

Graduate School - Is it right for me?

Students often assume that graduate school is the next logical step after completing an undergraduate degree. Whether and when to continue your education is an important decision, since graduate or professional school requires a significant commitment of time, energy, and money. It also means turning down other opportunities that may come your way during that time. There are, however, specific questions you should consider before applying:

- Why do I want to go to graduate school?
- What will I gain by attending?
- What will I give up by attending?
- Is this the right time for me to apply?

Helpful Hint: The graduate school application season is during the fall

Is graduate study right for you?

Graduate education is very different from undergraduate education. To be successful, you must be self-directed, intellectually curious, hard-working, flexible, and committed. You will have a closer relationship with faculty than you had as an undergraduate, and you will rely on your fellow students for ideas, criticism, and stimulation. On the other hand, you will have less of a social connection to your peers and less social time in general. Graduate school is designed for people who enjoy researching one topic in depth. If you cannot find satisfaction with extensive writing, researching, and intellectual discussion, graduate school is probably not the place for you.

In addition, think about what you want from graduate school to be sure your goals and the purpose of graduate education match. For some fields, a graduate degree is crucial, while for others, it will not help you advance to a higher level on its own. Graduate school is NOT the place for you if you simply cannot decide what else to do with your life. There should be some purpose. Education for its own sake is a valid reason, but delaying inevitable decisions about your future is not.

Is now the best time for you to attend graduate school?

If you know that you want to pursue an academic career, now is the best time to start. A doctoral degree typically takes 5 to 8 years of full time study, so there's no time like the present. Now is also the right time if you are entering a field that requires an advanced degree for credentialing or to gain entry-level positions. However, there are some fields that value work experience as well as an advanced degree, and they may want you to have that experience first. For example, most business schools expect that you will have 2-3 years of work experience before they will consider you for admission. Work experience enriches the classroom experience, making classroom conversations more relevant for you and your peers. Explore your field to determine when they recommend furthering your education. The last two reasons for delaying your graduate education may be the most important. If you feel burned out after four years of college, or if you are unsure of your future career goals, it is best to take some time to work and reflect before making this commitment of time and money.

Should I pursue a master's degree or should I be applying to doctoral programs?

Remember that the doctorate is intended for those who want to pursue a career in university-level teaching and/or advanced research. Even if that describes you, there may still be reasons to apply to a master's program first. If you have not had a strong academic career, you may need to enter a program through the master's in order to prove that you are capable of serious, doctoral level work. The other instance in which a master's program may be necessary as a first step is if you are changing fields. You will develop a solid base in your new discipline, as well as prove your dedication to that field.

Graduate School - Choosing and Applying

Choosing Graduate Schools

When beginning to make a list of potential graduate programs, keep an open mind. In graduate school, a good university may not equal a good program. You may find that the best program in your field is located within a less prestigious university. The best source of information about graduate school programs is Columbia faculty members in your field of interest. But before you talk with them, do some preliminary research in the Center for Career Services, the library, or on the Internet. Look at professional journals in your field to find where the cutting edge research is being done. Contact professional associations to see if they evaluate programs. Then, set up an appointment to talk to a Columbia faculty member about your list. When making your final decision, you will want to consider the curriculum, faculty, the quality and number of students in the program, the university's location and facilities, and availability of funding.

Applications for Graduate School

You can request application materials via e-mail or by sending postcards to the schools. More and more schools are encouraging students to complete applications electronically. Please refer to the specific Web sites of the schools for more details. In addition to the basic information, most applications will require GRE scores, a personal statement, a transcript and letters of reference. Each is discussed below.

Graduate Record Examination

GRE's are required in support of most graduate school and fellowship applications. This three-hour General Test, designed to measure verbal, quantitative, and analytical ability, is very similar to the SAT you took in high school. Graduate school catalogues usually indicate whether a school requires the General Test, Subject Test, or both. The general test is offered on the computer only. Although in theory, you can schedule the test at your convenience, computer times can fill up at peak times. Many graduate schools require that you take the GRE by October or December, so plan ahead. Subject tests are offered on specific dates. For further information, visit the GRE Web site at www.gre.org.

