



Graduate School Planning Guide

The decision to attend graduate school is a choice many students consider. This process can be both exciting and overwhelming. For your convenience, University Career Services has put together the following resources to give you an overview of things to consider when applying to graduate schools.

Why Should I Attend Graduate School?

Graduate programs are designed to assist students in specializing in an academic discipline or profession upon completion of a bachelor's degree. Students may be expected to complete internships/field work, conduct and defend research projects, and/or take comprehensive exams. In addition, faculty members have greater expectations of their students and require their students to be self-motivated and eager to learn. Attendance and class participation are typically not optional while attending graduate school.

It is vital to research your desired career path before applying to graduate programs. If you want to obtain a graduate degree, further research should focus on choosing the appropriate discipline or program that best fits your personal and professional goals. Stop by University Career Services and we can assist you with your career journey!

Here are some questions you may want to think about before applying to graduate programs:

- Why do I want to attend graduate school?
- What type of professional or academic degree am I seeking?
- Should I consider a full-time or part-time program?
- Do I need an advanced degree to enter or advance in the profession I am interested in?
- Do I have the finances to cover the cost of graduate school?
- Do I need to take time off (or a gap year) because I am academically burned out?
- Do I believe I possess the skills and abilities needed to be successful in graduate programs?
- Will children, a significant other, or a spouse impact my plans?



Best Reasons to Attend Graduate School

- Your career path requires or desires a higher education degree.
- You want to pursue your passions and interests in more depth.
- You need further education for certification or licensure purposes.
- You want to develop new skills or abilities.
- You want to increase your professional and social network.



Worst Reasons to Attend Graduate School

- I want to put off paying my student loans.
- I want to avoid starting a career as long as I can.
- I am scared I will not be able to gain employment.
- I just want to go to graduate school because it appears to be fun.

Tips to consider when applying for graduate school



Size of the institution you want to attend.



Research the financial costs.



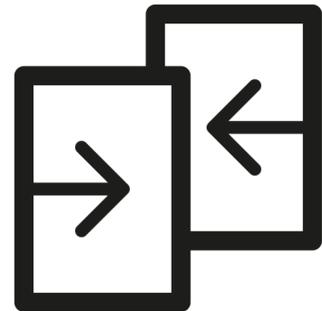
Check the acceptance and graduation rates of your potential colleges.



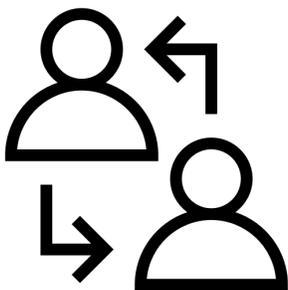
Research the GPA and standardized tests for acceptance.



Check to ensure you meet the recommendations and requirements for the colleges you are applying for.



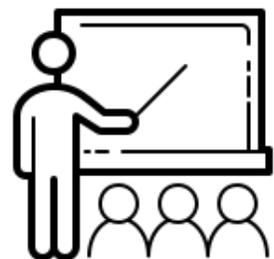
Compare your GPA and test scores with the average acceptance GPA and test scores of the school for which you are applying.



Faculty interaction – will you be able to engage with the faculty in a one-on-one situation or group setting.



Check the application fees and standardized testing fees before applying and registering.



Check the prerequisite classes and determine if you should do a post baccalaureate to increase your course grades and/or complete your required classes.

Competitive Candidate – What does this look like?

Most graduate schools have minimum qualifications for gaining acceptance; however, it is wise to go above those requirements. The competitive graduate student candidate is one whom will stand out when compared to the average qualifications of the current students within the program of interest.

Here are some factors to consider in becoming a more competitive candidate:

Plan Ahead

Check out our graduate school timeline to help establish a timeline for applying for graduate school. Start looking for and enrolling in prerequisite classes needed for your desired program and field of study. In addition, allow yourself time to research the institution you want to attend, write your personal statement, take required admissions tests, and gather recommendations.

Relevant Experience

Know that programs often look at the experience you have gained while achieving your undergraduate degree. The time of experiences available, but not limited to, is practicums, research experience, fieldwork, lab research, internships, volunteering, and job shadowing.

