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# Graduate and Professional School Guide

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## Using this Guide

The Graduate and Professional School Guide is designed to help you with questions about graduate school: from whether you should attend to more detailed information about how to apply and finance your education. Although this guide is divided into sections, all of the information interacts with one another. For instance, which school you select might depend on the financial assistance you receive. This guide should answer some of your questions and provide you with many resources for further research. However, sometimes it can only offer more questions you need to ask yourself. Answering these questions as you explore your options will assist you with the steps you need to take. An individual appointment with a CDO Career Counselor will provide additional resources for your decision, search, and application process.

## Defining Graduate School Degrees

When you consider graduate school, you may be thinking of professional school (law, medicine, business, etc.), master's programs, or doctoral programs, all of which require specialized knowledge and concentrated study in one area.

The **professional master's degree** gives you a specific set of skills needed to practice in a particular field, such as education, accounting, business, engineering, social work or other professions requiring specialized training. It is generally a final or terminal degree, and involves an internship, practicum, field work and/or professional exam.

The **research master's degree** provides experience in research and scholarship and it may be a final degree or a step toward the Ph.D. A master's degree usually takes one or two years of study. A qualifying final comprehensive exam or thesis is typically required for completion of this program.

The **professional doctoral degree** is the highest degree for areas such as medicine, business and law and requires practical applications of knowledge and skills. The M.D. for medical practice and the J.D. for law are the most common professional degrees.

The **Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy)** is the highest earned academic degree and the primary credential for college level teaching. The Ph.D. typically involves both course work and an extensive and original research project (e.g. dissertation). This doctorate usually takes a minimum of four to six years of full-time study.

### Dual Degree Programs

Some graduate programs combine professional and research degrees within specific areas of interest. Others may combine professional programs. Examples include J.D./M.B.A., J.D./Ph.D, M.A./J.D., M.D./M.B.A., M.D./Ph.D. Check the graduate school of your choice for more information. Dual degree programs may have more stringent admission requirements or distinctive completion schedules.

## Deciding if Graduate School is Right for You

Before applying for further study, you need to be fully aware of the working conditions, employment prospects, and physical and mental demands of the field you plan to pursue. In addition, the more immediate demands of research, coursework and major papers are all part of the graduate school experience to be considered. Although there are defined course requirements in most graduate and professional school curricula, you will build a program for yourself based on your interests and goals.

Some individuals enter graduate study with the idea that they can postpone the inevitable—deciding on a career and searching for a job—for another year or two. ***If this is your sole motivation for entering graduate school, it could have serious implications for your career development.*** Therefore, before going any further, carefully consider some important questions:

- What do I want to accomplish in my lifetime?
- What are my long and short-range professional goals?
- Is graduate study necessary for me to achieve these goals?
- Am I willing to invest the time and money to take on another academic program?
- Do I have the interest and ability to be successful in a graduate program?
- By going to graduate school, am I simply delaying my career decision-making?

Two of the reasons most frequently given by students who have dropped out of graduate programs are a dislike of concentrated academic work and a realization that they have not defined their career goals clearly enough. By answering the above questions honestly, you may avoid similar problems in the future.

Through research, you should be able to get a solid idea of whether or not you would benefit from graduate study. In the process, however, be aware that further education may not be required for entry into every career field. It is, of course, if you are planning to enter such traditional professions such as law, medicine, dentistry, and teaching at the college or university level. If you have not already done so, it is a good idea to look over occupational literature and talk with faculty, friends, and alumni—people who have the kinds of jobs in which you are interested. The staff of the Career Development Office will also be able to assist you in determining your job prospects in various fields at all degree levels.

If you do not have a general idea of what you want to do, you will have a difficult time making appropriate choices. If further education offers only an alternative to the job search, you may wish to reexamine your career objectives to see if they "fit" with the opportunities the chosen program offers. If you do not know where graduate or professional school might lead you, your significant investment of time and money in additional education might have only limited benefits. **Choose graduate school because you are working towards a goal.** Graduate or professional study can be a worthwhile and rewarding career additive; it should not be a disappointing employment alternative. As practical work experience is an education in itself, a combination work/study arrangement or short-term deferral of graduate study may be a possible solution.