Personal statements

Unlike undergraduate institutions, graduate schools will expect you to have clear direction and goals upon entering a program. Therefore, their essay questions will be more focused. The most important piece of advice about writing these statements should be obvious-be sure that you answer the question that is asked on the application. It is quite possible that you will not be able to use the same essay for multiple applications. You should be prepared to make a case for why you will fit with a particular program, and what you will be able to contribute to a department, rather than just what you hope to receive.

Letters of recommendation

Graduate schools usually require two to three letters of recommendation. These should be academic letters, and you should have at least one from a professor in your major. If you are changing departments, it is imperative you also have a letter from someone who is teaching in that department. It is wise to begin acquiring recommendations as early as possible so that they are in your file when you begin applying to graduate schools (generally November through January). It can sometimes take professors a long time to complete a recommendation and they may need a gentle reminder of their commitment to you. The earlier you start, the more assured you will be of meeting application deadlines.

Junior and Senior Class Center Tips on...

Graduate School – Helpful Resources

<http://www.gradschools.com/> - This site bills itself as "the most comprehensive online source of graduate school information," and they're not far off. Here, you can search for programs by subject or school, find information about all the standard entrance exams, and get information about financial aid and fellowships. It's a great place to start the research process.

<http://www.depts.drew.edu/career/gradsch/> - One of the most useful sites we've seen, this site is a document created by Drew University faculty. It guides students through every step of the graduate admissions process, from evaluating if graduate school is for you, to finding and selecting schools, to the application process, to evaluating decision letters and funding options. It is thorough and straightforward, and shouldn't be missed.

<http://www.princetonreview.com/grad/> - Formerly embark.com, this site contains many very useful articles and tools to help you research and evaluate programs, and explore the differences between college and grad school. There's also test prep info (including sample tests), on-line applications for many schools, and personal statement help. There is also a significant amount of financial aid and financial planning information. This is one of the more comprehensive sites around.

<http://www.justcolleges.com/grad/index.phtml?inc=index.htm> - This is another great, comprehensive site that includes everything from evaluating programs, to help with writing personal statements and asking for recommendations. There is such a wide range of info at this site-- it's worth a look.

<http://www.gradview.com> - This site is made up of brief articles on topics related to graduate school, including whether or not to attend, how to choose a program, and perspectives about being a graduate student. There is also a good amount of information about financial aid and money management.

http://www.jobweb.com/Resources/Library/Grad_School/default.htm - Although most of this site is devoted to job information, this specific address will take you to a list of links about applying to graduate school, financing your education, and addressing the transition from undergraduate to graduate education. While many of the links included are standard fare, there are a few articles you won't find other places.

<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/grad/grhome.htm> - Along with the standard rankings, this site also provides useful tips on evaluating programs and schools, and information about financing your education.

<http://www.graduateguide.com/> - This is another useful site for finding programs and their entrance requirements. It also has articles about admissions tests, accreditation, and useful questions to ask admissions offices. It isn't the most comprehensive site, but still useful.

<http://iiswinprd01.petersons.com/GradChannel/> - This site has links about selecting, applying to, and paying for graduate school.

<http://www.mit.edu:8001/people/cdemello/univ.html> - This site is the fastest way to get to any college or university home page. It lists over 3000 schools, alphabetically.

Help with personal statements:

<http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/gradapp.html> - This article covers the basics about how to write your statement of purpose for graduate school.

<http://www.accepted.com/help/index.htm> - This site offers several services to help you begin and/or edit your personal statement, but they do charge a substantial fee. Among their free services are a few sample personal statements, and transcripts from past chat sessions with general advice on constructing an effective statement.

About financial aid:

<http://www.finaid.org> - This site includes everything you ever wanted to know about finding funding sources and completing your financial aid paperwork. Also see some of the other general websites listed above, most of which include some financial aid information.