



# Career Services

*"Your journey to career success begins here..."*

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# Graduate School Tips



This guide was created by Gwynedd-Mercy College Career Services and is designed to help you understand the basics of graduate school. In addition to this guide 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 concentrated or 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, specialist, and doctoral. Master's degrees are offered in almost every field of study, although some universities only offer doctoral programs in certain fields. 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 studies usually require the pursuit of original research for an academic program or the practical application of knowledge and skills in professional programs.

Students who have received their bachelor degrees but have not been accepted to graduate school are classified as post-baccalaureate. You may want to consider this option if you...

1. want to take more classes but are not seeking a graduate degree. This includes students who have changed their professional goals, students who want to expand their educational background, and students who may need certain courses to complete certification or licensure requirements;
2. intend to enter a graduate degree-seeking program but need a substantial number of prerequisite courses.

## **Is Graduate School for Me?**

Before applying to graduate school, give careful consideration to your goals. Become familiar with the working conditions, employment prospects, and other requirements of the field you plan to pursue. It may be that graduate study is not necessary in this phase of your career planning. If it is needed for the pursuit of some profession (e.g., law, medicine), 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 for me to accomplish my goals?
- Why am I planning to attend graduate school? What do I hope to attain?
- What skills and abilities do I have that have prepared me to 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 as to what kind of 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?
- Do I know where to get advice and help in planning my career and future goals?

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.

## **So You're Thinking About Graduate School**

Graduate school is not just another year (or two or three or more) of college. It can be as different from your undergraduate work as high school was from Gwynedd-Mercy College. What you need to do first is ask yourself some serious questions.

### **1. 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. There is no choice. 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.

### **2. How can I tell if I need an advanced degree to reach my career goal?**

You have to do some researching. It's as simple as that. Schedule an informational interview with a professional in the field. Talk to people who actually are in the career that interests you. Also, the Department of Labor's Occupational Outlook Handbook ([www.bls.gov/oco](http://www.bls.gov/oco)) can tell you the educational requirements for thousands of careers. You can also use Career Services to find out:

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

### **3. Will I be successful (can I handle it?)**

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

### **4. If I do 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?**

That's up to you. Base your decision on the major you have as an undergraduate. Do you need to learn more about it? 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. Remember that many career fields allow you to mix and match. For example, certain businesses prefer to hire MBAs with technical or liberal arts undergraduate degrees.

### **5. If I decide that graduate school really is for me, is it better to go right after graduation or should I get some work experience first?**

#### Choice #1 -- Go Right Away

- a. If an advanced degree is REQUIRED for you to meet your career goal, you will gain nothing career-wise by delaying graduate school.
- b. 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.
- c. 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

- a. 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. Also, some graduate programs require that applicants have work experience in a particular field before they are admitted.
- b. Your economic situation may be such that you have no choice but to work after graduation.
- c. 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.

#### **6. How about 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 two things in mind:

- a. Going to grad school part-time will take much longer than going full-time. How will the time difference affect your career goals?
- b. Some people's life styles are not compatible with working during the day and going to school at night. Other people thrive on it. Decide which group you fit into.

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

This is where research comes in again 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:

- a. Curriculum: This is key. Go to a school which offers the kind of program that will get you the degree you want in order to get you the career you want.
- b. 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.
- c. Accreditation: Understand the role that specialized accreditation plays in your field as this varies considerably from one discipline to another. In certain professional 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.
- d. 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.
- e. Resources: Find out what resources are available on campus, particularly in the library, labs, and computer center. Are resources current, complete, and available to students?
- f. Students: Who attends the graduate school you're interested in? Learn what undergrad schools they came from and what alums do once they complete the program. Look at the drop-out rate.
- g. 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).

h. 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.

i. Information: You can find data on all of these topics (and more) by contacting the graduate admissions office, visiting a campus, or 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.

### **8. To how many graduate schools should I apply?**

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.

### **9. 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.

### **10. 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 stuff. 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.

