

Planning for Graduate School

As you begin this process, you are encouraged to:

- Talk with your *Academic Advisor*, particularly if they teach in the field you are considering
- Speak with other faculty (in or outside of your major) teaching within your field of interest
- Give yourself an early start and allow for a generous investment of time — The information your research yields will enable you to make an informed and confident decision

What is Graduate School?

Graduate studies are more specialized and focused in a particular area of interest. Learning is done through courses and active participation in research study and/or practica, internships, externships and clinical experiences. Graduate study allows a student to develop specialized skills to practice in certain professions or conduct research.

There are two major categories of graduate degrees:

Professional degrees – such as M.D. for medical practice and the J.D. for practicing law

Length: two or three years of study

Research degrees; prepares individuals primarily for careers in academe or research centers – Ph.D. for Doctor of Philosophy

Length: four to six years of full-time study plus several years to complete an in-depth dissertation

Factors to take into account when considering graduate education:

- Do you need an advanced degree to reach your goals?
- Clarify your career/educational goals –short and long term
- Consider personal factors and situation
- Research: read, network with faculty, professional journals and organizations
- Personal motivation and support
- What is important to you?
- Do I have a realistic idea of the kinds of work and employment opportunities that this degree will make available to me?

When to attend graduate school is a matter of concern for many students.

Advantages of starting immediately:

- Maintain the momentum of your undergraduate work
- Certain fields recommend continuing immediately after your bachelor's degree (Talk to your advisor to see about your field)

Advantages of delaying your start:

- Gain valuable work experience within your field.
- Take time to focus your career goals
- Take a break from academia

Selecting the Right *One*

Begin your research by consulting with people—

- Talk with your advisors and mentors at St. Kate's, and with other professionals in the field. Ask where they did their graduate work and get recommendations about specific programs
- It is also important to consult with students currently studying in the graduate programs you are considering
- Reach out to programs you are interested in applying to for information

Continue your research by consulting reference materials.

- *Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs* provide a comprehensive listing including degrees offered, enrollment figures, admission and degree requirements, tuition, financial aid, housing, faculty and more – petersons.com

As you create your list of potential schools, there are many important factors to consider.

- Department specialties
- Flexibility of curriculum and schedule
- Admission/pre-requisite requirements
- Facilities: library, housing, labs, etc.
- Reputation and quality of program
- Practical experience opportunities
- Cost/tuition/availability of financial aid
- Location
- Diversity of student population
- Faculty/possibility of advisor in your field
- Number of degrees awarded each year and average amount of time to complete
- Placement of graduates

One of the most crucial things for a prospective Ph.D. student to consider is whether there will be an advisor in your department who can help you advance in your career. When evaluating potential advisors in a program look for the following: tenure/length of time in field, amount of time s/he will be able to spend with you, whether s/he is active and respected in her/his field, and his/her “clout” within the field.

What Does an Application Include?

After you’ve researched the programs in which you’re interested, make a list of the requirements and deadlines for each one. Each application will include several items and an application fee ranging from \$50-\$175. Note that the fee structures for AMCAS (medical school) and CAS (law school) are different. (Many institutions have an “application fee waiver program” for anyone needing financial assistance.)

The application itself may contain all or most of the following parts:

- Application form
- Personal statement
- Letters of recommendation
- Transcripts
- Aptitude tests/standardized test scores (i.e. GRE, MCAT, etc.)
- Interviews, portfolios, auditions
- Financial aid applications

Personal Statement: The personal statement can be one of the most important components of your application package. The statement should be tailored closely to the program for which you are applying, and should give a clear and concise description of your motivation for completing this degree, and your plans for going on to work in the field. *Keep your description focused and professional.* It is important that you convince the department to which you are applying that you have clear career goals and will be able to successfully complete the program. Be sure to have a career counselor and your advisor critique your personal statement, and allow yourself plenty of time to revise.

Letters of Recommendation: Your recommendations should provide the readers with a balanced perception of your academic skills and personal abilities. You should make an appointment and spend time individually with those writing letters of recommendation for you, in order to provide them with an understanding of your goals and motivations for graduate work. Provide each recommender with a copy of your personal statement and a current resume so that they may refer to them in their letter. Be sure to give the writers at least three to four weeks lead-time prior to the deadline. After the letters have been written, show your appreciation by sending the writers a thank-you note.

Interviews, Portfolios, Auditions: Some graduate schools (especially medical and business) will require an admissions interview. You should prepare for a graduate school interview just as you would for an employment interview. Learn about questions that you are likely to be asked, and practice answering them. Dress as you would for an employment interview.

Fields that are creative in nature (M.F.A., for example) may require you to submit a portfolio as part of your application. Likewise, programs in music, theater, and dance will often require an audition. Both the portfolio and audition are means to show your skill and ability to do further work, and should reflect the scope of your training and abilities.

Aptitude Tests/Standardized Test Scores: Review the requirements of your target schools to determine which tests you need to take and when the scores are due. There are many methods for preparing for these tests. You can buy (or check out from the library) test preparation guides, take sample online tests (for example see www.gre.org), or enroll in a test prep course. *Contact the O'Neill Center for more information about test prep.*

GRE

The most common entrance exam is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) General Test, which measures verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills. The GRE General is offered in computerized testing format only. Contact a testing center near you to schedule a test date and time. Find your nearest testing center at – ets.org/gre

In addition to the general test, certain graduate programs may require a GRE Subject Test, which measures achievement in a particular field of study. Check with the programs to which you are applying to see whether they require a subject test.

LSAT

If you are applying for law school, you will need to take the LSAT and register with CAS (Credential Assembly Service). (See lsac.org for complete information on CAS and for LSAT test center information check LSAC website for registration deadlines and testing dates.)

MCAT

The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a computer-based standardized examination for prospective medical students. It is designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking, written analysis and knowledge of scientific concepts and principles. For more details on testing dates, times, locations, and questions about the MACT see aamc.org. Information available about the MCAT, registering with AMCAS (American Medical College application Service), testing dates and more.

GMAT

Most MBA programs require applicants to take the GMAT (graduate Management Admission Test). For information about the assessment, registration process and prep materials go to mba.com.

Timeline Considerations

It is important to start gathering information early in order to be able to complete your applications on time. Most people should start the process a full year and a half before their anticipated date of matriculation. However, keep in mind that some scholarships have even earlier deadlines. Application deadlines range from August (before your senior year) for early decision programs of medical schools, to late spring or summer (after your senior year) for a few programs with rolling admissions.

The timetable that appears below represents a sample of how you might plan; it has been adapted from *Peterson's Guides to Graduate and Professional Programs: An Overview*.

A Suggested Timetable

SOPHOMORE Year

- Consider graduate school options depending upon the career fields of interest
- Explore options for graduate programs with faculty advisor and/or career development
- Inquire about post-graduation fellowships with advisor and see information on the St. Kate's website

JUNIOR Year

- Research areas of interest, institutions and programs
- Talk to advisors about application requirements
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admissions tests.
- Investigate national scholarships

JUNIOR Year, Summer

- Take required admission tests
- Obtain application materials
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible
- Write your application essay
- Check on application deadlines and rolling admissions policies
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use

SENIOR Year, Fall

- Obtain letters of recommendation
- Send in completed applications

SENIOR Year, Winter

- Complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form and a financial aid PROFILE, if required

SENIOR Year, Spring:

- Check with all institutions before their deadlines to make sure your file is complete
- Visit institutions that accept you
- Send a deposit to your institution of choice
- Notify other colleges and universities that accepted you of your decision so they may admit students on their waiting list
- Send thank-you notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters, informing them of your success



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