## Deciding if You Should Attend Now or Later

You may need more time to clarify your professional goals. This is common. A frequently asked question about graduate school is “Should I attend now or later?” The following table will show some advantages and disadvantages of pursuing a graduate degree immediately after graduation. It is highly advisable to speak with faculty advisors, alumni, or students currently enrolled in programs of interest in order to hear perspectives on immediate entry versus delayed. However, personal experiences and situations vary, and your decision may involve several factors. Some of the pros and cons of immediate entry and delay of graduate study follow:

### Advantages of Pursuing a Graduate Degree...

#### Immediately after Graduation

- As an undergraduate, you will have access to several graduate program resources and events.
- Faculty members will be more likely to remember your recent achievements for recommendation purposes.
- Commitment to the academic lifestyle and good study habits should be firmly established.
- Some programs prefer to recruit students directly from undergraduate programs.
- Scheduling and preparation for standardized tests may fit with existing study schedules.
- Personal, financial, and geographic commitments may be minimal at this time.
- For those who enjoy research and studying, these opportunities continue immediately.

#### Delayed Enrollment

- Many graduate schools, and particularly those with well-known programs, tend to be more selective in their admission process. Delayed enrollment may strengthen focus and the ability to articulate long-term plans for your degree.
- Some schools (particularly M.B.A. programs) may require or prefer a few years life/work experience. The argument given in favor of this selection process is that work experience tends to give persons more knowledge on which to base their decisions.
- The risk of academic burnout may be reduced.
- Your financial position may be stronger than when an undergraduate.

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Evaluate all factors when determining the best time to begin graduate study. Consider these questions before making your decision:

- Would related work experience help you clarify ambiguous career goals?
- Will you change your career goals after a taste of the working world?
- How much do you know about your chosen field? Have you completed internships and/or talked extensively to those who work in the field?
- Would work experience enhance your application?
- Would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after a break?

If you are uncertain about your field of study or unsure whether it would be advantageous to gain some work experience and/or take some time off, it may be a good idea to delay graduate school. If you decide to postpone your graduate study, yet plan to begin a program within three to five years, you may want to take the appropriate standardized entrance examinations during your senior year of college, or shortly after, as scores on most of these tests are generally valid for this period of time.

# Research Resources

**Peterson's Graduate Programs Directory** profiles more than 1,500 accredited institutions offering master's and/or doctoral programs of over 300 disciplines in the U.S. and Canada. Profiles include general institutional information, a directory of institutional offerings, academic contact persons, and a listing of departmental faculty and their research interests. Directories are located in the Career Development Office Library and Burling Library as well as [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com).

## **Comprehensive Online Guides:**

Graduate School Guide: [www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)

GradSchools.com: [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)

PhDs.org: <http://graduate-school.phds.org/>

Princeton Review: [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com)

**Medical School Admissions Requirements** is a publication by the Association of American Medical Colleges that provides listings of U.S. and Canadian medical schools with information and advice about applications and financial aid. This guide is available in the Career Development Office Library. Website: [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)

**The Student Doctor Network** provides forums for medical students to post opinions and information related to the application and interview process. **(Opinions and information posted here may or may not be accurate)** Website: [www.studentdoctor.net/schools/](http://www.studentdoctor.net/schools/)

**The MBA Explorer** is the official GMAT website, offering test information, MBA program search tools, financing resources, a recruiting calendar, advice for those considering programs, and more. Website: [www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com)

**The Law School Admission Council** is the official LSAT registration source. The LSAC also provides free sample LSAT exams, access to the LSDAS service, Candidate Referral Service (CRS), Law School Forums, MILE Program (Minorities Interested in Legal Education), and additional test preparation resources. Website: [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)

**Graduate School Rankings** provide detailed program information on programs, often by category: Law, Medicine, Engineering, and Business. Visit the CDO library to view the print copy of the U.S. News Graduate School Guide or visit <http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/> for the condensed online version. Other sites and companies with compiled rankings for programs include: [www.phds.org](http://www.phds.org), [www.businessweek.com](http://www.businessweek.com), [www.forbes.com/education](http://www.forbes.com/education), and <http://money.cnn.com/>.

