

Making a Good Decision

In contemplating graduate and/or professional school, it is vital that you ask the following questions:

Self-Knowledge

- Why are you applying? Do you have a continued interest in your subject area? Why?
- Have you researched a variety of graduate and professional school programs and career fields?
- What are your career goals?
- Can you identify your interests, skills, and experiences and describe how they relate to an occupational field?
- Are you interested in continued study to immerse yourself for pure knowledge or for employment opportunities?
- What is your financial situation? What do different programs cost? What aid is available?
- Are you burned out academically or motivated to continue your study for another one or more years?
- Are you using graduate school to postpone the job search process?
- Should you take some time off before starting a program?
- Is a traditional or a non-traditional program right for you?
- Can you balance continued education with other life roles (parent, spouse, employee, community member...)?

Field-Specific Knowledge

- Do you have accurate, reality-based information about your field of interest?
- Have you talked with professionals to see if an advanced degree is necessary for entry into the field?
- If an advanced degree is important, are there several options available in terms of programs?
- If there are several options available, is it wise to work for a year or two and then decide which route to pursue?
- Do you have related experience through an internship, externship, or summer job?

Program-Specific Knowledge

- Have you explored schools that offer programs related to your field?
- Have you spoken to people in the field to solicit their suggestions on schools/programs?
- Do you know the admission requirements for schools/programs of interest?
- What program is best suited to assist you in reaching your long-term career goals?

To help you gain clarity on some of these questions, we recommend the following:

- Make an appointment with a career counselor to discuss your options and your decision.
- Review graduate school guides in the Career Center Library.
- Talk to faculty and graduate students in the specific discipline you are seeking.
- If you are applying to professional school (law, medicine, dental, veterinary) seek guidance from your advisor in Pre-Professional Advising.

Are You Ready for Graduate School?

You may be ready for graduate school if...

- *You wish to study a particular field in-depth.*
- *You have accurate information about your intended field and know you need a graduate degree.*
- *You can balance the demands of graduate school with the rest of your life plans.*
- *You have talked to people in the field, and they have reconfirmed your desire to attend graduate school.*
- *You are ready to spend long hours in the library or lab, continue a limited income lifestyle, and are committed to an advanced degree.*

You may not be ready if...

- *You are feeling burned out academically.*
- *You view applying to graduate school as an alternative to the job search.*
- *You are considering widely different fields of study.*
- *You have no idea what types of jobs you could acquire with the degree you plan to obtain.*

Test Information

Graduate and professional schools may require that you take a standardized test prior to admission. For many graduate programs, the GRE is required; for business school, the GMAT is required. The LSAT is typically required for law school, and the MCAT is required for admission to medical school. Prior to taking one of these standardized tests, spend some time researching how your target programs evaluate test scores. Your target programs may also require that you take additional subject-based tests. Plan to give yourself plenty of time to study for all of the tests that you need.

Letters of Recommendation

Most programs will require submission of academic letters of recommendation. Recommendation letters are documents that tell the reader about the unique strengths and assets you have to offer the school. A recommendation is only beneficial if it is very positive. A poor or average recommendation does not help and can even hinder your chances of entering the program. It is important to provide the recommender with enough time to write a positive, personal recommendation. The earlier you ask, the more time you will give the recommender to write a stellar recommendation. It is customary to give a minimum of three to four weeks' notice depending on how busy the recommender is. In addition to providing sufficient time for the recommender to complete your recommendation, it is your responsibility to provide them with some additional information to help them make the recommendation strong. The following is a list of examples on what to provide:

- A Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- Colleges/universities attended
- Majors
- GPA
- Professional, volunteer, internship and research experience
- Projects on which you have worked
- Presentations you have given
- Awards and/or scholarship information
- Career/future goals
- Memberships/professional affiliations
- Hobbies/extracurricular activities
- The type of graduate school/continuing education program for which you are looking
- Papers/projects graded by the recommender

If you need more than a general recommendation, provide the following additional information to the recommender:

- The name, title and contact information of the person to whom you are writing the letter
- Specific skills and qualifications you have that you would like the recommender to highlight
- Self-addressed stamped envelope
- Deadline date
- Specific instructions if needed

You may need to be persistent with your letter writers; remember that they are very busy and will typically have more than one letter to write. After someone has written a letter of recommendation in support of you, make a point of calling or sending an e-mail or a letter to thank him or her for writing the letter.

Waived vs. Unwaived Letters

A waived recommendation means that you have given away your right to see what is included in your recommendation letter. This is the most common form of recommendation, because it allows your recommendation writer the opportunity to be honest about your abilities and performance. An unwaived recommendation means that you have retained the right to see what has been included in your recommendation and is not as common. Many graduate programs require waived recommendation letters.

Who Should You Ask?

You should request recommendation letters from professionals who know you and your academic work. Frequently, this will be a professor. You may also obtain recommendations from other professionals in your field (i.e., internship supervisor, volunteer coordinator). Make sure that you read your applications carefully and select the types of recommendation writers requested. Many applications ask for more than one recommendation and want them to come from specific individuals, so make sure that you ask the right people to write your recommendations. If you are not given a specific number of recommendations to submit, try to provide at least three, which is the average number requested.

