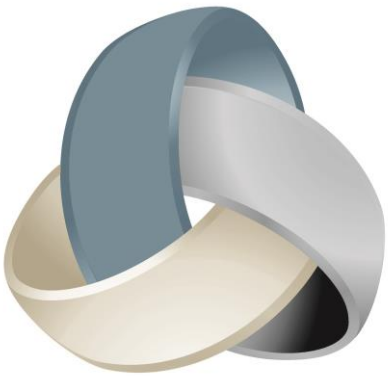

Graduate & Professional School Guide

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Defining Graduate Degrees

Graduate schools and professional schools both offer advanced degrees—that is, degrees for which a prerequisite is an undergraduate degree; these degrees are typically referred to as *master's* or *doctoral* degrees.* Graduate schools tend to prepare students broadly for careers in research or higher education (that is, as professors), with an emphasis on skills necessary to advance a particular field of study. Professional schools prepare students for careers as practitioners in professional fields, such as law, business, and medicine. Graduate schools and professional schools are both commonly—but not always—branches of larger universities.

Some major types of graduate degrees include:

Research master's degrees: These, typically master of arts (M.A.) or master of science (M.S.) degrees, provide experience in research and scholarship. They may be pursued as a final degree or as a step toward a Ph.D. A research master's degree typically requires one to two years of full-time study. In addition to coursework, a final comprehensive exam or thesis is typically required for completion of these programs.

Research doctoral degrees: The doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) is the highest earned academic degree and primary credential for college-level teaching. The Ph.D. involves coursework and an extensive original research project (the dissertation). Completion of a Ph.D. program usually requires a minimum of four years of full-time study, but discipline-specific requirements (foreign language fluency, fieldwork expectations, and more) can add many years. Funding opportunities include assistantships and fellowships.

Professional master's degrees: These provide specific sets of skills needed or desirable for practice in particular fields (e.g., M.B.A. for business administration, M.Ed. for education, M.F.A. for fine arts, M.S.W. for social work). Professional master's degrees typically require one to two years of full-time study, but because these degrees are often pursued by working professionals, accelerated, part-time, and hybrid options are frequently available.

Professional doctoral degrees: These are the highest degrees for areas such as medicine (M.D.) and law (J.D.), where practical applications of knowledge and skills are required. Coursework and practicums prepare students for successful entrance to their professions, which typically involves passing additional state- or national-level certifying examinations. Full-time study, subsidized by loans, is the norm. Although debt for medical school should be considered "safe" debt, debt for law school—except for the most competitive schools—is riskier these days.

Programs offering dual degrees: Increasingly popular are degrees that combine professional and research degrees (e.g., M.D./Ph.D.) or professional degrees (J.D./M.B.A., M.D./M.B.A.). Admission requirements may be more stringent for such programs, since applicants need to satisfy two sets of criteria. Dual degrees can occasionally be completed in one or two fewer semesters than if the degrees were taken sequentially.

*Additional postgraduate degrees include *certificates* and *specialist* degrees; most are professional in nature. Certificates tend to lie midway between undergraduate and master's degrees; specialist degrees tend to lie midway between master's and doctoral degrees.

Deciding if Graduate School Is Right for You

Before applying for further education, you should be fully aware of the working conditions, employment prospects, and physical and mental demands of the field you plan to pursue. Believe it or not, graduate school will most likely be even *more* intense than your Grinnell experience! You are lucky, though, to have experience with building a program of study that suits your particular interests and goals, since a core aim of graduate or professional school is for you to find your own particular niche in a broader field.

Some questions to consider:

What are your values, interests, and priorities for your career and life? Use Worksheet A to explore your values, interests, priorities, and goals. The more you understand about yourself, your values, your work style, and your goals, the more likely you will be to find a post-Grinnell step that is right for you.

Do you have a clear purpose and goal for attending graduate school? Use Worksheet B to explore what you want out of a graduate program. What would you like a graduate degree to do for you? How will a graduate degree benefit your personal and career goals?

Have you researched the graduate school option in many different ways? Make sure you understand the field you are pursuing and its place in the workforce, and remember that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to pave your career path (so don't listen to what only one person or source tells you). Triangulating information from many sources—people, websites, other media—will allow you to obtain a more nuanced understanding of various possibilities and how your choice may affect your life and personal goals. Use Worksheet C to assess your research options.

Are you using graduate school to postpone making a career decision? If so, don't! 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.*

Are you simply perceiving graduate school as the automatic "next step"? If you do, you may not be prepared for the focused direction that graduate school requires. 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.

Invest some time carefully thinking about each of these questions and then talk with your adviser and other faculty members about your ideas and plans. Advisers at the Center for Careers, Life, and Service would also be happy to discuss your post-Grinnell plans with you at any time. In short, **make an intentional choice to go to graduate school because you are working toward a concrete goal**. Graduate or professional study can be a worthwhile and rewarding life and career additive; it should not be a disappointing employment alternative.

WORKSHEET A: Evaluating Career and Life Values, Interests, and Priorities

What are your values, interests, and priorities for your career and life?

1. What do I want in my lifetime?

2. What is important to me?

3. What kinds of work and experiences do I find meaningful?

4. What tools and skills do I already have? Do I need to enlarge or expand these tools and skills in order to have a meaningful life?

WORKSHEET B: Knowing One's Purpose and Goal for Attending Graduate School

Do you have a clear purpose and goal for attending graduate school?

1. What are my long- and short-term goals?

2. What skills and knowledge are necessary for me to achieve these goals?

3. How much interest do I have in graduate study?

4. What would be the benefits of *not* going to graduate school?

5. What will a graduate degree do for me personally?

6. How will a graduate degree add to my career direction?

WORKSHEET C: Seeking Multiple Perspectives on Graduate School

Have you researched the graduate school option in many different ways?

1. What are the different kinds of programs in my field, and which will most benefit my goals?

2. What information do I have available? How do I feel about the information presented?

3. What mentors do I have available (e.g., faculty, family, friends, professionals)? How do I feel about their perspectives and advice?

4. With whom could I conduct an informational interview to build my understanding of graduate or professional programs? What can I ask so I can further evaluate my options?

5. What are the time and money investments to take on a graduate or professional degree? How will those affect me? What about opportunity costs—the costs of making one choice over another?

6. Do I see myself succeeding in a graduate or professional program?

7. What can I do *without* a graduate or professional degree?

Deciding When to Attend

Should you go into a graduate program immediately after graduation from Grinnell, or wait a year or more? Many students don't want to lose the momentum of being in "school mode," but others benefit from a break or need additional time to clarify their professional goals. Some professional graduate programs—for example, those in business—prefer to receive applications from individuals with at least a couple years of full-time work experience. The best advice is to evaluate all factors in your life when determining the ideal time to begin graduate study.

In conjunction with your responses on the "Deciding if Graduate School Is Right for You" worksheets (Worksheets A through C), fill out the pro/con table below. If you can, take this page to your faculty adviser, alumni, or students currently enrolled in programs of interest in order to reflect on your ideas and hear other perspectives.

