IS GRADUATE SCHOOL FOR YOU?

Your interest and success with a particular discipline may lead you to personal satisfaction and the chance to broaden your experience and expertise in graduate school. Today, graduate schools opportunities throughout the world are diverse. If you have interests in a specific field of study, exploring the options of attending graduate school will be beneficial. In addition, many careers require advanced degrees: medicine, social work, law, higher education, specialized research.

Please reconsider attending graduate school in order to delay or postpone the job search process. You should have clearly defined interests in a particular field before applying to schools. Remember an advanced degree may not necessarily increase your chances of initial job search success.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Many students withdrawal from graduate programs because they dislike the concentrated academic work and realize they had not defined their career goals adequately and clearly. Asking yourself the following questions will help you access your needs, interests, values, skills and goals in order to make an informed decision about pursuing a graduate or professional degree.

- What are my short-range and long-range career goals?
- How might graduate school affect my career or professional plans?
- Will the graduate degree enhance or narrow my employment prospects?
- Do I have the interest and abilities to be successful in a graduate program?
- Am I mentally and physically prepared to undertake a long-term academic commitment?
- At the present time, do I have other needs that conflict with pursuing a graduate degree?
- Would I benefit more by gaining some practical experience before pursuing a graduate studies?
- Can I realistically invest the time and money required pursuing another academic degree?
- What type of value, if any, do I place on attaining a graduate degree?

PROGRAM SELECTION

A major concern of many individuals considering graduate education is that they need the BEST program of study. National rankings are available for review from a number of sources, but based on different criteria. Is the national recognition that a program or school has received the most important factor to consider? No, a program should meet your individual needs, interests, and goals. Here is some information to consider about each program.

- Departmental courses and offerings.
- Theoretical or pragmatic approach to the subject matter.
- Specialties and interests of the faculty (read their publications & books).
- Philosophical and professional attitudes of department & faculty.
- Flexibility of curriculum and length of the program.
- Availability of placement outlook and services.
- Accreditation of the program.
- Size, geographic location, type and availability of housing, community environment.
- Financial aid opportunities, cost and residency requirements,

**RESEARCHING GRADUATE SCHOOLS**

- Talk with individuals who have knowledge of the field: faculty, deans, advisors, friends, alumni, counselors to determine if and what type of an advanced degree is needed.
- Consult Career Library resources, such as Peterson’s Guides, the Kaplan guides or resources specifically geared to your field.
- Utilize the internet or link directly to schools of interest.
- Contact individual graduate schools’ departments requesting catalogs, application and financial aid information.
- Review academic journals in your field and pay attention to the authors of articles and their university affiliation.
- Visit institutions and interview.
- Interview with graduate school recruiters on campus.
- Attend graduate school fairs and forums.

**Key websites to research include:**

http://www.petersons.com
http://www.gradschools.com
http://www.gradprofiles.com
http://www.graduateguide.com
http://www.usnews.com/usnes/edu/beyond/bcrank.htm
http://www.lsac.org
http://www.mba.com
http://www.finaid.com

**THE APPLICATION PROCESS**

Applying to graduate school can be complex, time consuming and difficult if you are not well organized and prepared. Keep in mind the following requirements when applying to schools:

**Application Forms:**

- Follow instructions carefully and accurately while completing all requested information.
- Tailor your communication to the specific aspects of the graduate program.
- Complete all the forms on-line whenever possible, ensuring a neat and attractive appearance. Include all requested documents and materials: Resume, fees, personal statements, etc.
- Always make copies for your records before sending.

**Reference Letters:**

- Select recommenders who know you well enough to write detailed letters on your behalf and who can comment on your capacity to do graduate level work. When requesting this service, be specific of your goals and purpose. Provide a copy of your resume to recommenders so that they are able to gather a better sense of your skills and background.
Use institutional forms if provided by the graduate school and provide the recommender with a stamped envelope.

Allow the recommender ample time to complete your letter and always follow up to insure completion. Be sure to thank those who have written letters for you.

Transcripts:

- Allow Enrollment Services at least 5-10 working days to process your official transcripts for graduate school applications. Your request may be made in writing and signed by the individual requesting the transcript.
- Official transcripts are required by nearly all graduate schools and cost $5.00 each.

Essay/Personal Statement:

- This portion of the application is extremely important. Create and develop your statement keeping in mind the following issues:
  - Why are you applying to graduate school?
  - What are your future goals?
  - What have you done to prepare for graduate school?
  - How can this program help you to achieve your goals?
- The statement should be clear, detailed and concise. State your response in terms of how your background, skills, abilities and goals match the characteristics and opportunities of the graduate school/program.
- This is an opportunity to demonstrate your written communication skills, motivation, energy level, creativity, commitment and depth of response.
- Invite faculty members and Career Development staff to review and critique your personal statement.