## **Faculty and Alumni**

The numerical rankings assigned to various school programs are based on a number of different criteria and should not be taken as the final consensus. Discuss plans with alumni and faculty as well. Ask which institutions would be most appropriate for meeting your goals. In addition, visit the CDO website ([www.grinnell.edu/career](http://www.grinnell.edu/career)) for post-graduate survey data (programs and schools attended by recent graduates). Remember, the advice and rankings provided by others are useful, but it is important to establish your own personal criteria to compare graduate schools.

# Criteria for Evaluating Graduate Schools

Institutions and departments may vary greatly in one or more of the following factors: programs available, size, location, cost, facilities, faculty interests, reputation, and requirements. Matching your own abilities and personal requirements against the varying factors is an important task in selecting the institutions to which you wish to apply. You may want to take the following factors or questions into consideration as you evaluate various programs:

**Admissions** - What are the admissions requirements? Do you have the test scores, courses, research and experience required for the program? What types of students does the program attract?

**Programs and Facilities** - Do opportunities exist for specialization in areas of your own interest? Do the research facilities suit your needs?

**Geographic Location** - The climate, the political and social temper of an institution, and its setting (whether urban or in a smaller community) are all worth considering.

**Size** - How large is the institution and the department? The number of students, and particularly the student/faculty ratio, will affect the amount of individual attention you will receive.

**Faculty** - Who are they? Are there specific people doing the type of research in which you are interested? Could you contact these people? What have they published?

**Philosophy** - What is the average length of time spent in the program? Do opportunities exist for specialization in areas of your own interest? Some institutions may approach the subject matter theoretically where others may be more pragmatic in their approach.

**Residence Requirements** - How much time must you spend taking courses at a particular institution in order to earn your advanced degree? If you are at a public university, residence requirements also determine whether you pay in-state tuition. Many state universities are required to give preference to in-state applicants.

**Available Experience** - Are there opportunities for teaching, research or assistantships?

**Career Services** - Will you receive assistance in your job search when you are ready to graduate? Check with the career center at each institution to find out what types of employers express interest in graduates of the department you're considering. What are alumni of the program doing now?

**Financial Aid** - The amount of financial aid awarded will vary by student and by institution. The reasons may have as much to do with university budgets as an applicant's merits. Keep in mind that while awards may vary, graduate aid is often based on merit, not need.

**Requirements** - Some programs require demonstrated knowledge of one or two foreign languages. Universities may also require, or permit, a substitute for a foreign language e.g. knowledge of a programming language. Similarly, you will want to investigate research options and whether a thesis and/or comprehensive examination is required at the master's degree level.

# Applying to Graduate School

Formal applications vary from one institution to the next, but each usually consists of the following:

- **An application**
- **Graduate admissions test scores**
- **Official transcripts**
- **Separate financial aid application**
- **Application essay**
- **Letters of recommendation**
- **Application fee**
- **Resume/CV (Curriculum Vitae)**

As you research each institution, keep records noting admission requirements and application deadlines. It is very important to note each program's distinct instructions and requirements. Some graduate programs require a personal interview; most require a nonrefundable application fee of \$40-\$120 (which may limit the number of schools to which you will apply.)

Applications are usually referred to an admission committee for the particular program or school for which you are applying. This faculty committee reviews your application, reaches a decision, and makes a recommendation to the dean or the associate dean of the graduate school. In either type of school, the candidates that show strength in a combination of the requirements—academic preparation, test scores, and recommendations—have the best chance for selection.

Follow up with the school to make sure your application is complete (leave enough time to follow up on a letter of recommendation or request for additional information if needed.)