Immediately after Graduation	
Pros	Cons

Another Time	
Pros	Cons

If you plan to pursue graduate study not immediately after graduation but within three to five years, you may want to take the appropriate standardized entrance examinations during your senior year (or shortly thereafter). Scores on most standardized tests are generally reportable for three to five years—though some schools or programs may want scores from exams taken within an even more recent timeframe. (See "Graduate Admission Exams" for further information.)

Resources to Learn More

Preparing for graduate or professional school involves a lot of information-gathering. Use multiple resources and get as many perspectives as you can! Diversifying your research can help "reality-check" what you learn about programs and degrees.

Comprehensive Online Guides include the following:

Career Insider (Vault) – login through PioneerLink; then choose the "Education" tab
Graduate School Guide (www.graduateguide.com)
Peterson's Graduate Programs Directory (www.petersons.com)
Online Master's Programs (http://www.onlinemastersprograms.org)

Field-Specific Guides include the following:

Law School Admission Council (LSAC) (www.lsac.org) – the official LSAT registration source. The LSAC also provides free sample Law School Admissions Tests (LSATs); access to the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS), Candidate Referral Service (CRS), Law School Forums, and Minorities Interested in Legal Education (MILE) Program; and additional test-preparation resources.

MBA Explorer (www.mba.com) – the official GMAT website, offering test information, MBA-program search tools, financing resources, a recruiting calendar, advice for those considering MBA programs, and more.

Medical School Admission Requirements (www.aamc.org) – 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. Updated annually, a hard copy of this guide is available in the CLS Library—although future versions will be available only online.

Explore Health Careers (http://explorehealthcareers.org/) – a comprehensive portal of information about all the health professions, including educational requirements, accredited programs, and job prospects

Rankings, as a general rule, should not be taken *too* seriously; they are essentially markers of prestige. Linda Abraham, president of Accepted.com (an admissions consulting firm in Los Angeles), said that rankings are immaterial: "They are collections of data and surveys. They are opinions." Still, what people think—particularly people who are going to be reading your résumés and curricula vitae (CVs)—is important. Some sites with aggregate rankings include:

Bloomberg Businessweek (www.businessweek.com/bschools/rankings/) focuses, as you might expect, on business schools.

PhDs.org (www.phds.org) is not comprehensive but offers an interactive way to rank master's and doctoral programs on the basis of research productivity, student outcomes, student resources, diversity, National Research Council data, and other criteria. (However, ranking is usually not a very helpful criterion for selecting a PhD program—your selection will be based on the particulars of your research interest.)

U.S. News & World Report (www.usnews.com/education) publishes some of the most visible rankings for graduate programs, by category (law, medicine, education, business, and more). The CLS Library has current print copies; a condensed version is all you will see online (for free).

Faculty and alumni are a valuable resource: they can breathe life into the numerical rankings assigned to various schools and programs. So discuss your plans with alumni and faculty! Ask which institutions would be most appropriate for meeting your goals. Often, for example, a top program in a given field may be at an institution you would not intuitively think of yourself. Finally, always remember that the advice and rankings provided by others can be useful, but you need to establish your own personal criteria to compare graduate schools.

Exploring Informational Interviews

An **informational interview** is a brief (20–45-minute) meeting with an individual in your field or graduate program of interest. This meeting is not an actual job or graduate school interview; the purpose is not to be offered a job or admission to a particular program. Rather, it is more like a reconnaissance mission with a secondary goal of establishing a personal connection with a networked individual who is knowledgeable about your desired career or field. The individual may be someone in the specific type of job or graduate program you'd like to know more about, and the person could even be someone involved in a particular program of interest (as a current student, faculty member, or alumnus). Informational interviews are designed:

- To help you explore careers or graduate programs and clarify your career goals
- To help you learn what kinds of degrees, skills, or training are required for certain careers
- To discover assistantship, fellowship, or internship opportunities that are not advertised
- To expand your professional network
- To build confidence for your graduate school essays or interviews
- To access the most up-to-date career or graduate program information
- To allow you to learn from an insider about the future directions of a field
- To help you identify your professional strengths and weaknesses

Make sure that the potential interviewee knows from the start that you, as interviewer, are seeking to gather information, not ask for a job or a spot in a program.

Arranging an informational interview

Use your personal or professional network—or contact the Center for Careers, Life, and Service—to identify someone with knowledge about a particular profession or graduate program. Then, send a brief e-mail (or letter, if necessary) to this person wherein you introduce yourself and ask for an informational interview. For example:

> Dear Dr. Coverdale:
>
> My name is Steve Gump, and I'm a junior at Grinnell College, where I'm double-majoring in biology and psychology. I'm currently planning to apply to medical school and would be very interested to learn more about your career as a psychiatrist and your recommendations for a productive way to spend the summer between my junior and senior years. (Your colleague Dr. Will Fleming, a family friend, provided me with your e-mail address.)
>
> I would greatly appreciate if you could spare about 30 minutes in the next few weeks to talk with me over the phone. My contact information—plus a link to my blog, where you can see my current résumé—is at the foot of this message. I look forward to hearing from you soon.
>
> With best wishes,
>
> Steve Gump
> [*contact information*]

This message…

- Is polite, professional, and brief (just 130 words)
- Clearly explains what's being sought (an informational interview, though without calling it such)
- Offers a personal connection (messages without them are easier to ignore)
- Offers background on the requester and points to a place where the recipient can learn more

Preparation for an informational interview

Although informational interviews are for informational purposes, you should try to make the best impression possible. If you are connecting over the phone, strive to be as personable and professional as you can. If you are meeting in person, you will additionally be on display: make sure you look professional and act professionally. (If you're uncertain how to dress or how to sit or how to shake hands or the like, remember that we at the Center for Careers, Life, and Service are here to help.) You are the interviewer: Come prepared with questions that demonstrate you have given thought to the conversation and also that you respect your interviewee's time. Take notes. If the meeting seems to go well, ask if you may use your interviewee as a reference in the future.

Remember, too, that people want to help. No matter how famous and successful your interviewee, you should not be intimidated. In general, people love to talk about themselves; they are proud of their work and love to talk about it, as well; and they feel good when they help other people.

After your interview

Follow up with a thank-you note (or e-mail). The best thank-you messages are personalized, not generic. For example:

> Dear Dr. Coverdale:
>
> Many thanks for taking the time to talk with me yesterday afternoon about your career and experiences as a psychiatrist. I'm excited that you further reinforced my budding interest in neuropsychiatry, since, as you pointed out, it certainly combines my interests in biology and builds on the lab work I'm undertaking this semester with Professor Lindgren. And I truly appreciate your introduction to Dr. Rosenfeld; I'll be contacting him later this fall.
>
> I'll check in with you next year when I'm working on a short list of medical schools. I appreciate your offer of talking with me again to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of particular programs.
>
> With best wishes,
>
> Steve
> [*contact information*]

If you plan to use the interviewee as a reference in the future, make sure to keep him or her apprised of your experiences. E-mail or professional social networking sites (such as LinkedIn) are easy ways to keep in touch.

