

GUIDE TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

The choice to pursue a graduate degree is an important decision. Depending on your career plans, it can help you reach a career goal that will require additional education beyond a bachelor's degree. A graduate degree can help with earning potential, advancement, competitiveness, and entry into specialized professions. However, obtaining a graduate degree will require a commitment of time, energy, money, and readiness to pursue additional education. Consider the following when deciding if graduate school is right for you.

What are your career goals and how does going to graduate school help you accomplish them? Research if a graduate degree is needed to accomplish what you want in your career. Ask yourself- what exactly do you want to accomplish by pursuing graduate education?

Do you have the time and energy? Graduate school is a large commitment and can take anywhere from 2-7 years. How does this fit into your personal and professional goals? You'll want to find a program that fits your values in both your personal and professional life. Additionally, consider if the timing is right for the program, itself. Some programs, such as many MBA programs, require you to have work experience before beginning graduate school.

Are you ready to pursue additional information? Graduate programs vary widely, but being a graduate student generally requires you to be independent and self-motivated. Do you have the ability to work independently and manage your stress? Take a minute to reflect on your skills and what kind of environment you will succeed best in and use this information to help you evaluate graduate programs.

Types of Graduate School

Graduate school involves obtaining specialized knowledge and concentration in a specific area of study. There are two basic types of graduate degrees: **academic** and **professional programs**.

Academic Degrees

An academic degree provides more experience in research and scholarship in a particular discipline (e.g., Medieval History, Philosophy, and Social Work). Students interested in attending graduate school should consider a master's vs. doctoral programs.

- ❖ **Master's:** Typically about 2 years involving a combination of coursework, practical training, and potentially a research project or thesis. Master's students tend to receive less funding than doctoral students. Some professions require a master's degree for entry-level positions while in other cases it may open up more job opportunities or increase your salary.
- ❖ **Doctoral:** Anywhere from 3-6 years involving a combination of coursework, practicing training, and a dissertation. Doctoral students are typically treated as colleagues within an academic department and are offered funding to complete research assistantships or teaching assistantships alongside their coursework and training. Doctoral students work closely with a faculty member to complete a comprehensive research project called a dissertation. Doctoral programs may require that students have a master's degree before entering, but some also may admit students with bachelor's degrees.

Professional Degrees

A professional degree provides training to acquire specific skills and knowledge needed to work in a particular profession. These are pathways such as medical schools, law schools, dentistry, veterinary studies, and more.

Factors to Consider

There are many factors that go into choosing a graduate program that is right for you. Consider the following when evaluating programs:

- 1. Program Specifics:** Are faculty there researching a topic of interest to you? Is at least one of these faculty members accepting new students? Is it a research oriented or applied program? What is the culture of the program? What environmental support (e.g., cohort structure) and mentor support is available? What is the cost of tuition and what funding is available? How is the program ranked and where do graduates work? What is the format of the program (e.g., online, hybrid, etc.)
- 2. School Specifics:** How large or small is the school? Where is it? What is the cost of living there? What is the city structure like and will you need a car? What is the social and political climate of the area? What is the reputation of the school?
- 3. Personal:** How competitive is the program and where do you fall in the applicant pool? How are your GPA and exam scores? Are you able to pursue something interesting to you? How will you make friends and build support in that particular program? Are you able to continue your hobbies and activities that allow you to destress?

Searching for Schools

There are several different strategies to search for programs that may be of interest to you. Try a mix of the following keeping your wants and needs in mind:

- ❖ Search by topic of interest
- ❖ Search by interesting professor's work
- ❖ Search by location
- ❖ Search by institution
- ❖ Search for schools associated with professional organizations
- ❖ Search via search engine

Search Engines

Peterson's Grad School Search

<https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx>

The Grad School Guide

<https://www.gradschools.com/>

Grad Source

<https://www.gradsource.com/>

US News Rankings

<https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools>

College Degrees Online

<https://www.collegedegreesonline.com/program/masters>

Organization and Record Keeping

As you research programs, you may find yourself overwhelmed with information and it can be difficult to keep straight which program is which. It is helpful to keep a spreadsheet of information about each school detailing out admission requirements, tuition cost, locations, and any other factors that are important to you. Feel free to personalize this [Excel document](#) to fit your values.

Funding and Financial Aid Resources

Just like in your undergraduate, the first step in applying for federal programs is to submit a (FAFSA). Without completing one, you cannot accept graduate loans or state grants.

Specialized Scholarships, Grants, and Fellowships

Millions of dollars in financial aid are also provided through many state governments – investigate what is available to you. Financial aid opportunities vary from state to state. Many state grants target minorities, women, or special fields of study, such as medicine or education. To qualify for these state grants you must be a resident of the state and attend college in the state you are applying to. These are not loans and do not need to be repaid.

Assistantships

Colleges or universities are another source of money, look for opportunities to apply for assistantships. Assistantships are different from a scholarship because an assistantship requires that a student hold a position, or job, throughout the academic year. Sometimes a program may guarantee admitted students an assistantship, but that is not always the case. Be sure to check what is the norm for your potential program. You can check with current students and faculty in the program for information about where to find assistantships. There are three main types of assistantships:

Graduate Assistantships	Teaching Assistantships	Research Assistantships
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Administrative or clerical- Hourly wage or stipend- Potential for tuition benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Assist with or teach course- Hourly wage or stipend- Potential for tuition benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Assigned to faculty research- Hourly wage or stipend- Potential for tuition benefit

Federal Work Study

Federal work-study provides part-time employment to students while enrolled in school. It is available to graduate and professional students with financial need. If you are a graduate or professional school student, you can be paid by the hour or by salary depending on your job. Not all institutions guarantee federal work study, so it is important that you see if your school offers federal work-study. Federal work-study typically pays you biweekly and does not cover the cost of attendance unless you choose to send your earnings to the school.