### **11. What test do I need to take?**

The sooner you begin selecting graduate schools, the more time you will have for all the details such as taking the required standardized test. 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. Find out which test you will be required to take. Some examples of tests are:

GRE - Graduate Record Exam ([www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org))

GMAT - Graduate Management Admissions Test ([www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com))

LSAT - Law School Admission Test ([www.lsat.org](http://www.lsat.org))

MCAT - Medical College Admission Test ([www.aamc.org/mcat](http://www.aamc.org/mcat))

MAT - Miller Analogy Test ([www.tpcweb.com](http://www.tpcweb.com))

### **12. How do I apply to grad school?**

Write or telephone the schools you're interested in and request application information. Make a photocopy and fill that out first (type, please). That way, when you're ready to fill out the good copy, you will know exactly how to make it look perfect. Complete it EXACTLY as instructed.

You may also be required to send additional information such as:

a. Official undergraduate transcript.

b. Letters of recommendation: 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. Bring them the recommendation form and a self-addressed envelope if these are 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.

c. Personal essay: You will probably be asked to write a personal statement about why you want to attend graduate school in general or a specific program in particular. Requirements about length, topic, and format vary widely.

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. The best essay will be clear, concise, and to the point. Show the graduate school that you are articulate, realistic, and a competent writer. Grammar, punctuation, and spelling DO count, so be sure that your essay is perfect before you submit it with your application.

### **13. Do I just mail in my application and wait for an answer?**

Some programs, especially those in medical and business schools, often require an interview. Follow the same procedure as you would for a job interview. Career Services can help you with that, too.

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.

### **14. Is that all I need to know about getting into graduate school?**

Of course not. You should also know about:

- a. Auditions for performing arts programs
- b. Graduate programs for non-trads
- c. Part-time programs
- d. Foreign students' applications
- e. Financial planning
- f. Much, much more

### **MORE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF**

1. What are the goals and values that mean the most to me in my career?  
In my life?
2. Is grad school necessary? Can I reach my goals another way?
3. Is a graduate degree necessary for advancement in my field?
4. Will the expense of grad school pay off in a better salary?
5. Am I motivated? Willing to learn and work hard?

## **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 rules:

1. Write directly to the Graduate Admissions Office for an application. You may send a postcard or a letter requesting an application. You may also telephone.
2. Find out when the application deadline is by looking it up in Peterson's Guides to Graduate Programs. However, 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 application, 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 & correct. Different schools have different policies about filing applications so 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. Try looking at the words backwards--from the end to the beginning. That way, you won't be reading for content and you will be less likely to pass over an error.
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 goal statement or essay as part of the graduate or professional school application process. The requirements for these essays will vary from program to program, but some general rules apply.

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 more three-dimensional picture of you than do 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 personal statement should be focused - you should be connecting your experiences, education, and motivations to the program you have selected. What has prepared you for this program? What do you hope to gain from it? Where do you see yourself after completing the degree? Depending on what they ask you to write, you will likely have to address these types of issues in a relatively concise framework.

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, rather than providing 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 of each question, put forth.
- If necessary, explain or address any discrepancies or perceived weaknesses in your record.
- Consult with advisers on whether or not this is a necessary strategy in your situation.
- Proofread, proofread, proofread! Be sure to have a counselor in Career Services, advisers, and others read your essays.

## **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.

Think carefully about who you will ask to be your references. Choose people who know you and your work, not simple social acquaintances such as friends of your parents, no matter how influential they might be. Members of the clergy or physicians are usually not strong references, even though they may have known you for a long time.

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. Pick people who can attest to the kind of student you are. 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 accept the recommendation of your employer.

Once you have decided who you would like to write your recommendations, ask the people if they can give you a good, meaningful reference. If they are not exactly sure what to say about you, give suggestions; remind them of a special project you did, a problem you solved, a good grade they gave you in a course--anything that indicates you will be a successful graduate student. You can also give them your transcript and resume if these will help in the writing of your references.

In general, references should address your: academic skills, communication skills,

maturity, intellect, and motivation. Ask for reference letters early in the fall of your senior year before many other students have thought of it. If the people who write your letters are to mail them directly to the graduate schools, be sure to provide addressed, stamped envelopes.