Then, of course, repeat the process with any new contacts to whom you have been introduced. Often the individuals you end up meeting later are an incredibly valuable aspect of carrying out informational interviews. Your interviewee will say: "I know someone you should talk to," and give contact information. When you contact this new individual, then, you have a personal connection through your mutual acquaintance. You'll find that inquiries that call upon connections (that you're both Grinnellians, for example) or mutual acquaintances (you were recommended to contact this person by so-and-so, whom this person knows) are much more likely to garner positive responses for conversations—and more.

Evaluating Graduate Schools

As with undergraduate institutions, graduate institutions and academic departments can vary greatly in one or more of the following factors: programs available, size, location, cost, facilities, faculty interests, reputation, and degree requirements. Matching your own abilities and personal desires against the varying factors is an important task in selecting the institutions to which you wish to apply. Find answers to your queries at institutional websites (you may have to dig around a bit); or don't be shy about e-mailing admissions representatives. Take the following factors and questions into consideration as you evaluate various programs:

Admissions: What are the admissions requirements? Do you have the test scores, courses, research background, and experience required for the program? What types of students are attracted to the program? Would you be a competitive applicant?

Programs and facilities: Do opportunities exist for specialization in areas of your own interest? Do the research facilities (laboratories, libraries, collections) suit your needs?

Faculty: Who are they? Are people doing the type of research in which you are interested? What have they published recently? Have you considered contacting any faculty members in the department? Can you identify some potential mentors to advise you in your graduate work?

Geographic location and size: The climate, the political and social vibe of an institution, and its setting (whether urban or in a smaller community) are all worth considering. How large is the institution and the academic department? The number of students, and particularly the student-to-faculty ratio, will affect the amount of individual attention you receive. The vast majority of graduate programs are in locales larger than Grinnell. Can you imagine yourself living there for the on-campus portion of your studies?

Philosophy: Is an effort made to graduate students efficiently? (How can you tell? Look for the average length of time spent in the program. If this datum is not posted on the departmental website, feel free to contact the coordinator of your program to ask.) Are graduate students given adequate mentoring and support? How does the program approach your area(s) of interest? Some institutions may approach the subject matter theoretically, where others may be more pragmatic in their approach.

Residence and other degree requirements: How much time must you spend taking courses at a particular institution in order to earn your advanced degree? (Note that *residence* is different from *residency*; on the latter, see "Financial aid," below.) Is a thesis or comprehensive examination required at the master's level?

Available experience: What opportunities exist for teaching, research, or assistantships? How competitive is the application procedure? What sort of support is offered for students who seek external grants and fellowships? Does the institution or your target program participate in any formal exchange programs?

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 academic departments you are considering. What are alumni of those programs 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 with an applicant's merits. Graduate aid is often based on merit, not need. You therefore want your application to be competitive. And if you are at a public university, residency requirements determine whether you pay in-state tuition. (Many state universities are required to give preference to in-state applicants.)

Financing Graduate or Professional School

Higher education is expensive—and the more specialized the education, the more expensive it becomes (although as a student you may not incur those costs directly). Taking out loans is one option, but this is contingent on your own circumstances and the type of program to which you are considering applying. If you're applying to a professional program that is likely to make you highly employable, loans can be a wise choice. Don't assume that you can't afford graduate or professional school, even if you don't want to take out loans, because financial support is available from several sources: universities, government sources, banks, and private foundations. Make note of early deadlines when you are investigating target schools and programs. You may 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 (FSS) to the American College Testing Program. Some graduate schools will accept any of the three; others require one specifically. Types of financial aid available for graduate study are somewhat different from aid you may have received as an undergraduate. General types of financial aid include:

Fellowships: At the graduate level, the equivalent of a scholarship is a fellowship. Fellowships are usually monetary awards given on the basis of scholastic achievement. Be warned: Fellowships may count as taxable "unearned" income. Specific programs and universities have their own fellowships, which you can search for on departmental and institutional websites or find by contacting the schools' financial aid offices. The federal government also supports some fellowship programs that are largely portable (that is, you can use the awards at any qualifying institution). *Pros*: "free" money; you're essentially being paid to focus on your academic pursuits. *Cons*: may be taxed; you're missing out on teaching and research experience.

Assistantships: Teaching or research assistantships are often available through academic departments or programs of study. Assistantships may involve working 10 to 20 hours per week in exchange for a stipend and 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 or fees. Note also that assistantships are often, but not always, processed for entire academic years—meaning that even if you're finished with all requirements for the degree at the end of the fall term, you likely won't be able to graduate early. *Pros*: tuition remission; experience. *Cons*: the stipends are low, and the hours worked can be long.

Resident assistantships: Some institutions have programs in which graduate students earn a stipend plus room and board (or both) by working as assistants in undergraduate residence halls. If you cannot find information on such opportunities—and your program is housed on a residential campus with undergraduates—feel free to contact the school's director of residence life to inquire.

Long-term educational loans: Graduate students may be eligible for a variety of loan programs. Representatives of the institution's financial aid office should be able to explain these programs to you.

College work-study programs: Under these programs, eligible graduate students are provided part-time employment opportunities. Financial aid offices generally administer these programs, and their representatives can explain application procedures in detail.

Other employment: University communities often provide good opportunities for part-time work involving skills or interests that may or may not be related to your academic goals. Keep your eyes open, and don't be afraid to ask around for leads or contacts.

In short, financial support of graduate education may vary widely from institution to institution. Begin the process early to identify potential funding sources. Also, check to see if specialized financial support exists for your particular field.

Applying to Graduate School

Formal applications vary from one institution to the next, but most applications usually consist of the following components:

- An application (and application fee)
- Graduate admissions test scores
- Official transcripts
- A separate financial aid application
- An application essay or personal statement
- Letters of recommendation
- Résumé or curriculum vitae (CV)
- Academic writing sample (occasionally)

Show your depth! Candidates who show strength in a combination of the requirements—academic preparation (including GPA), test scores, experience, degree-related goals, and recommendations—have the best chance for selection.

Understand the requirements & be a great record-keeper

Keep detailed records noting admission requirements and application deadlines. Note that law schools and most health-professions programs (medical school, veterinary school, etc.) have centralized application procedures; if applicable, familiarize yourself with these systems and their timelines as early as possible.

Create "The Spreadsheet." The Spreadsheet will list all the programs to which you want to apply, their deadlines, and every component their applications require. Laying out this information will allow you to prioritize your work and will let you see overlap between applications (e.g. essays that can be used for more than one program).

Keep track of nonrefundable application fees (typically $40–$120 per application); they may limit the number of schools to which you apply. *Note, however, that fee waivers are often available.*

Don't wait until the last minute to apply. If admissions decisions are made on a rolling basis (that is, qualified applicants are accepted as they apply), you should apply at the earliest possible date for the best chance of admission. Early application is also an advantage if you are applying for financial aid.

Follow up with each program to make sure your application is complete. Leave time to chase down a letter of recommendation or to follow up on a request for additional information, if needed.

