

GRADUATE SCHOOL

This guide was created by Gwynedd-Mercy College Career Services and is designed to help you understand the basics of graduate school. There are several resources in our career library for you to refer to as well.

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What is Graduate School?

Graduate education involves obtaining specialized knowledge in a specific area of study, with two basic types of degrees: academic and professional. An academic degree involves research and scholarship in a particular discipline. A professional degree provides training to acquire skills and knowledge needed for a particular profession (e.g., law, medicine, business).

There are three basic degree levels:

- **Master's** - Master's degrees are offered in almost every field of study, although some universities only offer doctoral programs in certain fields.
- **Specialist** - Specialist degrees are usually completed in addition to a master's program and often require additional training or internship experience. This type of degree prepares an individual for certification or licensing requirements necessary for some professions.
- **Doctoral** - Doctoral studies usually require the pursuit of original research for an academic program or the practical application of knowledge and skills in professional programs.

Is Graduate School for Me?

Before applying to graduate school, give careful consideration to your career goals. Become familiar with the working conditions, employment prospects, and other requirements of the field you plan to pursue. A graduate degree may not be necessary in this phase of your career planning. If it is needed, take time to investigate what the profession is really like. Consult with faculty to estimate your readiness for graduate work and to evaluate the programs that best fit your goals.

A significant commitment of time, money, and energy is involved in graduate study, so it is important to investigate your options thoroughly. **Consider these important questions:**

- Is graduate study necessary to accomplish my goals?
- What goals and values mean the most to me in my career? In my life?
- Why am I planning to attend graduate school? What do I hope to gain?
- What skills and abilities do I have that will help me be successful in graduate school?
- Am I choosing graduate school because I feel I have no other options or am feeling pressure from others?
- Am I choosing graduate school to delay the decision of what career or job I want?
- Am I willing to invest the time, money, and effort to undertake a program that requires prolonged concentration in an academic setting?
- Will the expense of grad school pay off in a better salary and/or opportunities for advancement?
- Am I motivated? Willing to learn and work hard?
- Do I know where to get advice and help in planning my career and future goals?

Informational Interviewing is an important method in determining whether or not graduate school is a necessary next step. By contacting professionals in the field you hope to work in, you can ask them questions related to school and their careers. See the Informational Interviewing Guide on the Career Services website for details.

*The most frequently given reasons for dropping out of graduate school are length of time required, poor preparation, dislike of concentrated work, expense, academic burnout, and realization that "I was not cut out for academic life." You can avoid problems later by honestly facing the questions above before you pursue graduate education.

Thinking About Graduate School?

Graduate school is not just another year (or two +) of college. It can be as different from your undergraduate work as high school was from Gwynedd-Mercy College. **You need to ask yourself some serious questions:**

Should I go to graduate school or not?

Does your ultimate career goal require an advanced degree? Sometimes the answer is clearly "YES." For example, lawyers, physicians, and counseling psychologists **MUST** have advanced degrees. For some careers, a graduate degree is necessary for advancement. For example, an MBA can be very helpful (often necessary) for a businessperson who wants to climb up the corporate ladder.

How can I tell if I need an advanced degree to reach my career goal?

You have to research. Schedule an informational interview with a professional in the field. Also, the Department of Labor's Occupational Outlook Handbook (www.bls.gov/oco) can tell you the educational requirements for thousands of careers. You can also use Career Services to find out:

- What types of programs there are
- Which ones will best help you reach your career goal
- What an advanced degree will enable you to do

Will I be successful (can I handle it?)

Based on past academic performance, you should have a realistic assessment of your abilities. Undergraduate transcripts often accurately reflect students' future performance...but keep in mind that motivation and interest weigh heavily on future success in a graduate program. Discover what the minimal requirements are for acceptance and talk with your faculty advisor to gain his/her perspective on your chances of being accepted into a program.

If I decide to go, is it better for me to study something new or should I learn more about the subject that I'm already majoring in?

It depends on your career goals. Will in-depth knowledge let you reach your career goal or will you be more marketable to an employer if you have graduate experience in a different field? Research the answer, then make your decision.

Is it better to go right after graduation or should I get some work experience first?

Choice #1 -- Go Right Away

- If an advanced degree is **REQUIRED** for you to meet your career goal, you might not gain much career-wise by delaying graduate school.
- After 4 years of college, you have "academic momentum." Even though you may not realize it, your classroom skills are polished now. The longer you go without using them, the duller they will become.
- Once you start to earn a regular paycheck, it may be hard for you to give up all or part of your salary to become a student again.

Choice #2 -- Delay Graduate School

- In some cases, employers actually prefer people with experience + an advanced degree. For example, new hires with an MBA + experience start with higher salaries than those who only have an MBA. Some graduate programs require that applicants have work experience in a particular field before admission.
- Your economic situation may be such that you have no choice but to work after graduation.
- If you need help to finance your graduate degree, you may want to work for a company that will pay for all or part of your education.

