



Career and Internship Services

Planning for Graduate School

DECIDING IF GRADUATE SCHOOL IS FOR YOU

Begin your consideration of graduate school by looking at why you want to go. What do you want to do professionally? How is graduate school going to move you closer to this goal? Graduate School represents an extensive commitment in terms of time, money, and hard work.

After you've given much thought regarding your life plan, continue the questioning process by talking to other people. The greatest danger when you make the decision to attend graduate school is failing to ask enough questions of yourself and those in the field to which you aspire. If a particular career field interests you, make sure you have an understanding of what that career field entails. If possible, obtain some practical experience in the field before making the graduate school investment. Is graduate school a necessary step to entering the career field?

Talk to current graduate students at different phases of their programs. Talking to students and faculty will help you separate what you think graduate school will be like from what it, in fact, is.

Talk to professors and industry professionals. Choose people who have different perspectives and backgrounds: those who are new in their field, those who just started their careers, or those who have been in the industry for years. Contact people from different companies and organizations. Should you decide to go to graduate school, these people will be valuable sources of information for you once again. At this point, you want to know as much as possible about what they do and about how graduate school does or does not play a role in that.

Many students who consider applying to graduate or professional school worry needlessly about matching their undergraduate major to the requirements of advanced degree programs. The fact is that Liberal Arts students have a sufficiently broad-based education to be admissible to many graduate programs that appear, at first glance, to be unrelated to their undergraduate major. As you talk to people in programs, you will probably be surprised at the varied academic backgrounds that they represent. Top medical schools even recommend a strong grounding in the humanities and do not at all require a major in the natural sciences.

RESEARCHING PROGRAMS IN YOUR PROSPECTIVE FIELD

Be sure to begin your research early. Since the process will take both time and careful thought, it is best to begin no later than the spring semester of your junior year or as soon as possible, if you plan to attend graduate school immediately upon graduation.

A. Again, talk to the faculty in the field of your choice. They will know about your ability to pursue graduate study and they are the best source of information about the individual departments or schools in your field that will provide the best graduate program for you. Try to visit schools that you are thinking about attending. Talk to the faculty and administrative staff of the department that you are considering. Also talk to graduate students and alumni. In addition, professionals in the field of your choice can offer you valuable advice and information.

B. To effectively research graduate programs and schools online, consult the list of graduate school websites (*see Graduate School Websites handout*). Also, check Alemany library for the Peterson's Guides, listing graduate degrees at more than 1600 institutions. Most graduate school websites/catalogs include a summary statement along with admissions information that outlines a profile of accepted candidates from the previous year. The summary should include the average GPA, GRE scores, average age and gender, minority status and undergraduate institution. If the information is not included in the admissions packet sent to you, you may request it from the admissions office. If you are interested in Dominican University's graduate programs, contact the Admissions Department or the appropriate department(s) for further information.

C. Make a tentative list of schools that you would like to attend. Call or write to each academic department or school for the following information which will help you make your final choices:

1. Graduate catalogue and application.
2. Departmental program description and application.
3. Information about fellowships, scholarships, and research assistantships.
4. Information about financial aid, if needed.
5. List of faculty research interests/publications (if available).

D. Plan to attend graduate and professional school information days held at other colleges and universities. Visits by school representatives give you the opportunity to find out about various programs.

I. Determine the application requirements. Generally they are as follows:

- Bachelor's degree.
- In some programs, an undergraduate major is required in the field. In some instances, the completion of a group of courses in the field which will serve as a basis for advanced study will be sufficient. Some schools, such as Public Policy, require no special major. However, it is advisable to have completed some course work that provides the basic background required in the work of the school.
- Most graduate divisions require an overall B average or 3.0 on a 4.0 scale. At some schools the minimum GPA may be lower. The individual department will often require a much higher GPA in the field of graduate study. In some instances, where there is evidence of ability to do graduate study, the graduate divisions will waive the minimum requirement at the request of the department.
- Some departments will require a portfolio or tape of work for a field such as music, art, or environmental design.
- Many schools will require at least one admissions test. In some instances, there may be a minimum score or percentile level required for the test. (See following sections on admissions tests).
- Personal statement or statement of purpose. This is usually required as part of the application form. (See following section on personal statements).
- Letters of recommendation. In some instances, the letters of recommendation may be the most important items considered by the admissions committees of the department. (See following section on letters of recommendation).

