

Graduate/Professional School Guide

Graduate School/Professional School: Understanding the Difference

There is a technical distinction between graduate schools and professional schools. Typically:

Graduate schools: Include most types of post graduate programs, including psychology, English, chemistry, history, and business.

Degrees Available

Masters Degree (M.A., M.S., M.Ed., M.B.A., etc...)

The typical master's candidate spends about two years in graduate school.

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

The typical doctoral candidate spends five or six years in graduate school.

Professional schools: Include schools of medicine, law, dentistry, and other specialized fields.

Degrees Available

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

Professional degrees are awarded upon completion of programs of studies that prepare individuals to enter certain professions.

Some points to consider before applying

- Are you willing to invest the time, energy, and money associated with furthering your education?
- Can a single topic sustain your interest for the next 2-6 years?
- Will this advanced degree lead you to where you want to be professionally or personally?
- Will career-related work experience help you get into graduate school?

Questions to ask yourself before applying - Be honest!

- Does the profession you want to enter require an advanced degree?
- Do you truly enjoy a particular area of study and want to advance your knowledge?
- Will an advanced degree allow you to start your career in an advanced role?

- OR -

- Are you having trouble making a career decision or finding a job?
- Do you feel like you should or need to apply because everyone else is doing it?
- Do you want to delay entry into work or the “real” world?

If you find your answers in the bottom three, contact The Center for Career and Professional Development to make an appointment with a Career Coach to clarify your goals. The process of making career decisions is not an easy one, don't be afraid to ask for help!



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The Center for Career and Professional Development at Utica College (LinkedIn)

<https://utica.joinhandshake.com/login> (Handshake)

Choosing a School and/or Program

Choosing to pursue an advanced degree is a decision that should be taken seriously and researched thoroughly. Below is a partial list of factors that you should consider before enrolling in a graduate/professional school program.

Type of program (format, length, flexibility, teaching methods)

Is the program/school you're considering an exact fit for the area you want to pursue? Academic or researched based? M.A. or M.S.? Full or part time? Etc...

Cost to attend/aid available

What type of funding is available at the institution you are considering? According to FinAid.com the average debt accumulated for graduate degrees ranges from \$27,000 to \$114,000; this is in addition to undergraduate loans.

Admission standards

What is the average GPA and standardized test scores for accepted students?

Quality and reputation of the faculty

A program is only as good as the faculty who teach for it. Does the program you are considering have faculty who are respected and known in your field of interest? Are faculty publishing in your area of interest?

Quality and reputation of the school and department

Is the program accredited? What is the board or bar passage rate? Is the institution attached to an undergraduate institution?

Will the program lead to certification or licensure?

If certification/licensure is required or desirable for the area of study you are pursuing, does the program meet the necessary requirements to prepare and qualify you for certification/licensure? Does reciprocity exist with other states?

Location

Is the institution located in an area of the country where you want to live? An important consideration, given that name recognition of the institution is strongest in the region the school is located.

Size

It is important to consider both the size of the program and the institution.

Culture

What is the relationship between students and faculty? What is the relationship among students? Is the environment ultra competitive?

Overall "fit"

When you were on campus for your visit, did it feel right?

In the end, your decision should ultimately be based on the school and/or program that will provide you the best opportunity for you to learn and advance your career. Sometimes the highest ranked school or one with the best overall academic reputation is not the best one for you!

Application Timeline

One of the initial steps in applying to a graduate/professional school is researching application deadlines so that you can develop a timeline of when to submit test scores, letters of recommendation, personal statements, etc... Below is a suggested timeline to help you in planning your application process:

Junior Year

Fall & Spring

- Start researching schools and programs
 - Visit program websites
 - Identify admission requirements for each program (GPA, exams, etc...)
 - Discuss programs with The Center for Career and Professional Development staff and faculty members
- Open a Credential File with The Center for Career and Professional Development; it's FREE and active for a minimum of 5 years
- Get a copy of your transcript(s), review it, and make sure there are no mistakes
- Identify 3 - 5 people to write recommendation letters (professors, internship supervisors, etc...)
- Take a practice GRE, GMAT, MCAT, DAT, or LSAT; these are offered on campus twice a year
- Visit The Center for Career and Professional Development to pick up exam bulletins, resource guides, etc. to help you prepare

Summer

- Consider taking required admission exams this summer or register for a future exam
 - If taking the GRE, avoid taking both the general and subject test (if required) on the same day
- Develop a "study action plan" based on the results of your practice test
- Begin to budget money to cover the cost of entrance exam(s) and application fees
- Consider visiting institutions of interest

Senior Year

Fall

- Talk to The Center for Career and Professional Development staff and faculty members about questions you have
- If you haven't already, open a Credential File with The Center for Career and Professional Development
- If you haven't already, sign up to take required admission exam(s)
- Select programs to apply to; it is advised that you select five: one reach, two on par, and two safe
- Request financial aid information from schools
- Check with The Center for Career and Professional Development to see if your letters of recommendation have arrived
- Finish and send in all applications
- Apply for aid available through programs: assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, etc.