What if I combine the two and get work experience while I go to school part-time?

This plan works for many people, especially if an employer has a tuition remission program. Keep in mind:

- Going to grad school part-time will take much longer than going full-time. Will this affect career goals?

- Some lifestyles are not compatible with working during the day and going to school at night. Think about what will work best for you.

Let's say I do decide to go. How do I pick a school?

This is where research comes in because you need to find out 1) what programs are available and 2) which would be best for you. You should consider several areas when you make this decision:

- **Curriculum:** This is key. Find a school that a program that will get you the degree you want in order to get you the career you want. This information is easily accessible on the program's website.
- **Reputation:** Talk with professors who teach related undergraduate courses. Ask where they went to school and what programs they recommend (and why). If possible, visit campuses; talk to graduate students currently enrolled. Look at guides which rate programs (e.g., The Gourman Report: A Rating of Graduate and Professional Programs in America and International Universities). Remember: these guides reflect the opinions of the authors and should be only one part of your information search.
- **Accreditation:** Understand the role that specialized accreditation plays in your field; this varies considerably between disciplines. In certain fields it is a requirement to have graduated from an accredited program in order to be eligible for a license to practice. In other fields accreditation is not important and there are some excellent programs that are not accredited.
- **Faculty:** Determine if the professors are well known in their disciplines. Find out where they earned their degrees and what your current professors think about them. Do the graduate faculty concentrate on research and publishing? Are they concerned about and accessible to students? Is there diversity? During your campus visit, arrange to speak with a faculty member.
- **Resources:** Find out what resources are available on campus, particularly in the library, labs, and computer center. Are resources current and available to students?
- **Students:** Arrange to meet with or email current students to find out their thoughts on the program and what alums do after graduation.
- **Atmosphere:** Consider size, location (urban/rural, section of the country), class size, housing, facilities, cost of living, proximity to career environment (for example, not all graduate programs in oceanography are located on the coasts).
- **Cost:** Ask about tuition and financial aid. Do out-of-state students pay more? If so, how long does it take to establish residency and qualify for lower costs? Ask about grants, loans, scholarships, assistantships, and availability of off-campus jobs. Remember: high cost does not necessarily mean the best education.
- **Information:** You can find data on all of these topics (and more) by contacting the graduate admissions office, visiting a campus, checking out the school and individual program websites, and looking at guides such as Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs, The Official Guide to MBA Programs, or The Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools.

How many schools should I apply to?

Generally, five or six. These should include a school that you will certainly be admitted to, a school you will probably be admitted to, and a school that you might be admitted to. Keep in mind that there is a fee required with each application.

How can I know before I apply if a graduate program will admit me or not?

You can't --- but you can make a pretty good guess. Most schools require a B undergraduate average. Sometimes, individual departments have their own requirements. Find out what these are.

When should I do all this?

Begin your research at the end of your junior year. That will give you enough time to do a careful and complete search. Remember: this is important. Submit financial aid requests as soon as possible. Check with individual grad schools to find out when they start to accept applications. The sooner you begin selecting graduate schools, the more time you will have for all the details such as taking the required standardized test.

What test(s) do I need to take?

It depends on the individual program. If necessary, you can take it more than once to get the necessary admission score. Most schools won't accept scores more than three to five years old. Some examples of tests are:

- GRE - Graduate Record Exam
- GMAT - Graduate Management Admissions Test
- LSAT - Law School Admission Test
- MCAT - Medical College Admission Test
- MAT - Miller Analogy Test

How do I apply to grad school?

Most applications are done online. Check the application requirements and instructions for each individual school.

You may also be required to send additional information:

- **Official undergraduate transcript(s)**
- **Personal essay:** See the Personal essay section on page 6.
- **Letters of recommendation:** See the Letters of Recommendation section on page 7.

Do I just mail in my application and wait for an answer?

Some programs, especially those in medical and business schools, require an interview. Follow the same procedure as you would for a job interview. Come to Career Services for help preparing for an admissions interview.

Graduate programs in art, writing, or related fields sometimes ask for a portfolio as part of the application to show your skills and ability. Follow the requirements exactly as to when/where the portfolio should be sent and how the pieces should be labeled with your personal information.

What else do I need know about getting into graduate school?

- Auditions for performing arts programs
- Grad programs for non-traditional students
- Part-time programs
- Foreign students' applications
- Financial planning
- And more!