Learn about Transcript Options

All transcripts must be "official." Typically, they need to be sent to admission offices directly from the Office of the Registrar. If you are required to submit all of your supporting documentation together (transcripts, letters of recommendation, and other addenda), Grinnell allows you to order a copy of your transcript and then choose "Hold for Pickup." When you pick it up, you can request that it be placed in an envelope, which will then be sealed and signed across the back flap. Such transcripts are considered "official" (provided you keep them sealed).

Résumé or curriculum vitae (CV)?

Many graduate school applications require either a curriculum vitae (CV) or a résumé. A résumé is typically only one or two pages and focuses on work and volunteer experience. A CV is longer and focuses on academic activities and achievements, research, publications, and other relevant information. You want graduate schools to have as complete an image of you as possible, and a CV can include information that might not fit in other sections of the application. *Once you have put together your résumé or CV, we encourage you to have someone at the CLS review it for content and formatting.*

Letters of recommendation

Most institutions request that you submit between two and four letters of recommendation as part of your application. (Note that medical schools are an exception; Grinnell prepares committee letters for its applicants.) You should obtain recommendations from people who are qualified to evaluate your academic or work potential and performance based on personal observation. Faculty members and supervisors from work are natural choices; the best—as in most illuminating—letters of recommendation can be written by people who know you and your abilities and character traits well (regardless of whether the letter-writers are "famous"). Keep the following factors in mind:

Nature of relationship: Your referees need to know you well enough so that they can make good assessments of your academic and work abilities. You might find it worthwhile to have a meeting with potential referees before they write your letters of recommendation. Do not hesitate to ask potential referees if they feel they know you well enough to write a strong recommendation.

Additional materials: At some point, make sure to talk with your referees about your reasons for applying to graduate or professional school. Give (or e-mail) your referees copies of your résumé (or CV), material about the programs, and recommendation forms (if required) or suggestions for areas to highlight in their letters. If hard-copy letters are to be submitted (rare these days), provide your referees with stamped, addressed envelopes. Even if you're not finished with your personal statement, give a copy to your referees in advance. Ideally, all of the pieces of your application will fit together and complement each other; your referees can tailor their letters to your needs only if they know what the rest of your application will look like.

Communication: Send thank-you notes to those who assisted you in your application process. (Yes, sending them via e-mail is fine—just make sure to be sincere.) Then, once you've been accepted and have decided what you'll be doing, let your referees know—and thank them once again for their involvement in helping to make your postgraduate plans.

The application essay

Most institutions will ask that you submit an essay with your application—often referred to as a "statement of purpose" or "personal statement"—in addition to basic data requested on the application form itself. Personal statements give you the opportunity to supplement the standard application materials with your own goals and objectives with respect to the particular programs to which you're applying. Typically, programs will offer suggestions on items to consider, such as your reasons for applying in relation to experiences, personal goals, and professional expectations. *Don't overlook the value of the personal statement!* In most cases (with the major exception of applications

to medical schools), your personal statement will be your only chance to shine as an individual: it stands in for the interview. The best personal statements are, when possible, tailored to individual schools. After reading your statement, you want the readers to understand your goals—and how going to their particular program is the next logical step in achieving them. **In general, a chronological or developmental approach is not effective. Better is to BLUF: present the Bottom Line Up Front.** Clearly state your goal at the beginning of your essay, and connect everything you write back to that goal. Your statement should demonstrate:

- A clear long-term career goal, supported by the short-term goal of the degree or certification for which you are applying
- Preparation—indicated by *concrete details* about your experience and education—for graduate-level work
- Your specific areas of interest and, in the case of research-oriented degrees (PhD, academic master's programs), a research plan
- Specific reasons why the program you are applying to—yes, your statement should be tailored for each program!—is an excellent fit for your interests and goals
- Commitment to your chosen path and the maturity needed to complete the degree

Follow length guidelines carefully; do *not* go over a statement maximum, but remember that brevity is valued. Admissions committees appreciate applicants who can be concise and to the point.

Be consistent with the other material in your application, but do not simply repeat material that's presented elsewhere. The personal statement is your opportunity to go into greater depth about experiences you have had that have brought you to this point in your life. You cannot—and should not—mention everything that's on your résumé or CV in your personal statement: be selective. Don't just describe what you did. Rather, write about how various activities or experiences affected you or made you feel: What did you *learn* when you did something? How did something *change* you as a person?

In your statement, beware of "empty" adjectives, such as…

admirable	engaging	incredible	rigorous
agreeable	engrossing	inspiring	riveting
amazing	enjoyable	interesting	stimulating
appealing	excellent	intriguing	stressful
awesome	exciting	marvelous	surprising
captivating	extraordinary	pleasing	thrilling
challenging	eye-opening	powerful	transformative
delightful	fabulous	remarkable	tremendous
difficult	fascinating	rewarding	wonderful

If you describe an activity with words like these, make sure that you also state *why* you found it to be interesting or inspiring or challenging. Include specific, concrete examples. Remember: Something that's interesting or inspiring or challenging to you might not be the same to the people reading your application. It's your responsibility to *show* the readers why something was interesting or inspiring or challenging to you.

USELESS SENTENCE = "The experience was remarkable, and I am thankful I was able to do it."

BETTER = "The experience was remarkable because I witnessed the day-to-day pressures facing teachers who work in underfunded urban school settings."

EVEN BETTER (*avoids the empty adjective altogether*) = "Through this experience, I witnessed the day-to-day pressures facing teachers who work in underfunded urban school settings."

Have other people read over your statement! Don't wait until the last minute to write this essay: it is an important piece of your applications and you have *complete* control over its contents. Plan plenty of time to revise, revise, and revise some more. One law school admissions dean, in fact, has said that, because you have almost unlimited time to write your personal statements, the end results can be just as reflective of your time-management skills as they are of your writing skills and your discernment skills.

And here are a few more hints:

1. Remember that different types of programs have **different expectations** in the statements of purpose you'll write for them. For Ph.D. programs in the sciences, for example, remember that your readers will be scientists (the faculty members in the program to which you're applying). It's important that you write like a scientist. Your readers will care more about your research interests than about your non-scientific background and experiences, so focus on research. They want to be able to imagine you as a future colleague and as a contributor to your scientific field. (The point of this example applies to any practitioner-based field as well. For example, if you're applying to programs in social work, education, criminal justice, or nursing, remember that your readers will be attuned to characteristics and attitudes of professionals in the "helping" professions—and they'll be looking for such markers in your statement.)

2. You can often address the key question in a personal-statement prompt by writing something akin to: "I'm applying to the M.S.W. program at the University of Washington because I'm interested in helping families who are experiencing domestic conflicts." But notice how one-dimensional that information is: So you're an applicant who's interested in helping families who are experiencing domestic conflicts. So what? Perhaps several other applicants are also interested in the same thing. You want to **differentiate and distinguish yourself** from them, so you should add an additional layer of explanation: you should add a "because" clause to your interests. "I'm interested in helping ameliorate domestic conflicts because. . . ." Including that sort of commentary in your personal statements will help them rise to the top. The readers will actually be getting to know you as a person—to know what makes you tick. There's of course no right or wrong explanation as to why you're interested in any topic; but it's always good to provide one.