When you ask for letters of recommendation, do not forget to ask for positive letters. If you are submitting waived recommendations, you will not have the opportunity to see what they contain. To avoid a sticky situation, always ask your recommendation writers if they feel that they can write a positive recommendation. This gives them the opportunity to decline to write a mediocre recommendation, and it gives you the chance to ask someone else.

Personal Statement

Personal statements are used to introduce you to the graduate admissions committee. This is the part of your application that allows your personality to shine. It should tell the committee who you are, why you are interested in your field, and what you hope to contribute. That sounds like a daunting task to accomplish in less than two pages, but you can do it! The key to a good personal statement is to not bore the reader!

In writing your personal statement, focus on telling your story. You need to capture the reader's attention in the first paragraph and follow through with details and information that will accomplish the purpose of the statement. You want to paint a memorable picture that gets your point across.

Tips for Writing a Personal Statement

- Answer any specific question that is asked in the application.
- Explain any glaring inconsistencies in your academic record (no excuses; just explain and state what you have done to repair the damage).
- Stand out from other applicants; if your story is simple, be creative in its delivery.
- Practice good rules of writing: draft, edit, re-draft, re-edit.
- Take your time, since writing the personal statement will take more than one try.
- Have several people review it and provide suggestions on readability and grammar and to ensure that you have answered any questions that were asked.
- Be honest in your personal statement about your experiences.

- Only use information or experiences from high school if they are directly related to your interest in the field.
- Adhere to the allotted space that is provided.
- Be conservative in your story-telling.

The Application Process...A Timeline

Applying to graduate school takes time and careful consideration. The earlier you begin your graduate school search, the smoother the application process will be. It is helpful to begin your search and application process **at least one year** before you would start the graduate program. This timeline includes approximate dates to complete each step. Be sure to check with each graduate school for appropriate application deadlines, because they will vary from program to program.

Summer (prior to senior year)

- Most graduate programs require that you write a personal statement. Starting your personal statement early will give you time to revise and clarify your reasons for wanting to attend graduate school.
- Begin browsing through graduate school guides, such as Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs, which is available in the Career Center Library as well as online at www.petersons.com. E-mail graduate schools for catalogues, application forms, financial aid information, and assistantship information, including support programs for underrepresented populations as appropriate. Determine if there are any special admissions requirements.
- Begin saving for application fees.

September

- Meet with faculty members and/or career counselors to discuss possible programs.
- Ask professors for letters of recommendation. Provide them with the appropriate forms, addressed and stamped envelopes, and a resume. Discuss your goals and motivations for going to graduate school, so that the professors may obtain a better idea of your intentions.
- Register for required standardized tests. Prepare for tests by familiarizing yourself with the instructions and types of questions. Use sample practice books, such as Barron's Guide to Taking the GRE. Also, take advantage of free sample tests and test preparation tips offered on-line by the organizations sponsoring the tests.

October

- Take the appropriate standardized test(s). Ideal times for taking tests may vary so don't wait until the last minute.
- Request applications from programs if you haven't done so already.

November

- Request copies of your official transcript. Ensure that the Registrar's Office is able to send your transcripts and fall semester grades to designated graduate schools in time for the appropriate admissions deadline.
- Put finishing touches on your personal statement and have it reviewed by friends, faculty, and career counselors.

December

- Fill out your application forms. Applications should be typed or written very neatly if you can't fill them out online.

- Take or retake the appropriate test(s). Different test scores are reported in different ways, so check on score reporting before you retake an admissions test.
- Contact professors to ensure that they have mailed your recommendations.

December/January

- Mail completed applications. You are encouraged to send your applications at this time even if your deadlines are later. Some graduate schools accept applicants on a rolling basis, which means that they start accepting students as applications are received. You have a better chance of someone taking time to review your application carefully if they receive it early as opposed to the day before the deadline when most applications will arrive.
- This is a good time to send in financial aid information, if necessary.

February

- Contact graduate programs about the possibility of visiting. Accepting an offer to graduate school without ever stepping foot on campus is like buying a car without taking it for a test drive. Talk with faculty members and current graduate students.
- Set up appointments for graduate admission interviews as well as assistantship interviews. If interviews are required, be sure to follow up with thank you notes to all who interview you.
- Call graduate schools before the application deadlines to make sure that your application file is complete.

Sample Questions to Ask on School Visits

1. What are the retention and graduate rates for the program?
2. Where do your students obtain employment after graduation?
3. What services are available to help students find employment after graduation?
4. What kind of academic support programs do you have (i.e. faculty advisors, peer advisors)? Are they available only after I experience difficulties, or can I use them proactively?
5. Are there diverse faculty members, administrators, and staff associated with this program?
6. Are there opportunities for experiential learning (i.e. internships, practica, assistantships)?
7. Are students exposed to professional associations and/or given an opportunity to become active members?
8. Are students required/encouraged to do research and present the information at professional conferences?
9. What two things are necessary for success in this program?
10. What kind of financial aid is available to students in this program?
11. What kinds of services or opportunities for involvement are in place for program alumni? Is there a strong alumni network associated with this program?
12. Is on-campus housing available to graduate students?
13. What kinds of computing facilities are available to graduate students?
14. What kinds of social outlets are available to students in the area?
15. Are there opportunities to conduct research with program faculty?
16. Are there opportunities to conduct independent research within the program?