Graduate School Application

There are many reasons why an applicant is not accepted into a graduate school. College grades may be too low. Scores on the standardized test may not meet the required cut off. Personal recommendations may be mediocre. But there is another reason that should never, ever happen: some people don't get into graduate school because **THEY MESS UP THE APPLICATION PROCESS**. Luckily, this problem can be avoided if you follow a few simple guidelines:

1. Each individual program may have a different application process. Different due dates, required materials, and how they would like to receive your materials. Make sure you know the application details for each school and stay organized by making a chart similar to the one below. You can include any information that will help you stay on task and complete your application by the due date:

	Due date	Contact person	GRE	References	Personal Statement
Penn State	12/15				
NYU	1/7				
University of Maryland	1/8				
Drexel	1/10				

2. If a school has rolling admissions, do not wait to send in your application. A school with rolling admissions considers applications in the order in which they arrive. If you wait until just before the deadline to submit your materials, the people who look at it will already have read hundreds of applications--and will already have accepted students. Your chances of being accepted are greater the earlier you apply.

3. Make sure your application is complete and correct. Read instructions carefully. Sometimes you will mail everything in one envelope--references included. Other times you will ask the people who write your references to mail them directly to the graduate school. Some schools have a 2-part process. If your preliminary application is accepted, you send a second application.

DO NOT MAKE ANY SPELLING ERRORS, GRAMMAR MISTAKES, OR TYPOS. Check your application carefully and ask someone else to check it as well. Have a professor, family member/friend, counselor/advisor all look over your materials.

4. Every graduate application will have a required fee. Find out what the fee is and be sure to pay it. Remember: it can be expensive to apply to graduate school, so plan carefully when you decide to send applications.

Writing Effective Personal Statements & Application Essays

You will need to write some form of personal statement or essay as part of the graduate or professional school application process. Personal statements give you an opportunity to explain parts of your personal, educational, and professional background that have influenced your decision to pursue an advanced degree at a particular institution.

Admissions committees rely heavily on these essays, as they paint a better picture of you than test scores or GPAs. It is critical for you to reflect on the uniqueness of your background and to be specific about your goals, to help the committee feel like they would be gaining a valuable new member to their program. It's also critical that you answer the question they ask!

The requirements for these essays will vary from program to program, but some general rules apply:

- Begin by thinking carefully about the topic. Write a brief outline. It can be just a list of five or six words you want to discuss. Put them in order: beginning-middle-end. Think about the list.
- Write your first draft and bring it (rough but typed) to Career Services to be critiqued.
- Have others you trust read your essay(s) – professor, advisor, family members, friends, etc.

Effective essays need to say a lot in a fairly limited amount of space. Some tips that might help you in crafting your essays:

- Be concise and selective. Focus on common themes and specific goal statements. Do not provide a biography or a list of accomplishments.
- Give specific examples that are unique to you - don't generalize. For example, if applying to a program in social work, the following statement (while true) may be read as cliché: "I want to become a social worker because I like to help people." A stronger statement would include a specific example of volunteer work you performed, and how that experience influenced your decision to enter this field -- this will convey genuine enthusiasm and motivation.
- Emphasize that the information you are providing demonstrates your potential for this kind of advanced study (just as you must do in a job search, don't forget to "sell your skills").
- Follow instructions! Answer the question, and all parts.
- If necessary, briefly explain or address any discrepancies or perceived weaknesses in your record.
- **PROOFREAD!**

Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate schools require that you provide them with letters of recommendation. These will be sent either by you (usually as part of your application) or directly by the people who write them. You will need two or three.

Think carefully before you decide on references. If possible, choose people who not only know you well, but who are also familiar with the graduate school you want to attend. Depending on the program, you may want to use faculty members as well as professionals in your field. (This is one of the reasons why you did an internship or had related job experience, remember.)

Give people plenty of time to write references for you. Do not ask for a reference 2 days before an application is due. Bring them the recommendation form and a self-addressed envelope if necessary. You may also want to supply your references with a copy of your resume or relevant class work to help them write you an appropriate recommendation.

In general, references should:

1. Know what kind of student you are and how you work in an academic setting.
2. Be familiar with graduate schools in general and the one you are applying to in particular.
3. Work with many students and be able to compare you favorably with them.
4. Be articulate and have excellent written communication skills.
5. Think highly of you and be willing to put that opinion on paper.

You probably won't know many people who fit all of these criteria, but choose people who come close. If you are returning to school after having worked, you may not be able to contact any professors who can address your performance as a student. In that case, graduate schools may also accept the recommendation of your employer.

Keep in mind: Some schools have standardized forms for all references to fill out, instead of a free-form letter. Also, you will be asked to sign away your right to read the references written about you. Most schools will not accept a reference unless you have signed such a form.

When Should I apply?

Once you have narrowed your choice of programs, initiate the application process as early as possible. While researching schools, you probably discovered that application procedures and deadlines vary from institution to institution. Generally speaking, you want to start this entire process one and a half years in advance of when you wish to enroll; this will give you plenty of time to do everything you need to in preparation for graduate study.