3. Avoid being declarative in your statements that describe the offerings or special characteristics of the programs to which you're applying. Yes, it's great that you've done your homework about the programs; but the readers will already know these things about their programs. Instead, incorporate your knowledge of the program in a dependent clause that hooks itself onto a phrase that tells the reader something about *you*—something he or she would otherwise not know (while simultaneously and eloquently indicating that you've done your homework about the program).

   BAD = "The M.P.H. program at Northwestern would allow me to select two emphasis areas within a given concentration." (*Too obvious. The readers already know this fact.*)

   BETTER = "Because the M.P.H. program at Northwestern would allow me to select two emphasis areas within a given concentration, I would. . . ." (*You can demonstrate that you know details about the program while simultaneously telling the readers something captivating about yourself.*)

Graduate Admission Exams

Most graduate and professional schools require that you take one or more standardized examinations to be considered for admission. Generally, you are better off if you take the appropriate standardized test early in your application process, potentially up to a year (or more) in advance of your desired entry date. For example, if you wish to enter medical school during the fall after graduation, the MCAT is best taken during the spring of your third year. But be aware that scores have a shelf life: scores may generally be submitted to programs within three to five years of the original exam date. So, if you're planning to attend graduate school later but want to take the exam while you're still in "academic" mode, make sure to research how long the scores will be valid—and then plan to apply to graduate school within that window (unless you want to retake the exam at a later date). As for taking the tests multiple times, be aware that, for some tests, all of your scores during the window of validity will be reported. Schools may use the average score (instead of looking only at the highest).

Here are some of the commonly required examinations. Unless otherwise noted, the tests are computerized and offered at sites in both the Des Moines and Iowa City areas.

GRE (www.ets.org): The Graduate Record Examination is the most commonly required exam for graduate programs. The GRE General Test is designed to measure verbal and quantitative skills as well as analytical writing ability, and is offered year-round. The GRE Subject Test is a separate examination in one of seven fields of study and may be required in addition to the general test (particularly for PhD programs); make sure to investigate thoroughly. Subject Tests are offered in September, October, and April.

GMAT (www.mba.com): The Graduate Management Admission Test is generally a requirement for students planning to attend management and business schools, although many schools also accept the GRE. Offered year-round.

LSAT (www.lsac.org): The Law School Admission Test is a requirement for admission to law school. Interested students should also fulfill requirements of the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS). Offered four times per year (at the University of Iowa): once during the spring term, once in the summer, and twice during the fall term. (Also offered in Ankeny at Des Moines Area Community College *except* at the summer test date.) The LSAT is the only paper-and-pencil exam on this page.

MCAT (www.aamc.org): The Medical College Admission Test is taken by applicants to medical schools (and is accepted, in lieu of the GRE, by College Application Service (AMCAS). Approximately two dozen administrations of the test are offered between January and September. (Note, however, there are no 2015 test dates prior to April, following some veterinary schools). Interested students should also fulfill requirements of the American Medical a revision of the exam.)

DAT (www.ada.org): The Dental Admission Test is a requirement for admission to most dental schools. Administered year-round.

PCAT (www.pcatweb.info): The Pharmacy College Admission Test is a requirement for admission to most pharmacy schools. Offered in January, July, and September. Some pharmacy schools accept the GRE.

MAT (www.milleranalogies.com): The Miller Analogies Test is a high-level mental ability test accepted by several graduate school programs, although its popularity seems to be waning (and you're probably better off taking the GRE). Administered throughout the year at Drake University in Des Moines.

Mapping a General Timetable for Graduate School Prep

It's never too early to start thinking about ways you can prepare yourself for further higher education. Take a look at the timetable below, see where you fit, and make sure not to panic! Advisers at the CLS are always happy to meet with you to consider your options and your future. *Note that the dates suggested below are guidelines only; they are based on typical programs with deadlines in December or January of your fourth year. Some programs may have earlier, later, rolling, or spring application deadlines. Take these deadlines into consideration when planning your own timetable.*

During Your First Year

- Visit the CLS to learn about our services
- Start your résumé (the CLS can help)
- Assess your interests, abilities, personality, and values
- Identify possible majors, career fields, and professional associations
- Meet with a CLS adviser to learn how to find out more about careers, make decisions, and set goals
- Use the CLS library to aid in your career research
- Take a variety of classes in areas that interest you to explore possible majors
- Identify and join student organizations or volunteer activities that will provide leadership opportunities, enable you to explore interests, and build skills
- Obtain relevant work experiences through GRINNELLINK internships, volunteer activities, part-time jobs, and summer jobs
- Attend the GRINNELLINK Reception each semester to meet alumni in various fields
- Develop good time-management, goal-setting, and study habits; establish a strong GPA

During Your Second Year

- Continue first-year activities
- Cultivate relationships with contacts in your field of study
- Attend CLS presentations to learn more about résumé writing, interviewing, and internships
- Conduct research and solicit information from professionals and upper-class students to finalize your choice of undergraduate major
- Meet with a CLS adviser to develop short- and long-term goals; learn where recent graduates in your areas of interest are working or studying
- Develop and enhance your skills through participating in student organizations, volunteer opportunities, part-time employment, and GRINNELLINK internships or grant program internships
- Build skills in areas of importance to employers, including oral and written communication, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, and technology and social networking
- Update and revise your résumé
- Explore study abroad, Grinnell-in-Washington, and Grinnell-in-London programs

During Your Third Year

- Browse resources and guides to graduate programs
- Attend CLS-sponsored information sessions by visiting graduate programs
- Contact admissions offices and programs to request information (if answers to your queries and concerns cannot easily be found online)
- Investigate test requirements, dates, locations; determine application requirements and deadlines
- Outline or update your résumé or CV, and brainstorm ideas for inclusion in your application essay
- Consult with advisers, faculty members, and Grinnell alumni
- Prepare for standardized exams: use online practice tests and CLS resources
- Investigate national scholarships and determine financial needs
- Take standardized exams
- Begin narrowing down your list of target schools and programs
- Considering the requirements of your target schools and programs, prepare full drafts of your résumé (or CV) and application essay

During Your Fourth Year

Sep–Oct

- Take standardized exams (if you have not yet)
- Continue refining your application documents (résumé, CV, personal statement, etc.)
- Finalize your list of schools to apply to, and make note of all deadlines on your personal calendar
- Use the CLS and other resources (including the Writing Lab) to review your application materials
- Research financial aid sources, fellowships, and assistantships
- Request recommendations *early* from faculty members
- Apply for fellowships, grants, and assistantships

Nov–Dec

- Order official transcripts from the Office of the Registrar; ask the Registrar to send a transcript with your fall term grades in time to meet the application deadlines
- Finalize your personal statement
- Submit your applications: Even if deadlines are later, early application is better

Dec–Feb

- If you haven't received confirmation already, contact schools *before* their deadlines to make sure your applications are complete
- 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—so file your tax return well before the April deadline)