### **When should I apply? - Application timetable**

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.

Application deadlines can vary widely, but 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. Use Peterson's Guides in Career Services or online.
- Consult with faculty/advisers regarding interests and the nature of graduate study you might like to pursue.
- Obtain application forms, graduate school catalogs and financial aid information. Note deadlines.
- Open a Credentials File at Career Services and begin to approach faculty for recommendation letters.
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admissions tests; register with national application services, if appropriate (e.g., LSDAS for law school).

#### **Junior Year, Summer**

- Take required graduate admission test(s) - (GRE, LSAT, GMAT, MCAT, etc.) - Be aware of deadlines and minimum time needed for scoring.
- Request applications, handbooks/bulletins, and financial aid information from all schools of interest.
- 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**

- Obtain additional letters of recommendation from faculty and/or professionals with whom you have worked (e.g., internship supervisors).

- Submit request for Credentials (recommendation letters) to be mailed AT LEAST THREE WEEKS in advance of any application deadline, to ensure they are processed by the time of your deadline (processing time can take up to 10 working days, before the letters are mailed).
- Mail 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 - submit request to Credentials Service well in advance of application deadline
  - Application Essays/Personal Statement - Counselors in Career Services can provide feedback/critiques of your essays
  - 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.
- 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 to which you may be applying are the first source of information about what monies may be available and what 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. Graduate students are automatically considered independent and provide no parental information on the FAFSA; however, the graduate school may ask for parental financial information on other required forms.

### **Sources of Financial Aid**

**\*Graduate Assistantships:** These are given by campus offices, which allow you to gain valuable experience while working in an institutional office or department.

**\*Teaching Assistantships:** Given through department, allows you to gain valuable teaching experience while continuing your education.

**Assistantships**--work much like college work study programs in undergraduate school. Students are typically assigned assistantships in areas of the college related to their major. The assistantship may involve working for a faculty member, classroom preparation, clerical/research duties or other repetitive tasks. Teaching assistantships or other positions working with undergraduates may also be available. Students receive tuition remission and a stipend in exchange for their work. Students apply directly to the institution for assistantship positions.

\*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 and the library at the school. These graduate assistantships are given by campus offices, which allow you to gain valuable experience while working in an institutional office or department.

**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, but you need to compare loan programs 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.

**Financial Aid on the Information Superhighway:** Don't forget to look for what may be available to you on the World Wide Web. Search these sites for financial aid information and scholarship searches:

- Financial Aid Information Page--A free, comprehensive, independent and objective guide to student financial aid. The address is [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org).
- fastWEB--Financial aid search for scholarships and resources. The address is <http://www.studentservices.com/index.ptml>.
- PA residents may also find the website [www.PHEAA.org](http://www.PHEAA.org) helpful.

## Additional Resources

### **General Websites on Grad School**

[www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)  
[www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)  
[www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com) (U.S. News)  
[www.gradschooltips.com](http://www.gradschooltips.com)  
[www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)

[www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org) (GRE)  
[www.lsat.org](http://www.lsat.org) (LSAT)  
[www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org) (MCAT)  
[www.gmac.com](http://www.gmac.com) (GMAT)  
[www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com)

### **Financial Aid**

[www.finaid.com](http://www.finaid.com)  
[www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com)  
<http://www.grantsnet.org/>  
<http://www.scholarships.com/>  
<http://www.petersons.com/finaid/file.asp?id=780&path=ug.pfs.financial>  
[www.gradview.com/finaid/paying.html](http://www.gradview.com/finaid/paying.html)  
[www.gradschools.com/info/financial.html](http://www.gradschools.com/info/financial.html)  
[www.gradloans.com](http://www.gradloans.com)

### **Law School**

[www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)

### **Medical School**

• [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)

### **Essays & Personal Statements**

- <http://www.gmc.edu/students/arc/>
- [www.essayedge.com](http://www.essayedge.com)
- [www.admissionsessays.com](http://www.admissionsessays.com) (“Writing Tips” section)
- [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p\\_perstate.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html) (Purdue University Writing Lab)