## Application Forms

All application forms, whether hard copy or online, should be completed in a thoroughly professional manner. Carefully follow instructions. Be aware of application deadlines listed in graduate school bulletins. If admissions are handled on a "rolling" basis (i.e. qualified applicants are accepted as they apply), it is to your advantage to apply at the earliest possible date in order to show your enthusiasm and give them more time to evaluate your application. Early application is also an advantage if you are applying for financial aid. Medical, law, and veterinary schools have centralized applications. For more information, go to [www.aamc.org/students](http://www.aamc.org/students) or [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org).

## Transcripts

All transcripts must be "official"; that is, transcripts must be sent to admission offices directly from the Office of the Registrar. If you receive your transcript first and then send it on, there is no proof that it is "official" and therefore it will be considered invalid. For additional information on transcripts, contact the Office of the Registrar.

## Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV)

Many graduate school applications require either a curriculum vitae (CV) or resume. While a resume typically consists of one or two pages, a CV is often much longer and includes all academic activities and achievements, research and publications, and other relevant information. You want graduate schools to have the most complete image of you as possible, and the CV can include information that might not fit in other sections of the application. Once you have put together your resume or CV, we encourage you to have a career counselor at the CDO review it for formatting suggestions, targeted content, and errors. For additional advice related to the distinction between CV's and resumes, visit *The Chronicle of Higher Education* at [www.chronicle.com](http://www.chronicle.com).

## Applying to Graduate School (continued)

### Application Essay

Most institutions will ask that you submit a statement of purpose or personal statement in addition to basic data requested on the application. Personal statements provide you with the opportunity to supplement standard application materials with your own goals and objectives with respect to the program; therefore, they should not be taken lightly. Typically, programs will offer suggestions on items to consider, such as your reasons for applying in relation to personal goals and professional expectations. Good grammar and writing styles are extremely important. Before writing anything, stop and consider what your reader might be looking for; the general directories or other documents contained in the application may give you an indication of this. Do not hesitate to seek help from faculty members and the Career Development Office in preparing your personal statement or other application materials. Admission committees may be trying to evaluate a number of things from your statement, including the following:

- Motivation and commitment
- Expectations and goals
- Educational background
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution
- Writing ability
- Major areas of interest
- Research or work experience
- Personal uniqueness – what you would add to the diversity of the entering class
- Maturity

### Letters of Recommendation

Most institutions will request between three and five letters of recommendation on your behalf. As with application forms and test dates, it is important to pay close attention to application deadlines, so you may contact people whom you wish to write letters well in advance of the deadline date. Letters of recommendation are useful to graduate admission committees only if the letters tell them something about you that is not particularly evident in the rest of your application packet. It is best to obtain recommendations from those persons qualified to evaluate your academic and/or work potential and performance based on personal observation. You may also wish to obtain a recommendation from a professor in an unrelated discipline in order to show the breadth of your academic interests. It is essential that the reference person know you well enough that he or she can make a good assessment of your academic and work abilities. You might find it very worthwhile to have a meeting with references before they write your letters of recommendation. Do not hesitate to ask references if they feel they know you well enough to write a good recommendation. Ask if they are willing and able to support you and discuss any reservations. If they agree to provide a recommendation, give them a copy of your application essay in advance. In any event, you will want to share with faculty your reasons for applying to graduate or professional school. Give your recommenders updated personal and professional data as needed, such as a resume or previous work done for faculty, recommendation forms (if required by the institution), and a list of deadlines. It is also a good idea, as well as courteous, to provide stamped, addressed envelopes. The CDO also utilizes [www.interfolio.com](http://www.interfolio.com) for online storage and submission of recommendation letters/credential files. **It is good practice to send a thank you note to those who assisted in your application process.** Once accepted, it is thoughtful to let your recommenders know of your acceptance.