Mar–Apr

- Discuss acceptances, rejections, and other career options with faculty members or CLS advisers
- Contact graduate program representatives with your decisions
- If you would like to defer enrollment for one or two years, contact your graduate department concerning that possibility (be aware that not all programs will allow this)
- If rejected, contact the school and discuss how to improve your application if you re-apply
- Send thank-you notes to people who wrote your recommendations or assisted you in the process

Pre-Health at Grinnell: The Basics

Academic preparation for pre-health professional programs

In keeping with the philosophy of a liberal arts education and Grinnell's open curriculum, there is no specific "pre-health" track at Grinnell; however, if you are interested in attending professional school for one of the health professions you can be strategic about your course selections. Many students who ultimately apply to medical school—or to veterinary school, dental school, physicians' assistant (P.A.) programs, master's of public health (M.P.H.) programs, and the like—major in biology, chemistry, or biological chemistry, but the choice of major is entirely yours. Again: *A major in science is not required for admission to medical, veterinary, or dental school*. If you are planning to apply to one of these programs so you can matriculate the fall after you graduate from Grinnell, however, you should get started in your first semester by taking either BIO 150 or CHM 129 (or possibly CHM 210 if you have an AP chemistry score of 4 or 5).

Health professional program prerequisites

These are the *minimum* course requirements for many health care professional schools. Some schools have additional requirements and may be making more changes in the near future.

- **Biology**: 1 year (BIO 251, 252) (*note that BIO 150 is a prerequisite for BIO 251*);
- **Chemistry**: 2 years (CHM 129, 210, 221, 222);
- **English**: 1 year (your tutorial counts for one semester; second semester should stress literature);
- **Physics**: 1 year (PHY 131, 132); and
- **Calculus I** (calculus is not required for admission to most medical schools; however, MAT 131 [Calculus I] is required for physics at Grinnell, and MAT 133 [Calculus II] is recommended).

Prerequisites for some programs may need to be taken outside of Grinnell. For instance, Occupational Therapy programs often require anatomy, which is not offered here. Look for opportunities to take such classes at nearby institutions, online, or at an institution close to your home during summer breaks.

Timing of standardized tests

For matriculation in medical school in the fall following graduation from Grinnell, the **Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)** should be taken in the **spring of your third year**. All of the material covered in required courses is subject to examination on the MCAT. Therefore, all of the requirements listed above should be completed by the end of your third year. For incoming students without any AP credits, you'll be taking, on average, two courses in the science division per semester. As of 2015, the MCAT also includes material on sociology, psychology, and other behavioral sciences; coursework in the social sciences will help you on this portion of the test. Grinnell College subsidizes participation in an online MCAT-preparation course for both current students and alumni. Contact the CLS for details (e-mail career@grinnell.edu).

Dental school requires the Dental Admission Test (DAT); most veterinary schools require the GRE but some accept the MCAT. For other health care fields, check program requirements carefully. See "Graduate Admission Exams" for further information.

Learning more

First, join the listserv of the **Health Professions Advisory Committee** (HPAC) at Grinnell (see www.grinnell.edu/about/committees/hpac for details). The HPAC coordinates activities involving the preparation for careers in the health professions, and its members serve as advisers for students who are planning careers in any health care field. The committee also gathers information for the evaluation of students and is responsible for the preparation of committee letters of recommendation. Please feel free to contact any member of the HPAC (see list at the above URL) or the pre-health adviser at the CLS with questions you may have about preparing for a career in one of the health professions.

Representatives of several medical and health-professions schools typically visit Grinnell throughout the academic year. Visiting with admissions officers in person—even if they represent schools to which you are not planning to apply—is always a good way to learn what such schools are *really* looking for in their applicants. Watch for announcements of such visits from the CLS and HPAC.

Preparing beyond the classroom

Keep in mind the various experiences that health care professional programs look for in ideal applicants: **Strong academic ability** (measured by GPA and MCAT scores); **research experience**; **health-related experience** (such as job shadowing of physicians); and **volunteer/service experience** that involves working with diverse populations. Some programs will place more importance on research experience than others. *If you need assistance finding job-shadowing or volunteer opportunities, feel free to contact the CLS at any time. These experiences are* very *important to your applications; you cannot expect that your high GPA and competitive test scores alone will result in offers of admission.*

According to Dr. Jim Phillips, senior associate dean and professor of pediatrics at Baylor Medical School, admissions boards consider many criteria, with **GPA** and **MCAT scores** being the most influential. In addition to GPA and MCAT scores, the following criteria (in descending order of importance) influence admission to medical school, specifically:

1. **Statement of purpose**
2. **Letters of recommendation**
3. **Interview**
4. **Extracurricular activities** (including volunteer activities)
5. **Health-related experiences** (including job shadowing) or other life experiences
6. **Academic progression** (i.e., have you shown improvement during your career as a student?)

Mapping a General Timetable for Medical School

The average age of matriculants to medical school is around 25 years old—so, clearly, not everyone goes directly to medical school after finishing his or her undergraduate degree. If your goal is to do so, keep the following timeline in mind. A timeline for other doctoral-level health programs will be similar.

During Your First Two Years and the Fall of Your Third Year

- Join the **HPAC listserv** and attend the required HPAC presentations for potential pre-med students.
- Take the general medical school prerequisites.
- Become involved with **volunteer** and **extracurricular** (leadership) activities. (Deep involvement in a limited number of activities is more meaningful than superficial involvement in a lot of activities.)
- Begin **shadowing healthcare professionals** and learning more about the health profession.
- Participate in **undergraduate research**.
- Strategically evaluate **study-abroad opportunities** (participating, for example, in a summer or short-term session, perhaps one with a medical theme).
- Get to know **faculty members** well; share your aspirations with them.
- Do well in your **academic work**.
- Don't get overwhelmed: Take advantage of the CLS, HPAC and SHOT (Students on Health-Oriented Tracks) presentations and workshops, the Science Learning Center, the Math Lab, the Writing Lab, Student Health and Counseling Services, and other services on campus to help you reach your goals.

During the Spring and Summer of Your Third Year

- Study for and take the **MCAT**, if applicable; most Grinnellians (intending to go directly on to medical school) take the MCAT on one of the test dates in April through July. (Note that your MCAT scores are valid for a three-year period.)
- Visit and familiarize yourself with the "Medical School Application Forms and Timetable" information on the HPAC website (see www.grinnell.edu/about/committees/hpac/resources). Here you will find detailed instructions—and important deadlines—regarding forms you need to complete in order for your **committee letters of recommendation** to be prepared.
- Aim to **apply as early as possible** to your medical schools of choice. You should begin preparing your statements of purpose, for example, in the late spring or early summer. *If you'd like help assessing viable medical schools to which you should apply, consult with the pre-med adviser at the CLS.*
- Fill out your **AMCAS primary application** online. AMCAS will send your application to the schools you indicate. (Grinnellians usually apply to between six and ten schools.) As part of this process, you will need to request from the Grinnell Registrar that **official transcripts** be sent from the college. You will also indicate that the college will be submitting a committee letter on your behalf.