Graduate Admissions Deadlines/Testing:

It is imperative to research and discover the specific time requirements for submitting applications, test scores, financial aid information and other related material for each school.

NOTE: Be aware those financial aid deadlines are usually earlier than the comprehensive application material. Many programs will not communicate these deadlines without your assertive inquiry.
Financing Your Graduate Education

Monetary obligations involved with graduate education can be a major concern and obstacle. Financial aid information can be found on-line or in most graduate school catalogs or specific departmental brochures. Obtaining the maximum financial aid requires pursuing a variety of financial aid avenues.

Fellowships and Grants:
- This type of financial aid consists of outright awards usually requiring no service to the institution in return. Awarded on a competitive basis, grants vary in terms of monetary amount and length of funding.
- Explore institutional, private and governmental fellowship opportunities. Do not limit your application to one type of grant because it may take several combined awards to fund your entire graduate education.
- Consult with faculty members and the resources available in the Career Development and Student Success office for information about fellowships and grants.

Graduate Assistantships:
- Individual departments award teaching and/or research assistantships. These awards usually carry full or partial tuition remuneration plus a stipend.
- The commitment normally involves a 10-20 hour per week workload dealing with teaching, tutoring, proctoring exams, developing lesson plans, and/or performing a variety of research activities.
- Competition for these awards is strong. Apply early and always submit a resume with your inquiry. If possible, visit the department and arrange a personal interview. Be cognizant of deadlines.
- Be sure to specifically request assistantship information at the time you request application materials.

Resident Assistantships:
- Some graduate programs offer financial assistance in the form of residence assignments involving room, board, and a stipend by working as managers in the undergraduate residence halls.
- These opportunities may be the most lucrative because some schools will also include tuition remuneration with the assignment.
- Again, competitively based, resident assistanceships will involve utilizing your job search skills. Always include your resume and cover letter, requesting an interview for available jobs.
- Inquire about these opportunities at the institution’s residence life or student affairs office.

Loans:
- Remember any undergraduate loan can be deferred while you are a full-time graduate student.
- Most institutions have loan programs for graduate students including private, state and federally sponsored Guaranteed Student Loan opportunities. Note: you automatically become “independent” as a graduate student on the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Aid). This can be obtained from the Financial Aid Office.
- Explore GAPSFAS (Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid service), offering low interest loans and financial assistance to graduate students.

Scholarships:
- Be sure to inquire about special offerings at your institution of choice.
QUESTIONS TO ASK ANY GRADUATE PROGRAM

1. What are the largest and the most typical class size for a graduate class? Are classes restricted to graduate students or are undergraduates common in your graduate class?

2. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of going to graduate school immediately after completing the undergraduate program? The advantages and disadvantages of waiting a few years? The best use of interim time?

3. What are the criteria and process for selecting teaching assistants, research assistants, and fellow?

4. I will probably need financial assistance. Can you tell me how most students fund their studies here?

5. Will I get to develop my own topics, or will I be expected to work on a professor’s ongoing research?

6. What is the mean time to complete (a) class work, (b) research, (c) dissertation? (I.e., what is the mean time to complete the Ph.D.? Ask about the program as a whole, but perhaps more importantly, by professor.)

7. What is your attrition rate? Of those who don’t finish, what are their reasons?

8. What kind of student thrives in your program?

9. How reliable is your financial support year to year? Is the first-year offer always sustained given attainment of academic goals?

10. What is the age, race, gender balance, ratio of married/single, and geographical origin of graduate students in the program? (In other words: Are there any other people like me?)

11. May I have some bibliographies of recent publications by faculty? Which professors have won awards and grants lately? (and presumably need graduate assistants)

12. Can you tell me about your placement rates and types of jobs obtained by recent graduates?

13. May I meet some currently enrolled students (in person or via phone or email)? (Be sure to ask about their research topics and be sure to take notes on specific professors mentioned.)

14. How can I be a strong candidate for a program like this?

Adapted from Graduate Admission Essays by Donald Asher (Ten Speed Press, 2000)
1-800-841-BOOK or www.amazon.com
THE THREE BEST WAYS TO STAND OUT

1. Contact the professors
   - Ask for a clarification of the program offerings
   - Comment on a recent publication
   - Propose an area for further study

2. Visit the department
   - Make your own appointments with professors
   - Be sure to confirm a day ahead
   - Send a thank you note later!

3. Submit an outstanding work sample
   - Your best paper, la, article, or writing sample
   - Make sure the sample is directly related
   - Get a professor to review the work sample first!