Spring

- Contact institutions, before their application deadline, to confirm that your files are complete
- Continue to apply for assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships if you are still in need of aid
- After receiving an acceptance from the school of your choice, send in required deposit, and contact other schools to decline acceptances so others on their waiting list can be notified
- Make housing arrangements
- Send thank you letters to people who wrote letters of recommendation, let them know where you were accepted and where you will be attending

Graduate/Professional School Entrance Exams

Graduate Record Exam (GRE)

Measures verbal and quantitative reasoning and analytical writing skills that have been acquired over a long period of time; they are not related to a specific field of study. The GRE is computer-based. For more information, visit: www.ets.org/gre.

Section	# of Questions	Time Allotted
Analytical Writing	1 Section (2 separately timed writing tasks)	60 Minutes (30 Minutes per task)
Verbal Reasoning	2 Sections (20 questions per section)	60 Minutes (30 Minutes per section)
Quantitative Reasoning	2 Sections (20 questions per section)	70 Minutes (35 Minutes per section)
Unscored or Research	Varies	Varies

NOTE: There are separate GRE Subject Tests in Physics, Biology, Biochemistry/Cell/Molecular Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, English Literature, and Psychology.

Law School Admission Test (LSAT)

Provides a standard measure of acquired reading and verbal reasoning skills that law schools can use as one of several factors in assessing applicants. The test is administered four times a year. For more information, visit: www.lsac.org.

Section	# of Questions	Time Allotted
Logical Reasoning	2 Sections (25 questions per section)	70 Minutes (35 Minutes per section)
Analytical Reasoning	25	35 Minutes
Reading Comprehension	27	35 Minutes
Unscored Experimental	Varies	35 Minutes
Unscored Writing Sample	1 Essay	35 Minutes

NOTE: Although the writing sample is unscored, it is sent to all law schools to which you apply.

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)

A standardized test that helps business schools assess the qualifications of applicants for advanced study in business and management. For more information, visit: www.mba.com.

Section	# of Questions	Time Allotted
Analytical Writing Assessment	1 Task	30 Minutes
Quantitative	37	75 Minutes
Verbal	41	75 Minutes
Integrated Reasoning	12	30 Minutes

NOTE: This information reflects the most recent GMAT format, which went into effect on June 5, 2012.

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)

Tests the skills and knowledge that medical educators and physicians have identified as key prerequisites for success in medical school and the practice of medicine. For more information, visit: www.aamc.org.

Section	# of Questions	Time Allotted
Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems	59	95 Minutes
Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems	59	95 Minutes
Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior	59	95 Minutes
Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills	53	90 Minutes

NOTE: This information reflects the new MCAT format, which went into effect in April 2015.

Additional Exams

Miller Analogies Test (MAT)

The MAT tests analytical ability that requires the solution of problems stated as analogies. It consists of 120 partial analogies; 100 count toward your score and 20 are experimental items that are being tried out for use on future test forms and do not affect your score. The test must be completed in one hour. For more information, visit: www.milleranalogies.com.

Pharmacy College Admissions Test (PCAT)

The PCAT is required for admission into pharmacy school. It consists of 232 multiple choice questions and one writing prompt. Questions test the following: verbal ability, quantitative ability, reading comprehension, biology, and chemistry. The test must be completed in three hours and 40 minutes. For more information, visit: www.pcatweb.info.

Optometry Admission Test (OAT)

The OAT is required for admission into optometry school. There are four sections which test: reading comprehension, quantitative reasoning, physics, and the natural sciences (biology and general and organic chemistry). The entire length of the test is 280 minutes, including a break and a tutorial. For more information, visit: www.opted.org.

Dental Admission Test (DAT)

The DAT is required for admission to most dental programs and tests the following: natural sciences, reading comprehension, quantitative reasoning, and perceptual ability. The length of the test is five hours. For more information, visit: www.ada.org.

Letters of Recommendation

How important are letters of recommendation?

Very important! And, they are required by nearly every program.

How many letters do I need?

Each institution will have its own policy, but generally, you will be asked for three. It is advised that you send only the number specified. However, get additional letters from additional recommenders, just in case!

Who should I ask for letters of recommendation?

The best letter writers are people who know you well and can provide an evaluation of your ability to perform and succeed academically in graduate/professional school. It is recommended that at least two of these letters come from your field of study. It is advised that you take every opportunity to get to know and talk with your professors; go to their office hours, ask questions in class, do independent research, or study with a professor whose recommendation you may want. Graduate/professional school admissions representatives say the best letter writer is someone who:

- Has known you long enough to write with authority
- Is able to favorably compare you with your peers
- Knows your educational and career goals
- Is a professor at the school granting your undergraduate degree
- Has earned the degree you are seeking

How do I approach potential letter writers?

Make a list of professors and/or supervisors whom you feel will be your best advocates. Then, set up a face-to-face meeting to discuss your request in person. Be prepared to articulate your reasons for wanting to further your education.

When should I approach letter writers?

Professors and supervisors want to help you and are pleased to write on your behalf; however, they are usually involved in many activities. Be considerate and courteous of your letter writers' time and workload, and approach them at least two months in advance of your request.