During the Fall of Your Fourth Year

- Complete **secondary applications** for medical schools that wish to pursue further action on your application. (You will receive these applications four to six weeks after submitting your primary application to AMCAS.) Once you receive secondary applications, only then do you request that a committee letter be sent from Grinnell.
- Prepare for **interviews** by visiting the CLS for mock interviews.
- Await offers of **admission**, but also think about alternate plans if no acceptances come through. Many applicants to medical school are successful in their second or third round of applications. If you are not accepted, contact medical schools to ask how you can improve your application.

Pre-Law at Grinnell: The Basics

In keeping with the philosophy of a liberal arts education and Grinnell's open curriculum, there is no specific "pre-law" track at Grinnell; however, if you are interested in attending law school you can be strategic about your course selections. The deans of law schools nationwide list the four things an entering student must be able to do to be successful in law school:

1. **read critically**
2. **think analytically**
3. **write well**
4. **speak well**

Each of these skills can be developed in courses across the curriculum. No one major provides better preparation for law school than another. Similarly, no set of courses guarantees admission. You should choose courses with professors who challenge you to read critically, think analytically, and write and speak well. *Common* majors for students who are successful in gaining admission to law schools include philosophy, political science, history, English, and economics, but your primary goal should be to find a major that interests you and motivates you to do well.

Learning more about law school

First, join the **pre-law listserv** at Grinnell by sending an e-mail request to the Center for Careers, Life, and Service at career@grinnell.edu. Then, keep your eyes open for workshops, presentations, recruiting visits, webinars, and other opportunities for learning more about law school and legal professions. No matter what your current level of interest in law is, you can make an appointment to discuss your plans by contacting the CLS at (641) 269-4940.

You might also consider attending one of several free **Law School Forums** that are located in major cities throughout the United States. Each forum offers the opportunity to talk with representatives of Law School Admission Council (LSAC)–member law schools from across the USA; obtain admission materials, catalogs, and financial aid information; view video programs about the law school admission process, legal education and careers, and multicultural perspectives on legal education; and attend information sessions on law school admissions, financing a legal education, and issues of importance to multicultural applicants. Visit the following website to review the LSAC Forum schedule for upcoming event dates: www.lsac.org/jd/choose/forums-and-other-events.asp.

You should also **talk with lawyers or others holding J.D. degrees** about your interests and their careers. If you don't know any, stop by the CLS. We can help you identify Grinnell faculty, staff, and alumni with J.D. degrees who would be happy to serve as resources and informal mentors.

Law school rankings

Be aware that rankings matter *tremendously* in the law school world, much more so than in other fields. Competitiveness of admission increases in direct proportion to higher ranking, as does employment success upon completing the degree. Think carefully about the ranking of schools you apply to, the funding offers you receive from schools you are accepted to, and the employment outcomes for graduates of those programs.

Pre-Law at Grinnell: Law School Admission

Creating a strong application for law school

Law schools use various criteria to determine their admissions decisions. For the most competitive law schools, the quantitative data—your LSAT scores and GPA—are given great weight. Less competitive schools still value the quantitative data but give added weight to other aspects of your application. The typical order of importance for various criteria is as follows:

1. **LSAT scores**
2. **GPA**
3. **Application essay (personal statement)**
4. **Letters of recommendation**
5. **Course of undergraduate study (rigor)**
6. **Extracurricular activities**
7. **Work experience**
8. **Motivation for law school**
9. **Ethnic background**
10. **State of residency**

The personal statement

Remember that you can always have your personal statement drafts critiqued by advisers at the CLS. Beyond the tips already given about the personal statement (see Applying to Graduate School), here are some law school-specific tips (adapted from the National Association of Pre-Law Advisers):

DO. . .

- Be specific, accurate, and truthful.
- Tell the reviewers why you have chosen to pursue a career in law.
- Show the reviewers who you are: this document usually stands in for your interview.
- Ensure your statement supports and is supported by the rest of your application.
- Look beyond "commonplace" extracurricular activities or athletic experience.
- Acknowledge negatives in your file.
- Mention sensitive subjects in an appropriate way (not overly dramatically).

DON'T. . .

- Use the third person.
- Give your statement a title.
- Gush about law school or the role of law in society.
- Be too cynical or come across as a "victim."
- Be too specific about what you want to do with your law degree, unless your experience demonstrates that your intended path is a logical extension of previous experiences.
- Focus too much on another person, even if this person has been influential in your life.
- Simply list the activities and experiences that are already elsewhere in your application.

Preparing for the LSAT

LSAC-member schools require the **LSAT** for all applicants. The LSAT does not test specific knowledge obtained in college classes and thus is intended to give no advantage to test-takers from any particular academic background. Scored sections include one Reading Comprehension session, one Analytical Reasoning section, and two Logical Reasoning sections (plus an additional unscored section from one of the three areas). The exam is offered only four times per year and is best taken in the summer between your third and fourth years (if you plan to go directly to law school). Visit the LSAT Information and Test Dates website: www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/test-dates-deadlines.asp for more information, including upcoming test dates. Practice tests are available at the CLS, and Grinnell College subsidizes participation in an online test-preparation course for qualifying current students and alumni. Contact the CLS for details (e-mail career@grinnell.edu).

Mapping a General Timetable for Law School

Of all Grinnellians who matriculate at law school, nearly two-thirds are alumni—meaning only one-third of all law school applicants go straight from Grinnell to law school. The timetable below presumes you'll be in that minority. The schedule is also based on a typical program with a December/January application deadline—although most schools offer rolling admissions that begin as early as October. Applying as early as you can to law school is always a wise move.

During Your Third Year

- Join the CLS pre-law listserv (if you haven't done so already)
- Establish ties with faculty members who may later write your letters of recommendation
- Attend information sessions by law schools visiting Grinnell
- Register to take the June LSAT and begin preparing for the test

During The Summer between your Third and Fourth Year

- Take the LSAT
- Begin drafting your personal statement
- Construct a résumé to be used with your applications
- Research law schools; prepare a list of places to which you will apply
- Receive LSAT score and meet with the pre-law adviser at the CLS to discuss school options

During Your Fourth Year

Sep–Oct

- Register with the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS)
- Have official transcript(s) sent to LSDAS
- Check LSDAS report for accuracy
- Register for and take the October LSAT if you did not take it in June (or if you need to retake)
- Request letters of recommendation to be sent to LSDAS
- Finalize your personal statement and any supplemental statements; have them reviewed at the Writing Lab, at the CLS, and by several other trusted readers

Nov

- Complete and send applications
- Begin investigating sources of financial aid; obtain applications; submit as early as possible

Dec—Jan

- Check with law schools to ensure your files are complete
- File your financial aid applications
- Have an updated transcript with your fall term grades sent directly to law schools
- Evaluate offers of acceptance and financial aid as soon as they come in, noting that (with the exception of early decision offers or for academic terms beginning in the spring or summer) you will not be required to place a deposit at any particular school prior to April 1
- Send thank-you notes to people who wrote your recommendations or assisted you in the process

Pre-Business at Grinnell: The Basics

Should you go to business school directly from Grinnell?