E. Make final choice of graduate schools to which you will apply. (See following section of factors to consider in the choice of a graduate school).

F. Take required examinations at suggested times and send for any other applications that may be needed.

G. Collect letters of recommendation and write personal statement.

H. Fill out applications and send transcripts.

- I. Complete all documentation at earliest possible date.
- J. Leave nothing to chance. Make a checklist of all items required by each school in its application and date each item as you complete it. After 30 days, check with each school to see that your application file is complete.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN THE CHOICE OF A GRADUATE SCHOOL

I. Purpose of the degree sought

Different schools have different purposes for the various degrees offered. In some schools such as Public Health or Public Policy, the Masters degree is the normal degree – M.P.H. or M.P.P. Other schools, however, give Masters Degrees as a terminal degree when a student has not completed a Ph.D. program. If you are seeking a Masters degree in a field, be sure you know its meaning. For most schools, the Ph.D. program is considered a research degree. A D.PH or an Ed.D. may have other functions. The purpose for which the school gives the degree should coincide with the purpose for which the degree is sought. Otherwise, your career goals may not be attained.

II. The individual school

- A. Department. Consider the quality of the department, not only the institution. Some distinguished universities have some weak departments and many lesser-known institutions have several fine departments.
- B. Faculty. The reputation of the faculty in your specialty is the most important consideration. Because a faculty member is judged by the quality of his/her research, it is important to find out about his/her publications and the research projects with which he/she has been associated. So, you can determine if there will be a faculty supervisor for the special area of your concern. The age of the faculty is also important. If any of them retire before you complete your degree program, it is vital that there are prospects for appropriate replacements. It is also necessary to consider the effect that such retirements might have on the completion of your degree program.
- C. Program. Study the graduate program and curriculum. Although the range and diversity of courses are important, the instructional methods and philosophy of the department are equally so.
- D. Facilities. The breadth and depth of the library collections in your particular field of interest are very important. Find out about laboratories, museums, scientific equipment of all kinds, and cooperative arrangements with affiliated educational and research institutions.
- E. Size. Size itself is no indication of quality. Some possible disadvantages of a very large university are classes of 100 or more students, inaccessibility of senior faculty, shortage of library materials, crowded facilities, and the possibility of only distant relationships with fellow students. Extremely small universities, on the other hand, may have the disadvantages of restricted class offerings, limited facilities, and relative scarcity of excellent fellow students.
- F. Placement. If at all possible, you should find out what has happened to students who have earned the degree from a school. You should be aware of the possibilities for work in your chosen field.

III. Degree requirements of the individual school

Perhaps the best way to make a comparison of schools is to list all the requirements of each school on a single sheet of paper and try to place a time estimate beside each item.

- A. Residency. Usually a school has a required time of residency – time actually spent at the school in study or research. For some schools this may be a full academic year, but it may be defined in the number of units taken. The time in which this residency requirement must be fulfilled is also a concern. Some must be completed prior to candidacy, but several state that it must be completed while in candidacy. Depending

upon candidacy requirements, the latter type of requirement could add a full year to the time required for your degree program.

