

Graduate School: A Step-by-Step Approach

Step 1: Determine if Graduate School is Right for You

For some professions, an advanced degree is required to enter the field. College teaching, law and medicine are examples of such professions. If you have chosen one of these professions, then graduate school is a necessity. For other fields, such as engineering or business, graduate school may not be absolutely necessary to be considered for an entry-level position.

Another reason you might be considering graduate school is to specialize in a subject of personal or professional interest. If you are unsure of your career choice, you should delay graduate school until you are more focused. Likewise, it is not a good idea to attend graduate school for the purpose of delaying a job search or to please someone else.

Step 2: Gather Information on Programs and Build a "Big List"

You will want to have enough information to make an informed decision about what program is best for you before investing a great deal of your time or money. You should build an initial list of **over 100** possible schools. Be sure to look nationwide; do not limit yourself geographically. Consider the following sources:

- **Published Guides**
- **Faculty & Staff**
- **Parents and Friends**
- **On-line Resources**
- **Graduate Students in Your Anticipated Field**
- **Professional Journals**
- **Published Rankings & Ratings**

Step 3: Research and Compare Schools

Aside from the basics, like geographic location and admission requirements, consider the following criteria when selecting the graduate school program that is best for you:

- **Time Commitment/Attrition.** How long does it take to complete the program and how many students drop out before completing? Be sure to ask students in the program for the realistic answer to this question. You cannot always believe the brochures.
- **Approach.** Does the department take a specialized or more generalist approach? Which suits your needs better?

- **Size of Department.** Can you get the attention you want from faculty members? How many faculty are devoted to the department? Are they part-time, full-time or adjunct?
- **Size of the Institution.** Would you feel comfortable there?
- **Student Mix.** Are the other students in the program much older or younger than you? Would you be comfortable with that? Also, consider gender and ethnicity.
- **Reputation.** Remember to explore not only the reputation of the institution as a whole, but also research the specific department and the individual faculty members.
- **Facilities.** Investigate the library. Accessibility of original research is important. Check that the computer centers and labs are adequate for your research.
- **Teaching Methods.** Depending on your field, practical work experience in addition to classroom learning may be important. Is there an emphasis on research or on practical application?
- **Cost and Aid/Scholarships.** Be sure to examine both of these factors. It can sometimes cost less to go to a school that at first glance seems expensive because of the opportunity for aid. Assistantships or internships may be available which offer tuition in exchange for working or teaching on the campus. Do not rule out any program because of cost; if the program wants you, there may be additional funding of which you are unaware.
- **Future Plans.** Where have graduates obtained employment after graduation? Often current students can tell you this.
- **Housing/Living Expenses.** Consider the cost of living in the area when weighing the total expenses. Investigate on-campus and off-campus possibilities.

Step 4: Rank and Narrow Your List

You can now rank your list of 100 or more schools. As criteria, use your personal interest and the relative likelihood of admission. Use three categories to rank. **You should apply to at least two schools from each of the following categories.**

1. **Reach schools** ("I don't think I have a good chance for admission but I am interested.")
2. **Possible schools** ("I have a fairly good chance for admission.")
3. **Safe schools** ("I will definitely be accepted.")

The best way to judge the competitiveness of a school's admission requirements is to ask the people who you talked to when developing your "big list" of schools. You can also check published rankings or call the school to ask about entrance requirements and class profile information.

Step 5: The Application Process

Write or call the schools you have selected to request more information, an application and a catalog (or look for this information on their website if available – most applications are found online). Be sure to write down the name of the person who answers the phone. Keep in mind that you are already making first impressions even in this early stage of the process.

When you begin reviewing the applications, scan each for deadlines. Build a timeline and a realistic plan for completing all of the tasks involved.

If it is not mentioned in the application, call to determine the **earliest** date that the school will accept applications. Make this your target date. A large percentage of applications arrive the month before the deadline, so do not get lost in that deluge.

Schools are seeking well-prepared students who have defined goals or a vision for their future. Since schools strive toward diversity in their student population, it is important to emphasize what makes you unique. You will be evaluated through your recommendations, exam scores, undergraduate GPA, application and essay(s). Keep in mind the following helpful hints about each of these items:

Recommendations

Obtaining recommendations should be the first step in your application timeline as the process can be time consuming.

All of your recommendations should be from people who have known you recently. Ask a potential reference, "*Would you feel comfortable making a **strong** recommendation for me?*" If yes, then provide that person with information to help him or her recall your accomplishments. For example: your transcript, resume and a paper or lab assignment.

Make the process as easy as possible for those who have agreed to write recommendations for you. Complete all the information on the recommendation form that you are able to (name, major, etc.) before giving it to the writer. If you want the writer to complete recommendations for several schools, give him/her all the material at one time. Provide the writer with an addressed, stamped envelope for each recommendation.

Give your writers a deadline (which should be a few weeks before you plan to mail your application). Gently remind them about once per week. Ask one

extra person to write a reference so you will have a safety net. Write a thank you note to each person who supplied you with a recommendation.

Graduate Entrance Exams

- Plan to take the appropriate entrance exam during your junior year or at the latest during the fall of your senior year.
- Plan far enough ahead so that you can take the test again if you do not do as well as you would like the first time. Statistically, scores generally increase 10% the second time. Some schools will average the two scores, while others will simply accept the highest score.
- Buy a review guide and use it.
- Consider taking a preparation class.

Grades

Be Honest. Never misrepresent your GPA. If you have a low GPA, re-analyze it to see if you can find a pattern. For example, you had a bad freshman year so you recalculate your grades to exclude that year, or you say that your GPA has increased consistently each year. Another common method is to calculate your last sixty hours. **Present your overall GPA as requested, but you may add an additional statement with your recalculated GPA.**

Applications

Leave Nothing Blank. Include honors and activities from high school if you have none from college. Join professional organizations related to your field of study, and include them on your application. Send something extra along with your application, like a resume or a really good paper or lab assignment. Anything extra you send must be quality work and it must be directly related.

Get published or submit papers for publishing. Send some work to a student journal or help a professor with research and get on the "et al." list.

Essay

Be sure to have a strong opening that will catch the reader's attention. Substantiate your interest and your preparation. Show your vision for the future. Present yourself as a unique individual who has something to offer to the program.

An essay must be **perfect**. Check carefully for grammatical and typographical errors. Go to The Center for Communication Practices, located in 154A and 154B Lower Level, Folsom Library, for assistance. Call in advance for hours: 518-276-8983.

Timeline

18 months prior

- Research institutions and programs of interest.
- Investigate national scholarships.
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate entrance exams.
- Ask people for suggestions of good programs.

15 months prior

- Take the required graduate entrance exams.
- Obtain application materials.
- Note application deadlines and admission policies.
- Check to see if you need to register for a national application service (some schools use these to streamline application process).

One year prior

- Obtain letters of recommendation. Write thank you notes to each person who writes a letter for you.
- Mail completed applications.
- Take (or re-take) graduate entrance exams if you haven't already.

Six months prior

- Check with all schools prior to their deadlines to make sure your file has been received and is complete.
- Visit all schools that accept you.
- Apply for financial aid and assistantships.
- Send a deposit to the school of your choice.
- Contact the people who wrote your recommendations to inform them of your progress and choice.
- Notify other schools that accepted you.