# Graduate Admission Tests

## Graduate Admissions Tests

Most graduate and professional schools require that you take one or more standardized examinations before they decide upon your application for admission. Listed below are the commonly required examinations:

**GRE:** This test is required for entrance to most graduate programs. There are two parts to the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The GRE General Test is designed to measure analytical, verbal, quantitative, and writing ability. The GRE Subject Test is an examination in a major field of study. Graduate schools may require one or both parts of the test; [investigate this thoroughly](#).  
Website: [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)

**GMAT:** The Graduate Management Admission Test is a requirement to assess students planning to attend management and business schools. Some schools may substitute the GRE.  
Website: [www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com)

**LSAT:** The Law School Admissions Test is a requirement law school. Interested students should also complete the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS).  
Website: [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)

**MCAT:** The Medical College Admission Test is given to applicants for admission to medical schools. Interested students must also complete the American Medical College Applications Service (AMCAS). Website: [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)

**DAT:** The Dental Admission Test is a requirement for admission to dental school.  
Website: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)

**PCAT:** The Pharmacy College Admission Test is a requirement for admission to pharmacy school.  
Website: [www.pcatweb.info](http://www.pcatweb.info)

**TOEFL:** The Test of English as a Foreign Language evaluates English proficiency of students whose native language is not English. Website: [www.ets.org/toefl](http://www.ets.org/toefl)

**MAT:** The Miller Analogies Test is a high-level mental ability test accepted by several graduate school programs. Performance on the MAT reflects candidates' analytical thinking.  
Website: [www.milleranalogies.com](http://www.milleranalogies.com)

**Note:** It will work to your advantage to take the appropriate standardized test **early** in your application process. Those wishing to enter a graduate program in the fall of a given academic year will want to consider testing up to a year in advance of this desired entry date. In any event, remember that test registration deadlines are often well in advance of the actual test dates, and subject tests are given only a few times a year. Research how long tests scores are valid for your particular field and exam. Often scores may be submitted to programs within three to five years of the original exam date.

# Strengthening Your Application

## Test Preparation

You may wish to purchase a preparation manual for the specific test you are planning to take. These preparation manuals have been published for most of the major examination programs, and are available for sale at bookstores. These manuals typically contain several practice tests based on different units of each examination, as well as "refresher" sections designed to assist in updating your skills in recall, judgment, and mathematics. Study guides and additional resources are available in the Career Development Office Library.

In addition, private "short courses" exist to help applicants prepare for examinations such as the MCAT and LSAT. Before investing money into one of these services, it is advisable to check them out thoroughly with faculty members or persons currently or formerly enrolled in them.

## Interview Preparation

An interview can be important for you to persuade an institution's admission officer or committee that you would be an excellent manager, doctor, lawyer, dentist, etc. Interviews are usually required by medical schools and often suggested by business schools and other programs. Interviewers will be interested in the way you think and approach problems and will probably concentrate on questions that enable them to assess your thinking skills, rather than questions that call upon your grasp of technical knowledge. Bear in mind that the interviewer is more interested in *how* you think than *what* you think. Schedule a mock interview with the CDO to prepare.

## Contact Programs Directly

Admission officials and faculty members at the institution you would like to attend can help you with questions you may have about the specific programs. Do not hesitate to contact them by phone, email, or even a personal visit. In some cases, a telephone call can save a \$50 application fee, prevent you from making an unfortunate choice of an academic program, or strengthen your knowledge of the nuances of a particular graduate school.

## Research

It is highly recommended that you engage in research, either with your own independent project or as an assistant to a professor. Ask professors for suggestions. Research experience will be looked upon favorably by the application committee.

## Experience

If timing permits, gain experience in your chosen field. Complete a summer internship, shadow a professional, and/or complete informational interviews with alumni contacts.

## GPA

Many graduate programs have minimum GPA requirements and others consider GPA when evaluating applications. Maintain a high GPA throughout your academic career and research particular program requirements.

## Financing Graduate/Professional School

Monetary support to attend graduate/professional school is available from several sources: universities, government sources, banks, and private foundations. However, sources change continuously, and in the case of government aid, the amount available is subject to and regulated by current executive and legislative policy. Financial aid information can be found through catalogs, websites, and literature published by universities, government, and foundations. Typically, deadlines are quite early for financial aid applications. If you will require financial assistance, be sure to request a financial aid application at the same time you request an admission application. In most instances, you will be required to submit a completed copy of the Student Financial Statement (SFS), a Parents' Confidential Statement (PCS), or a copy of the Family Financial Statement (FFS) to the American College Testing Program. Some graduate schools will accept any of the three; others require a specific one. Types of financial aid available for graduate study are somewhat different from aid you may have received as an undergraduate student.