The **Master of Business Administration** (MBA) degree is a professional degree that integrates leadership, management experiences, and team projects into the classroom environment. People with an MBA are broadly trained and are expected to be highly skilled individuals who can go on to assume key positions in a wide variety of settings (e.g., corporate, healthcare, nonprofit, entrepreneurial, and more).

Experience is a key factor in selection of applicants for most business schools. Although some business schools will accept students directly from undergraduate programs, the more competitive graduate programs in business are typically looking for **two to four years of full-time work experience**. You should read this requirement as indicating two to four years of full-time, *post-Grinnell* work experience. Business schools are willing to consider experience from a range of industries and opportunities (nonprofit, service, entrepreneurial, government, and more). As long as you have developed the **quantitative, analytical, teamwork, leadership, communication**, and other skills business schools seek, you can still be a competitive applicant without "traditional" business experience.

If you decide to attend a school that will accept applicants without at least some full-time work experience, do not expect your degree to have that much cachet. The best-paying jobs for MBA graduates require *both* work history and the degree—not simply the degree. In fact, with an MBA in hand, you're actually at a *disadvantage* when applying for entry-level positions. So, do not underestimate the value of work experience before applying to and enrolling in business school.

Determining the best fit

Applicants often place more emphasis on which schools might accept them than focusing on which schools are best for them based on their interests and goals. Schools vary in curricula, specialty areas, teaching methodologies, and overall atmosphere. You should consider these and other factors before you begin the application process. Check out this affiliated website of the Graduate Management Admissions Council (www.mba.com) to explore various programs. Among postgraduate degrees, MBA degrees are among the most flexible. Individual schools often deliver their curricula through a number of channels (full time, part time, remotely, hybrid, etc.); you have many options to weigh in evaluating the best fit for your situation and needs.

The application timeline

Many schools have multiple rounds of applications, with final deadlines (for fall matriculants) typically falling in early spring. It's best to apply early since many admissions decisions will be made before the official deadlines. Applications for fall matriculation may be reviewed as early as October and November—but make sure to read each school's information regarding deadlines and admissions procedures.

Pre-Business at Grinnell: The Application

Bridge programs

Business "bridge programs" are offered by several prestigious business schools to prepare college students for graduate-level work in business. Participating in such programs can be especially useful for students at liberal arts colleges who believe they lack certain social and cultural capital necessary for understanding, for example, the ways of the corporate or financial world. Students potentially interested in someday attending business school should investigate the possibilities of such programs and pay attention to scholarship options that may be offered through the CLS.

GMAT or GRE?

The **Graduate Management Admission Test** (GMAT) used to be the standardized test most commonly taken by business school aspirants. However, these days, the more competitive business schools (especially) are accepting GRE scores in lieu of GMAT scores. Check with the websites of the schools to which you wish to apply for particular requirements. To learn more about the GMAT, check out the website of the Graduate Management Admissions Council (www.gmac.com).

The application essay

Essays are extremely influential in the business school admissions process. In many cases, your personal statements will be given as much or even more weight than your undergraduate grades, standardized test scores, or the prominence of your past employers, so the manner in which you describe your work experience and discuss your goals and achievements (both professional and personal) can have a major impact on the disposition of your application. Make sure you've done your homework and are targeting schools that have offerings that fit well with your interests and goals.

Each application will also include a copy of your current **résumé, letters of recommendation** (usually at least two), and an **application fee**. (Some business schools, such as those at Columbia, Harvard, and Stanford, have application fees of $250 or more; keep a running tally of these fees in mind as you're selecting your target schools.) And here's a telling number that speaks to the import of pre–business school experience: The average age of GMAT-takers is around 27 years old.

Preparing for interviews

Many business schools require or offer optional interviews. The MBA admissions interview is similar to an employment interview. You are given the chance to highlight your accomplishments, skills, strengths, and personal qualities. The focus of the interview will be your **work experience**, the **benefit of an MBA** to you at this point in your career, and the **goals** that you wish to achieve. You should (of course) carefully research the program before interviewing, so you can be clear as to why you wish to pursue an MBA at that school and how that program particularly fits your goals. Interviews may be conducted by faculty members, members of the admissions staff, or even alumni of the program.

If you are offered an optional interview, in most cases you should accept. Interview offers often signal that a program is interested in you but wishes to learn a bit more. Preparing for an interview is also a great opportunity for you to gather more information about the program and help make a decision about whether the program is a good fit. Talking with alumni is a great way to prepare for business school interviews; contact the CLS for assistance in identifying Grinnellians who may have MBA degrees from your target schools. Also, advisers at the CLS would be happy to carry out mock interviews in person or via phone or Skype.

Options and Information for International Students

How does graduate and professional school work for international applicants?

If you're planning to apply to **graduate school in the United States**—that is, to a discipline-based master's or doctoral program—you're in luck. You will follow many of the same steps that domestic applicants will, and you'll generally be eligible for the same types of institutional funding (through fellowships, teaching assistantships, research assistantships, tuition waivers, and the like). In most cases, your visa will be extended for the duration of your studies—though you should always consult with Grinnell's Office of International Student Affairs (as well as with the equivalents at your target schools). You will not be eligible for federally funded student loans, but in any case you should rethink the possibilities if you must resort to borrowing money to pay for a discipline-based master's or doctoral program. With an undergraduate degree from a U.S. institution of higher education you should not need to take or report TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores as part of your application to graduate school, even if your native language is not English. And if your native language is not English, you have the further potential benefit of serving as a language expert, research assistant, or teaching assistant for undergraduate courses in your native language at your graduate institution.

However, if you're planning to apply to **medical school in the United States**, you'll face *tough* competition. Public (state) schools generally do not even *consider* applications from international students. Private schools might or might not—but the competition for spots is fierce. You should have stellar MCAT scores, a stellar GPA (i.e., 3.9 or even higher), and stellar experiences (research, volunteer, service, leadership) to consider yourself competitive and even, really, to bother to apply in the first place.

Admission to **law school** and **business school in the United States** is much less preferential than admission to medical school. International students generally must pay for law school and business school themselves (or through loans), though. If you can afford the tuition and living expenses, then you have as good a chance as anyone of gaining admission to a U.S. law school or business school. If you will need to rely on loans, your opportunities are limited. Law schools and business schools offer few to no fellowships; most students rely on student loans (for most of which, as an international student, you will not be eligible).

Applying to graduate programs abroad

The CLS can offer advice and assistance with your applications to international graduate programs—although the advice and suggestions we offer will generally be based on our understandings of how graduate and professional schools operate in the United States. Certain principles are transferrable, such as how to come to the decision to apply to graduate school, what makes for a strong personal statement, how to ask for letters of recommendation, and how to plan ahead to make sure you don't miss deadlines or other opportunities. Other factors are specific to particular countries and programs, so you would be wise to seek expert advice elsewhere, as well. The best advice, as always, is to do thorough homework: Research the possibilities and talk with as many knowledgeable people you can to triangulate your data.