

Graduate School Guide

Should you Pursue Graduate School?

For many college students, career decisions about the future include the possibility of attending graduate school. As you consider this next step in your career, it is important to reflect on your personal motivations and reasons for wanting to attend graduate school.

- Are you ready to continue your formal education?
- Do you have sufficient financial resources?
- Do you know enough about the field to make this sort of commitment?
- Would it be more appropriate to work first and then return to school?
- Are there other options that you should consider?
- Is this the best career path toward your ultimate goals?
- Are you going to graduate school because you lack focus?
- Are you considering graduate school to avoid the “real world”?

Your motivations may be mixed so it is important to identify what is driving you.

Many students feel they have to go to graduate school immediately after finishing their undergraduate degree. It's a myth that you will lose your drive if you do not go to graduate school immediately. Many recent graduates are “burned out” from their senior year and need some time to take a break and pursue other activities. Actually, many graduate schools prefer students who have been out of school for some time, as they have more maturity and can be more committed to their studies.

An important consideration is whether a graduate degree is required for you to obtain your career goals. In some fields it is necessary to go straight through graduate school following your undergraduate studies in order to work in that field. In other fields some prior work experience is actually preferred before entering graduate school. Researching your field of interest is critical to understanding how and where graduate school plans may fit in your own career plans. However, if you know what you want to study, know what is needed or desirable for your career, or feel a passion for the subject, then it is the time to pursue graduate education.

Factors to Consider in Selecting a Graduate Program

Department

Consider the quality of the specific department, not the institution. Many well-known and respected universities have some weak departments, while many “lower profile” institutions have several fine departments. Determine whether the program is accredited by appropriate accrediting agencies and professional organizations.

Faculty

The reputation of the faculty in your area of specialization is an important consideration. Attempt to find out what types of research projects and publications have been conducted or produced by department faculty. Much of this information can be found on the web. Also try to determine if the faculty are available and interested in student contact. Learn what current student perceptions are regarding the program and the faculty.

Program

Obtain materials from the program to determine the curriculum and types of courses offered. Find out if there are internships, practicums, independent studies, and other types of opportunities to enhance your learning experience. Consider the type of learning experiences the program offers—lectures, seminars, research, readings, etc.

Facilities

Find out about the research facilities, labs and libraries available. The breadth and depth of the library collections in your field of interest, labs, equipment, and other resources are all important to consider. Additionally, any cooperative arrangements with other educational and research institutions are helpful to know about.

Size

Consider the size of the program. An important aspect of size is the faculty/student ratio in your specific program. In a large program, one should be concerned about the ratio of active faculty to students and the number of students in first year courses. In a smaller program, the concern is focused on the number of active faculty, ratio of full-time vs. part-time faculty, and the number and breadth of graduate courses offered.

Thesis, Dissertation, Language Requirements

Some programs require demonstrated competence in either one or two languages before the advanced degree is rewarded. Universities may also require (or permit as a substitute for foreign language) knowledge of a research tool such as computer programming or statistics. A thesis (Masters) and dissertation (Ph.D.) are fairly standard in most graduate programs. Determine the requirements involved in each program you are considering.

Cost/Financial Aid

Find out the cost including tuition and fees. Many universities are able to provide some form of financial aid to graduate students. Spend time investigating the various resources within the department to which you are applying, as well as in the Financial Aid Office. Typical graduate financial aid packages include grants, assistantships, fellowships, work study and loans. Inquire about all of these as early as possible to determine the process and deadlines involved.

Career Services

Identify what types of career services are offered to students and alumni. Ask about the availability of internship programs and resources and career counseling. Inquire about the types of employment recent graduates have obtained.

As you review these criteria, you want to choose a program that ultimately suits your personal and professional goals, interests and needs. You may want to add a few criteria of your own such as geographic location, availability of housing resources, cost of living, and spiritual values.

Once you've done your research, compile a list of all of the schools you are planning on applying to. It helps to have a notebook with each school's individual due dates and application requirements written out as a checklist. This simple strategy can help keep you organized when all the due dates start piling up! Some application requirements will overlap between graduate schools and some programs will have their own individual requirements. It's important to make sure that you give yourself enough time to get all of the application materials in.

Admission Requirements

Admission requirements vary from institution to institution. The common elements that most universities and departments use to evaluate students are as follows:

Official Transcripts

Graduate schools will need a copy of either your official or unofficial transcripts. Some applications will let you upload an electronic copy of your unofficial transcripts directly onto the application portal, while others will require you mail a sealed envelope with your official transcripts. Make sure you go to the registrar's office a few days in advance to order your official transcripts. Pitzer College doesn't charge students for copies of their transcripts. These records of your coursework will be reviewed with regard to grades, difficulty and types of courses taken. A minimum GPA may be an admissions requirement. An undergraduate major in the field or at least successful completion of a group of courses will serve as a sound general basis for advanced study.