Most schools have deadlines between January and March. Applying early can be an advantage, especially at schools with rolling admissions and can sometimes affect the amount of funding still available.

TIMETABLE FOR APPLICATION PROCESS

Junior Year, Fall and Spring

- Research institutions and programs of interest.
- Consult with faculty/advisers regarding interests and the nature of graduate study you might like to pursue.
- Understand the application process, curriculum, and financial aid info for each program. Note deadlines.
- Begin to think about who you could ask to provide a letter of reference.
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admissions tests. Most exams require a fee, so give yourself enough time to study.

Junior Year, Summer

- Visit or talk to admissions staff, current students and faculty at programs of interest. Be sure to investigate the faculty research interests.
- Begin drafting application essays, so you have time to get feedback from Career Services and your adviser(s) before applying.

- Gather information about financial aid resources -- scholarships, fellowships, teaching and research assistantships.

Senior Year, Fall

- Take required graduate admission test(s). Be aware of deadlines and minimum time needed for scoring.
- Obtain letters of recommendation from faculty and/or professionals with whom you have worked
- Completed application materials, including financial aid packages, which typically include:
 - Admissions test reports - you must request that score reports be sent to schools of choice
 - Transcripts - you may request that these be sent directly to the institution or you may get copies issued to you and mail them with your application
 - Letters of Recommendation
 - Application Essays/Personal Statement
 - Portfolios, Auditions, other materials as requested
- For financial aid, be sure to complete the necessary applications. Check with each school for financial aid application requirements and forms.

Senior Year, Spring

- Wait for admission decisions - follow-up to check on the status of your application.
- Visit institutions of interest (optional). Evaluate your options.
- Interview, if necessary. Prepare ahead of time with a mock interview at Career Services.
- Choose among schools. Be prepared to consider multiple offers - how will you decide? Also be prepared for the possibility that you might not get any offers - what is your contingency plan?
- Once accepted to a program of choice, be sure to notify other institutions of your choice.
- Send thank you notes to those who wrote your recommendation letters, informing them of your plans.

Financial Aid for Graduate School

Financial aid resources may be available to you for graduate school even if you received no assistance for undergraduate study. The institutions are the first source of information about what aid may be available and the forms need to be filed to establish eligibility.

What Form to File and When: Most schools will require the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). For other required forms and deadlines, students should contact the graduate school directly

Sources of Financial Aid

ASSISTANTSHIPS: Similar to college work-study programs in undergraduate school. Students typically apply for assistantships in areas of the college related to their major. The assistantship may involve working for a faculty member, classroom preparation, or clerical/research duties. Students receive tuition remission and a modest living stipend in exchange for their work. Students apply directly to the institution for assistantship positions.

- **Graduate Assistantships:** These are given by campus offices; allows you to gain valuable experience while working in an institutional office or department.
- **Teaching Assistantships:** Given through academic department; allows you to gain valuable teaching experience while continuing your education.

*Institutions may also have *departmental grants, internships, loan forgiveness programs and employment* available. The best place to ask is at the institution's financial aid office.

OTHER SOURCES OF AID: Applicants should also do additional research into funding sources not hosted by the institution. Private foundations, associations and other organizations may have money available to students in a particular discipline. Ask the school's graduate financial aid office if they have books, databases or web sites that you could explore for private funding.

- **Private Loans:** There are many private loans available to students, so you need to compare before applying. Compare APR, repayment terms, capitalization and deferment options to determine what program is best for your situation. Ask the school's financial aid office to recommend a few of the best loans and go shopping.
- **Deferment of Existing Loans:** If you have previously borrowed under either the Federal Perkins, Federal Subsidized or Unsubsidized Stafford Loans you are eligible for a deferment while you are enrolled in school. Contact your lender or service for details and deferment forms. Interest may accrue when loans are in deferment.

Additional Resources

General Grad School Websites

www.petersons.com
www.usnews.com/sections/education/index
www.gradschooltips.com
www.graduateguide.com
www.princetonreview.com

Law School

www.lsac.org

Medical School

www.aamc.org

MBA Programs

www.mbaprograms.org

Essays & Personal Statements

www.essayedge.com
www.admissionsessays.com (Writing Tips)
owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate

Grad School Exams

www.gre.org (GRE)
www.lsac.org (LSAT)
www.pearsonassessments.com (MAT)
[www.aamc.org/students/mcat\(MCAT\)](http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat(MCAT))
[www.gmac.com/gmac/thegmat\(GMAT\)](http://www.gmac.com/gmac/thegmat(GMAT))

Financial Aid

www.finaid.org
www.fastweb.com
www.scholarships.com
www.petersons.com/finaid
www.gradview.com/financialaid/index
www.gradloans.com
www.PHEAA.org