What information do my letter writers need to write good letters?

You can help your letter writers write effective letters by giving each of them a portfolio that includes:

- What you would like them to emphasize in each letter
- A list of schools you are applying to and application deadlines
- Any other information that is relevant, i.e. your statement of purpose, résumé, transcript, etc...
- Information on how to get in touch with you in case they need to reach you

What about recommendation forms?

Make it easy for letter writers to complete forms in a timely manner. Do the following:

- Type in applicant information
- Type in recommender's name, title, contact info (telephone, fax, address etc...)
- Provide stamped and addressed envelopes for the recommender to send directly to The Center for Career and Professional Development or schools

Do graduate schools care if letters are confidential or not?

In general, graduate programs prefer confidential letters. Admissions officials say that it displays more confidence on the part of the applicant if letters are "confidential" (meaning you, the applicant cannot see the letter). You should only request letters of evaluation from individuals you are confident will give insight into you and your abilities and will be an advocate for you.

Personal Statements

Graduate and professional schools typically require some sort of written statement as a part of the application process. The terminology they use may differ, "statement of purpose," "personal statement," "letter of intent," "personal narrative." Some require specific information like your intended area of study within a field. Others suggest subjects which should be addressed specifically. Still others are quite unstructured, leaving you free to address a wide range of topics.

Helpful Essay Writing Tips by Geoffrey Cook, Founder EssayEdge.com

Imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest? What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully preparing an effective statement.

To arrive at these answers, you should begin by asking yourself two specific questions:

1. Why have I chosen to pursue an advanced degree in this specific field?
2. What are my qualifications for admission to this particular school's program?

Don't Write a Term Paper.

As a prospective graduate student, you may be tempted to try to impress your reader with an already tight grasp of academic style. Resist this temptation! Write clearly and personally.

Don't Bore the Reader. Do Be Interesting.

Admissions officers read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. Admissions officers aren't looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you the applicant. The best way to grip your reader is to begin the essay with a captivating snapshot.

Do Use Personal Detail.

Good essays are concrete and grounded in personal detail.

Do Be Concise. Don't Be Wordy.

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also confuses the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point.

Do Address Your Weaknesses. Don't Dwell on Them.

The personal statement may be your only opportunity to explain deficiencies in your application, and you should take advantage of it. The best tactic is to spin the negatives into positives by stressing your attempts to improve; for example, mention your poor first-quarter grades briefly, then describe what you did to bring them up.

Do Seek Multiple Opinions.

Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:

- Does my essay have one central theme?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

Don't Wander. Do Stay Focused.

Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to support one central theme.

Do Revise, Revise, Revise.

The first step in improving any essay is to edit, edit, and edit some more.

Financing Your Graduate Degree

Consider this

Graduate school generally costs more than an undergraduate education and potentially adds to the debt you are already carrying. On top of this, there is less financial aid available at the graduate level. With all of this being said, you shouldn't automatically assume that you won't be able to further your education. There are numerous sources of aid available, several of which are described below. It is strongly suggested that you engage in a realistic evaluation of costs and available resources.

Grants

Funding comes from the government or through private sources. Monies do not need to be repaid.

Scholarships

Available through the institution or private sources and are awarded based on academic excellence, ethnic background, field of study, or financial need. Monies do not need to be repaid.

Fellowships

Awarded by private organizations, institutions, or through the government. Awards can be applied towards research or education. Monies do not need to be repaid.

Assistantships

Require students to work as Teacher Assistants (TA), Research Assistants (RA), or participate in institutional work. Students typically receive monthly stipends plus a partial or full tuition waiver.

Loans

Monies awarded based on need and must be repaid. There are several types of loans available including:

Stafford Loan

Subsidized - Based on financial need. Interest is paid by the government during your time in school and for the first six months after you leave school.

Unsubsidized - Interest must be paid from the time you are awarded the loan. All students are eligible, regardless of financial need.

Federal Perkins Loan

A low-interest loan awarded by the institution.

Loan forgiveness programs

Under certain circumstances, the federal government will cancel all or part of an educational loan. To qualify, you must: perform volunteer work, perform military service, teach or practice medicine in certain types of communities, or meet other criteria specified by the forgiveness program. Visit the website www.finaid.org/loans/forgiveness.phtml for additional information.

Private Loans

Graduate/professional students have the option to take out loans through private sources such as a bank. The interest rates for private loans are more expensive than government loans.

Helpful Websites

www.gradschools.com

Directory of graduate school programs by subject

www.petersons.com

Provider of information on accredited educational institutions in the U.S.

www.graduateguide.com

A comprehensive on-line guide to Doctoral, Master's, and Professional Degree programs

Application Worksheet

	School #1	School #2	School #3	School #4	School #5
School Name					
Application(s)					
Deadline					
Fee					
Visit					
Sent					
Transcripts					
Date requested					
Date sent					
Date school received					
Test scores					
Exam date					
Date scores available					
Date school received					
Recommendation					
Name					
Date requested					
Date completed and sent					
Date school received					
Recommendation					
Name					
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