Prerequisite Coursework

Many programs will have specific prerequisite courses that must be completed either before you can apply, or that must be finished before you begin the graduate school courses. It's important to plan in advance to ensure that you will be able to complete all necessary prerequisite coursework before you enroll. Some of the prerequisites will most likely have been fulfilled by your core requirements, but some will surely be more program specific. You may also be required to send copies of the course listing and syllabus in order to have the school confirm that it fulfills their requirements.

Graduate Admissions Test Scores

Most programs will require a general graduate admission test, and some will require an additional subject test. The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) is the most widely used test, comprised of three sections: quantitative, verbal and analytical. Each university will indicate the score required for admission. Other tests that you may be asked to take include the GMAT (Business), MCAT (Medicine), PRAXIS tests or CBEST (Education), LSAT (Law), and the MAT (often for Social Science, Education, Psychology). Costs for these tests vary. Both the GRE and the GMAT also offer computerized testing throughout the year for your convenience. Author Donald Asher, who has researched the successful application of students to competitive graduate programs, recommends taking the GRE in the month of June, prior to the senior year. For the best and most current information on the above tests look on our web site under Graduate School on the Student page.

It is to your benefit to prepare for the graduate test you will take. Familiarize yourself with the types of questions, and with the available test taking strategies. There are prep guides that you can pick up at your local bookstore as well as classes that can help you get ready as well.

Letters of Recommendation

These reference letters are written by faculty who can comment on your undergraduate academic preparation, potential for success in graduate study, commitment to your field of study and possibly your involvement in co-curricular or community activities. Graduate schools tend to ask for about 3 recommendation letters. Usually at least one is from an academic reference such as a professor or your advisor, one from a work supervisor or volunteer coordinator, and one of your choosing. You should be considerate of the demands of your reference and make sure to ask well in advance of when you will need the letter. Some individuals appreciate it when you give them an outline of what you would like them to include in their recommendation. Definitely think through how your recommenders can strengthen any areas that may be lacking in your application. If you feel as though you have a strong GPA but know your program really values past experience, you may want to include more recommendations from any work supervisors. Conversely, if you want to offset some lower grades on your transcript, it'd be wise to include a recommendation from a professor who knows your strengths and capabilities as a student.

Essay/Statement of Purpose

This is the portion of the application where you will be able to demonstrate why you want to pursue a graduate education. Most programs will require you to write two or three essays. The prompts can vary from school to school, but they typically give you the opportunity to defend why you want to participate in the program, what personal or work experiences prompted your interest and passion for the field, and to demonstrate your maturity and readiness for this level of work.

An essay of this type is evaluated for a number of reasons. Determining one's motivation, passion, and commitment to a field of study is a primary use of the essay. Thinking and written communication style, creativity, personal uniqueness, breadth and depth of a person are also evaluated. This essay should convey educational and career goals, substantiated interest and preparation in your academic field, passion for the field of study as well as your personal vision of your future in the field. It is also beneficial to include how each specific graduate program will assist you in obtaining your goals. Career Service's library has helpful materials that will assist you in writing an essay/statement of purpose. It's always important to have your essays edited several times by different individuals whose opinion you trust and respect.

Experience

For some types of degrees (i.e. MBA, MSW), work experience is often preferred or even required. This experience may be gained through full-time work, internships, summer or part-time employment depending on the program requirements.

Interviews/Portfolios

Some graduate programs may suggest or even require personal interviews prior to admission. Additionally, some programs in the fine arts or communications may require a portfolio including samples of your work.

One thing to keep in mind is that each school may have different requirements for admission. It is the applicant's responsibility to be clear on the requirements and to make sure that they are met. It is a good idea to identify a person in each program that you are applying to who can let you know the status of your file (if incomplete, what is missing; if complete, when you can expect to hear results).

Resources for Researching Graduate Programs

To begin your research of graduate programs, the following are several resources that are worth considering:

- Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate and Professional Programs
- (Six volume series includes Humanities; Art & Social Sciences; Biological & Agricultural Sciences; Physical Sciences & Mathematics; Engineering & Applied Sciences; Business, Education, Health & Law, as well as an Overview volume - CD ROM version of these directories is available at Honnold Library.)
- Website: <https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx>
- Internet web sites for colleges and universities
- Start with the Career Services Homepage: <http://www.pitzer.edu/careerservices>
- Talk to faculty in the discipline you are considering

Once you have identified potential schools and programs of interest, contact those schools for more information. They will send program, campus, and application materials. To request information, call or email the Graduate Admissions Office or the specific program office.