Make Connections

Networking is key for graduate school admissions as well as career searching. Connect with professors and faculty while you are obtaining your undergraduate degree. Attend office hours, interact in class, and be attentive. Ask your connections if they can write you strong recommendations. Maybe even connect with the graduate school to express interest and desire to know more about the program.

Perfect Your Personal Statement

When writing your personal statement, ensure that you are answering the questions asked of you. Allow your passions and desires for your education and career goals to shine through. Proofread your document! Ask others to read over it or set up an appointment with a Career Counselor to go over your statement.

Maintain a Strong GPA

The minimum GPA requirement for most graduate schools is a 3.0. However, some schools may have minimum GPA requirements as high as 3.5. Know that your grades in prerequisite classes or other major classes are likely to be given more importance. Strive to obtain a higher GPA than the minimum requirement.

Interviewing

Know if your school has a candidate interview process and practice your interview skills. Set up an appointment with a Career Counselor to practice interviewing techniques.

Test Scores

Test types and requirements vary from institutions and programs. Most graduate schools have a minimum score for admittance, but again, other competitive candidates often have higher than the minimum required score. Some programs may even put a greater emphasis on certain portions of the standardized tests, so be sure to do your research beforehand.

Apply

When applying, break your schools up into three categories: dream schools, target schools, and safety schools. The optimal number of graduate schools to apply for is 5-6.

Personal Statement

- Have a focus point. Being more in depth and focusing on a topic is more important than cramming lots of information on a page.
- Try to tell your reader something that is unique only to you and give them information that is not already highlighted within your application.
- Be passionate, be yourself, and help the reader to understand what motivates you and what excites you about your career path.
- Have a strong opening sentence and paragraph to hook your audience, again, focus on being unique and stating something no other applicant would state.
- Describe features of the school that interests you.
- Evaluate your experiences, rather than describe them.
- Proofread your document for errors.
- Take a look at the brainstorm activity for assisting in creation of your personal statements; as well as additional tips.

How to Finance Graduate School

Compare all options below to see which financial decision would be best for you.

FAFSA

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a form to determine your eligibility for student financial aid. FAFSA unlocks federal and state aid for your graduate program (federal loans, work studies, state and federal grants, and school student assistance).

Merit-Based Aid

This financial aid is usually given in recognition of student achievements (e.g., athletic, artistic, academic, etc.). Check with the programs you are applying to determine if they offer this assistance.

Employer

Certain employers will pay for their employees to advance their education within a field the employer deems appropriate for career growth. This is a great question to ask your current employer if you want to advance your education.

Fellowships

This aid covers living expenses and/or tuition in return for research or work on a project for the graduate school. These may be awarded on a yearly or multi-year basis and is usually dependent on an individual's merit determined by GPA, publications, and letters of recommendation.

Military Benefits

If you or your partner served in the armed forces, you may be eligible for public or private tuition through the GI Bill. The amount you are given is determined by years of service.

Faith-based Organizations

Some faith-based organizations offer scholarships and grants for their members. Contact your local faith-based organization and see if they offer this resource for you.

Academic Scholarship

There are thousands of scholarships available online. Many scholarships go unclaimed each year. Look over different websites for scholarship assistance.

Graduate Assistantships

Assistantships are provided by your program that requires you to do some campus-affiliated work assignments. The exact amount and type of assistantship you receive is at the discretion of the program you are applying. Typically, the aid given is tuition reimbursement and/or stipend. Contact the program administrators to determine if the program offers assistantships.

What if I Don't Get Into Graduate School?

- Don't be discouraged, take some time for yourself away from the process, ask for feedback on how to improve your candidacy and application.
- Check to see if you are only applying for "reach programs," and look to apply into more of your "safe schools."
- Apply earlier next year.
- Apply to more schools.
- Improve your grades by taking different classes that are relevant to your field of study.
- Network with administrators and professors at your schools.
- Volunteer or complete an internship in your targeted field of study while you work on the application process.
- Look into certifications or credentials that may help you stand out within your career field.