Loans

If unable to get grants or an assistantship, then loans are an alternative to cover or supplement your financial costs associated with graduate school. Unlike in undergraduate, graduate school loans are only unsubsidized meaning that they will begin to accumulate interest while in school. Graduate students are eligible for three types of loans:

Federal Direct Loans	Direct Graduate PLUS Loans	Private Student Loans
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Unsubsidized- Can borrow up to \$20,500 each year- Does not consider credit history- Based on FAFSA- Available only to domestic students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Unsubsidized- Helps to cover any cost over \$20,500- Considers credit history- May be required to have a cosigner- Available only to domestic students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Offered by banks and credit unions- Apply directly through bank- Usually a higher interest rate and less flexibility- Can obtain when less than half time students- Only loans available to international students

Applying to Schools

Once you have chosen which schools you will apply to you will need to begin collecting materials and creating specific, tailored materials. Every school will have different requirements and expectations during the application process—it is important to deliver exactly what they ask for. A complete, correct, and on-time application packet is expected. Make sure to check thoroughly the school and department websites for each program you are applying to, paying special attention to due dates and required materials. Be sure to make note if there are special due dates or applications for assistantships or funding. Keeping track of all these materials in an excel spreadsheet can make this process much smoother.

Types of Applications

When you begin the application process for graduate school, it is important to know what kind of applications you will be required to complete. There are many types of applications, depending upon the program that you select. The two most common types of applications are the single school application and the common application.

Single School Application	Common Application
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Most common for graduate programs- Complete one for each school- Vary in requirements and cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- More common for professional schools- Complete one to apply to several schools- May have to complete secondary applications

Potential Application Materials

- ❖ **Curriculum Vitae (CV):** This is an overview of your academic achievements that, unlike a resume, is not limited to a specific page limit. It should contain sections regarding your education, research experience, internship and service experience, honors, awards, extracurricular and leadership involvement, and work experience. See [Career Development's Guide to CVs](#) for more information on formatting and other tips.
- ❖ **Personal Statement or Essay:** This should focus on your passion for the subject you wish to study and why you would like to continue your education in this field, and more importantly, in this program. It is important that this is genuine and follows any guidelines (page limits, specific questions, etc.) set forth by the program. See [Career Development's Guide to Personal Statements and Essays](#) for more information.
- ❖ **Letters of Recommendations:** These letters are written in favor of you and act as a stamp of approval on your behalf speaking to your ability or potential to complete work at the graduate or professional level. It can be hard to control what your recommenders might say or if they will meet the deadlines, but you can guide them into making this process run as smoothly as possible. See [Career Development's Guide to Letters of Recommendation and References](#) for more information.
- ❖ **Exam Scores:** An entrance exam may or may not be required by graduate schools. If your potential program is requiring an entrance exam see [Career Development's Test Prep Resources](#) and [apply for funding](#) to take the exam well before your application deadline.
- ❖ **Transcripts:** Be sure to check if the school requires official or unofficial transcripts in the application.
- ❖ **Writing Sample:** This could be a capstone paper or research you have worked on. Your best work!
- ❖ **Application Fee:** You can often ask for a fee waiver or reduction. If not available, see our [funding options](#).
- ❖ **Interview:** After your initial application, you may be invited to interview. Read more interview tips [here](#).

General Timeline for Graduate School Applications

6 + Months Before Applications Due

- Begin your research into graduate programs
- Study for and take practice exams (GRE, GMAT, etc.)
- Register to take required exams
- Begin requesting information from schools that interest you
- Consider asking your professors about potential programs that may be a good fit for you

5 Months

- Start drafting your personal statement
- Work on drafting and perfecting your resume or CV

4 Months

- Register for the second round of exams if necessary
- Finalize your list of potential schools and familiarize yourself with professors who have similar research interests as you at these schools
- Contact your recommenders and ask for letters of recommendation
- Continue polishing your personal statement

3 Months

- Make sure that your recommenders have all your supplemental materials (personal statement, vitae)
- Request unofficial transcripts from your institution
- Contact potential students and professors at the programs in which you are interested
- Schedule a campus visit if you can

2 Months

- Have a professor in your field, the writing resources team, a career development staff and other friends read over your personal statement

1 Month

- Begin submitting your applications
- Double check that all your materials have been turned in
- Turn in any last applications that are due

After Submission

- You will begin hearing back from graduate schools
- If you have not yet gone on a campus visit, do so this month
- Make a final decision and let all of your schools know your decision in a courteous manner

Career Development Resources

Career Development is here to help! From our website resources to our events to our one-on-one appointments we are here to help you every step of the way. Be sure to check [Handshake](#) and our social media regularly for upcoming events regarding graduate school. You can also use Handshake to schedule one-on-one appointments to discuss any stage of the graduate school process or request funding.