Funding Graduate School

If you plan on applying for financial aid, many schools require forms such as the Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service (GAPSFAS) form or the Financial Aid Form (FAF). Some schools also require that you fill out institutional forms. These forms are used to assess your need and eligibility for aid. Tax forms may also be required. Each school will have guidelines of requirements for financial aid application.

Types of Aid

Grants and Fellowships

These awards usually require no service in return. They are based on merit, financial need or a combination of both. As a rule, grants are awarded on financial need, and fellowships/scholarships are often based on merit. Sources of grants and fellowships include: federal support, state support, institutional aid, corporate aid, and aid from foundations.

Loan Programs

An amount of money loaned that will be repaid with interest over a defined period of time. They can take 8-12 weeks to process. The following are common private and federal loan programs: the Stafford Student Loan, Supplemental Loans for Students (SLS), Carl D. Perkins Loans, Health Profession Student Loans, Law Access Loans, M.B.A. Loans, PEP Loans.

Work Programs

Types of financial support that require service to the university in exchange for a salary, stipend or tuition break, these vary from school to school. The following work programs are often offered: teaching assistantships, research assistantships, administrative assistantships, and part time on-campus employment.

Financial Aid Resources

Consult the following resources for information about financial aid:

- The Career Services Homepage—<http://www.pitzer.edu/careerservices>
- Various directories located in Career Services and Honnold Mudd Library

General Advice

The decision to apply for graduate school is one that requires much research, thought and introspection on your part. The application process can be lengthy and costly. In the final analysis, only you can make this decision. Graduate school is an excellent opportunity to further one's education, achieve career goals, and gain new experiences.

Standardized Test Information

California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST)

<http://www.cbest.nesinc.com>

Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAT)

<http://www.gmat.com>

Graduate Records Exam (GRE) & Subject Tests

<http://www.ets.org/>

Law School Admissions Council (LSAT)

<http://www.lsac.org/>

Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)

<http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm>

Information to Collect about Graduate Programs

If you've begun to collect information on graduate programs, you already know that the process can be overwhelming. The following list will help you to identify specific program areas you might want to know more about. Use it as a springboard for developing your own list of questions and criteria for graduate programs. The information will probably not be accessed through just one resource; make use of guidebooks, catalogs, brochures, Internet Home Pages, campus visits, conversations with graduate faculty, advisors, and students. If you wish, use a grid to record and compare the information you discover.

Program Focus

- Obtain listing of faculty research interests.
- Obtain course descriptions.
- What are the department's areas of expertise or specialization? What are they well-known for?

Student Profile

- Obtain or develop profile of typical graduate class (size, average student age, work experience, academic preparation, and racial/ethnic makeup).

Faculty/Student Ratio

- Faculty/student ratio?
- What are primary instructional methods used by department? (Lecture, independent study, seminar)
- Ratio of full time to part-time faculty?
- Perceptions of current students?

Cost/Financial Aid

- Program cost including tuition and fees?
- Are assistantships/fellowships available?
- Are grants and loans available?
- What is the application procedure for
 - Assistantships, fellowships, grants and loans?

- What are the deadlines?
- What percentages of students are awarded financial aid?
- What is the cost of living (rent, food, transportation)?

Experiential Learning Opportunities

- Are internships/summer jobs available? What types?
- Popular sites? Internships for credit? Paid/un-paid?
- Assistance provided in locating summer jobs and internships?

Campus Life/Facilities

- Quality, quantity and availability of library resources in your field?
- Computer resources, lab equipment available?
- Recreational/health and counseling facilities?
- Housing options for graduate students?
- Graduate Student Association? What social and extracurricular opportunities are there for graduate students?

Job Opportunities

- Employment profiles of previous year's graduates?
- Career services resources?
- Obtain list of recruiters, if available.
- Use of alumni networking in job search process?
- Starting salary ranges?

Graduate School Application Timetable

Application Deadlines

Application deadlines may range from August (before your senior year) for early decision programs of medical schools using the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS), to late spring or summer (after your senior year) for a few programs with rolling admissions. Most deadlines for the fall's entering class are between January and March.

You should plan to meet formal deadlines. Beyond this, you should be aware of the fact that many schools with rolling admissions encourage and act upon early applications. Applying early to a school with rolling admissions is usually advantageous, as it shows your enthusiasm for the program and gives admissions committees more time to evaluate the subjective components of your application, rather than just the "numbers." More financial aid may also be available to early applicants. Applicants are not rejected early unless they are clearly below an institution's standards.

