

- Are there pre-requisite courses I need to complete before I start this program?
- What are the degree requirements? How many required and elective classes are there?
- How long do students typically take to complete this program?

- What areas of concentration are available?
- What percentage of students complete the entire graduate program?
- How does the department evaluate student progress?
- What kind of thesis and examinations are required?
- What practical experience are students expected to complete?
- What professional development opportunities exist for students?
- What kind of licensure/certification will I be eligible for after completing the program?
- What support is provided to help students fulfill experiential components of the program?
- What kind of job-search support is provided by faculty?

Questions for Program Faculty:

- What is most important to you in an advisee?
- When and how is an advisor selected? How difficult is it to switch advisors once in the program?
- How many full- and part-time faculty members teach in this department?
- What diversity exists within the faculty?
- What experience have the faculty had outside the academic world?
- What opportunities exist to work with faculty on their research? On my own research?

Questions for students enrolled in the program:

- How available is your advisor?
- How would you characterize the departmental culture?
- What is the actual time commitment for a teaching assistant or research assistant position?
- Is the departmental stipend enough to live on?
- How do students interact with each other inside and outside the classroom?
- What are some of the politics or current issues within the department?
- What diversity exists within the student body?
- How much support do students receive in developing their own approach to the field?
- How often do students present their work at professional conferences?

Questions about finances and resources:

- How available are teaching assistantships, research assistantships, or fellowships?
- What resources are available for students, (housing, insurance, child care, fitness, etc?)
- Are students guaranteed funding throughout their time in the program, or awarded on a yearly basis?

Helpful Websites for Applying to Graduate and Professional Schools

General information on individual schools and programs:

- All About Grad School - <http://www.allaboutgradschool.com>
- Gradschools - <http://www.gradschools.com>
- Graduate School Guide Publications - <http://www.graduateguide.com>
- Peterson's Education Center - <http://www.petersons.com>
- Princeton Review - <http://www.princetonreview.com>

Rankings of Graduate Schools:

- US News - <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools>

Graduate School Admission Test Information:

- American Dental Association - <http://www.ada.org/101.aspx>
- 4Tests - <http://4tests.com/exams/examcats.asp>
- GMAT Prep - <http://www.800score.com/gmat-home.html>
- Graduate Management Admission Council - <http://www.gmac.com/gmac>
- GRE Prep - <http://www.800score.com/gre-index.html>
- Graduate Record Examination (GRE) - <http://www.ets.org/gre/>
- Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions - <http://www.kaptest.com>
- Law School Admission Council (LSAT) - <http://www.lsac.org>
- Optometry Admission Testing Program - <http://www.ada.org/en/oat/test-preparation>

Example Essays/Personal Statements:

- Accepted.com - <http://www.accepted.com/grad/sampleessays.aspx>
- Purdue Online Writing Lab – <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

Financing Graduate School:

- FastWeb - <http://www.fastweb.com>
- FinAid - <http://www.finaid.org/otheraid/grad.phtml>
- GrantsNet: Funding Opportunities for Training in the Biological and Medical Sciences - <http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/funding>
- Law School Admissions Council – <https://www.lsac.org/jd/financing-law-school/financial-aid-overview>
- Association of American Medical Colleges- <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/preparing-med-school/paying-medical-school/>