General types of aid include:

**Fellowships** - On the graduate level, the equivalent of a scholarship is a fellowship. It is usually a monetary award given on the basis of scholastic achievement. Fellowships may be taxable if they involve teaching or research. Specific programs and universities have their own fellowships, which you may identify by contacting the school's Financial Aid Office. The federal government also supports some fellowships programs.

**Assistantships** - Teaching or research assistantships are often available through the academic department or program of study. Assistantships usually involve working 10-20 hours per week in exchange for some stipend and/or fee remission. Although fee remissions are common, be aware that in accepting a graduate assistantship you may still be responsible for partial payment of your tuition and/or fees. Requests for information on graduate assistantships and applications should be made directly to the department or program of interest to you.

**Resident Assistantships** - Some institutions have programs in which graduate students earn a stipend, room and board, or both by working as assistants in undergraduate residence halls. If you do not receive information on such a program, along with your application materials, you might contact the school's director of residence life to inquire about such opportunities.

**Long-Term Educational Loans** - Graduate students may be eligible for a variety of loan programs. The institution's Financial Aid Office will be able to explain these loan programs to you.

**College Work-Study Program** - Under this program, eligible undergraduate and graduate students are provided part-time employment opportunities. Generally, financial aid officials administer these programs, and they can explain application procedures in detail.

**Other Employment** - University communities often provide good opportunities for part-time work. Check with the institution's financial aid office, or the chairperson of the department to which you are applying, regarding possible part-time employment opportunities in the local community.

Financial support of graduate education may vary widely from institution to institution. Therefore, it is essential for perspective applicants to investigate the availability of financial aid in all its various forms as they go about the admission process. Both the sources and amounts of financial aid are important considerations. Begin the process early to identify potential funding sources.

## Graduate School Timetable

When:	What:
<b>Junior Year</b> Fall/Spring/ Summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Browse resources and guides to graduate programs</li> <li>• Contact admissions offices and programs to request information</li> <li>• Determine test requirements, application requirements/deadlines, and test dates</li> <li>• Consult with counselors, faculty members, and Grinnell alumni</li> <li>• Prepare for exams: utilize practice tests and CDO resources</li> <li>• Investigate national scholarships and determine financial needs</li> <li>• Take standardized exams</li> <li>• Outline or draft personal statement/essay/statement of purpose/resume</li> </ul>
<b>Senior Year</b> September/ October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take standardized exams (if you have not yet)</li> <li>• Write a draft of application documents</li> <li>• Utilize the CDO and other resources for review of application documents</li> <li>• Research financial aid sources, fellowships, and assistantships</li> <li>• Request recommendations <b>early</b> from faculty members</li> <li>• Apply for fellowships, grants and assistantships</li> </ul>
November/ December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Order official transcripts from the Office of the Registrar</li> <li>• Ask the Office of the Registrar to send a transcript with your fall term grades in time to meet the deadlines</li> <li>• Finalize personal statement/essay</li> <li>• Submit your applications-even if deadlines are later, it is good to get applications in early-fellowship deadlines may follow a separate schedule</li> </ul>
December/January/ February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact schools about the possibility of visiting or schedule interviews</li> <li>• Complete appropriate financial aid forms -if you are applying for need-based aid, you may have to file a copy of your federal tax return</li> <li>• Contact schools at least two weeks before the deadline to make sure your applications are complete</li> </ul>
March/April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss acceptances, rejections, and other career options with a faculty member or a Career Development Office Career Counselor</li> <li>• If you would like to defer enrollment for one or two years, contact your graduate department concerning that possibility-many programs may not offer deferral options-if you are rejected it may be helpful to contact the school and discuss the reasons for your rejection and obtain suggestions on how to get admitted in the future</li> </ul> <p>Send thank you notes to people who wrote your recommendations or assisted you in the process</p>

**\*This timetable is based upon a typical program with a December/January application deadline. Some programs may have earlier, later, rolling, or spring admittance deadlines.**