Timetable

Junior Year — Fall and Spring

- Research areas of interest, institutions and programs
- Talk to advisors about application requirements
- Register for appropriate graduate admission tests
- Prepare for graduate admissions tests

- Investigate scholarships, fellowships, and grants
- If appropriate, obtain letters of recommendation or identify sources for recommendations

Junior Year – Summer

- Take required admission tests
- Request application materials
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible
- Write 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 the data assembly service these programs use

Senior Year — Fall

- Obtain letters of recommendation
- Take graduate admission tests if you have not already
- Send in completed applications
- Register for Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service (GAPFAS) if required

Senior Year — Spring

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

Business School Admissions

The main components in an MBA application include your MBA admissions essay, test scores, transcripts, resume, and letters of recommendation. MBA programs usually have an application window ranging from 6 to 8 months, but it's always better to get your application submitted earlier on in the time frame.

Leadership Traits:

More than any other application, business schools will most certainly place a ton of weight on your demonstration of leadership roles and abilities. Your resume should emphasize your readiness and desire to be a leader. It's crucial to set yourself up in undergrad by taking on leadership roles whenever possible.

The GMAT:

The Graduate Management Admission Test is comprised of four sections: quantitative, verbal, integrated reasoning, and an analytical writing assessment. The test is entirely online. Total testing time is roughly four hours. The total GMAT score ranges from 200 to 800, given in increments of 10, and is a measure of the quantitative and verbal sections combined. The other sections are scored separately. The average GMAT score for test takers is about a 540 according to the most current data available.

It's a good idea to take this during or soon after you complete your undergraduate studies, as your mathematic skills are more likely to be fresh in your mind. The GMAT can only be taken once every 31 days. Your GMAT scores are valid for five years so you will still have plenty of time to apply to schools with these results.

The Admissions Essay:

Of course by now you know that the essays are your opportunity to demonstrate who you are beyond the numbers on your transcripts and test scores. You want to make sure that your essays set you apart as an individual in a sea of applicants. You can think of your MBA packet as a marketing packet. You are trying to market yourself to these potential MBA programs. Typically programs will have several questions that they want you to respond to. While some programs may have similar questions, it's important to tailor your essays to the specific program that you are applying to.

Law School Admissions

For students that are planning on entering Law School directly after their undergraduate studies, the application process actually begins during Junior Year.

The LSAT:

You will need to obtain a registration form for the LSAT around Spring of your Junior Year. You may do this by visiting the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) online at www.lsac.org. A good timeframe is to register to take the LSAT in June. The results are returned fairly quickly and if you are unhappy with your score, you will still have time to retake the exam in October.

The LSDAS:

You will also need to get registered with the Law School Data Assembly Service. Most Law Schools require that you sign up for this service, which prepares a report to send out that includes copies of any undergraduate, graduate, or law school transcripts, copies of your LSAT scores, and copies of your recommendation letters. This process actually saves you time as the Law Schools will request this report directly from the LSDAS after you submit your application.

The two most important components in Law School admissions decisions tend to be your undergraduate GPA and LSAT scores. Each law school will have its own distinct formula for calculating these two scores into an index score. While these two scores are important initially, once you make their "score break", the schools will start to consider other factors such as your volunteer/work experience, recommendation letters, and interviews.

Medical School Admissions

The path to becoming a doctor is one of the longest of all educational aspirations. In reality, it can take anywhere from about 11 to 16 years to finally become an M.D. There are the four to five years of undergraduate pre-med studies and courses, four years of medical school, and then three to seven years of residency.

The MCAT:

The MCAT is an entirely a computer based test. The MCAT is broken down into four sections: Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning, Biological Sciences, and a Writing Sample. The Physical Sciences section tests basic physics and general chemistry concepts. The Biological Sciences section tests your knowledge of basic biology and organic chemistry. With these sections there are 7 to 9 passages followed by multiple choice responses. The Verbal Reasoning section contains passages designed to test your ability to analyze, evaluate, and apply information from a passage. This section also includes multiple choice questions. Finally, the Writing Sample section consists of two essay prompts. There are scaled scores for each section. The Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning, and Biological Sciences sections are scored from 1 to 15. The Writing Samples are read by two readers and are then given scores from 1 to 6. The raw score is then converted to a scaled letter score ranging from J to T, a "T" being the highest possible score.

Registration typically opens up about three to four months before the test date. You may take the MCAT up to three times per year.

The Personal Statement:

Between your MCAT scores and your Undergraduate GPA, medical schools will be well aware of your academic

competency. The Personal Statement for Medical School then is an opportunity to showcase other personal qualities and enrich your competitiveness as a candidate. Admissions officers want to use this statement as a way to get to know you on a more intimate level. A successful Medical School Personal Statement will allow the reader to get to know you beyond just the numbers and to discover where your passion lies.