- B. Unit requirements. Some schools have a total unit requirement. Others require that specific courses be taken. It is important to know if there may be hidden requirements such as prerequisites for the required courses. If any course work may be waived, it may save you time in your program. The stage by which the unit requirement must be fulfilled may be prior to residency, prior to candidacy, or prior to the dissertation.
- C. Language requirements. Many Ph.D. programs have language requirements that must be completed prior to set times, such as candidacy examinations or the preparation of the dissertation. Occasionally, the material about these requirements must be sought both in the graduate catalogue and the departmental description of the program. In addition to the stage at which the language requirements must be completed, the times the language exams are given (such as fall and spring only) the type of examinations given (individual reading exams or standardized tests), and the level of competency that must be attained on the examination should also be noted carefully. The language requirements alone can sometimes add a full year to your degree program.
- D. Examinations. At some schools, several sets of examinations may be required. In one school there is a set of general area examinations that must be completed prior to candidacy examinations. Beyond these two sets of major examinations, there is also an oral justification of the investigation done for the dissertation. It is important that you know the number, the type, and the timing of the examinations you will face in each program.
- E. Candidacy. In some schools, a student becomes a candidate for the advanced degree immediately upon admission and registration for course work in the school. In other schools, the status of a candidate for the degree may depend upon residency, completion of unit requirements or examinations, or, in rare cases, completion of the dissertation. It is obvious that you should know what is required to attain candidacy and whether there are any requirements of time either prior to or in candidacy.
- F. Dissertation or thesis requirement. Perhaps the best discussion of this requirement is merely to list what you should know about the dissertation; the type that is expected by the faculty; the manner in which the dissertation topic is chosen and by whom; the requirements for final approval of the dissertation and how it must be prepared in the final form; if it must be published and at whose expense; any statement of time prior to which the dissertation may not be presented; and, of course, any time limits beyond which the dissertation will not be accepted.

IV. Profile of the students accepted by the school

From the description of the requirements of the department, the general entrance requirements and the other material provided by the departments and schools, it is possible to build a composite profile of the kind of students that is accepted by any single school. You should make a careful evaluation of yourself to see if you fit that profile. Often, many rejection notices can be prevented if you will carefully measure yourself against what an individual school is seeking in its graduate students.

ADMISSION TESTS, PERSONAL STATEMENTS AND LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

I. Graduate Exams

Many graduate schools require that you take one of the standardized graduate admissions tests as a prerequisite for acceptance into the program. Most often required are the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), the Miller Analogies Test (MAT), the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST), or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Materials to study for the general and subject tests are available from ETS. See the GRE application booklet. Career/Internship Services also has study guides and practice tests. There are a number of preparation courses available for a fee. Contact Career/Internship Services for information.

II. Personal Statement

The purpose of this essay is to show how serious you are about pursuing advanced academic study. Remember, you are the subject of this essay. It should be carefully reasoned, direct and straightforward and illustrate your knowledge of the school, its facilities and the professors. Usually it will contain:

- A. Your reasons for graduate study, including how you hope to use the degree.
- B. Your reasons for choosing the individual school.
- C. Explanations of any special conditions in your record, such as a bad year on your transcript or a low GRE score.
- D. Special qualifications or experience not listed elsewhere on the application from such as research under a professor or the number of hours you may have worked per week.
- E. **This is an opportunity for you to project your personality. Since this statement often takes the place of an interview, this is vitally important.** For further information and sample letters, refer to Graduate Admissions Essays, by Donald Asher, available in Career/Internship Services.

III. Letters of Recommendation

Professors in a field tend to know one another by sight or, at least, by reputation. Often the letters of recommendation may be the deciding factor, even outweighing the GPA or admission's test score.

- A. Generally, it is best to get letters from professors in your major field. Usually at least three letters are required, however, occasionally more are requested.
- B. The letters of evaluation should be from professors who know you well because the evaluation should show personal knowledge of your academic abilities and performance.
- C. The letters should specifically discuss as many of the following as possible:
 1. Intellectual qualities: creativity, imagination, analytical skill, reasoning ability, writing ability, capacity for independent work, etc.
 2. Personal characteristics: dependability, integrity, maturity, motivation, personal relations with others, etc.
- D. No "nice person" letters. These are usually written by friends of the family and they are just ignored by admissions committees. Sometimes they can also be damaging to your candidacy because the committee may feel you have wasted their time.
- E. Approach your professors. Do not leave a note in a professor's box requesting a letter. Go personally and spend some time with the letter writer so that he/she may get to know you. You may wish to share your personal statement with the professor. If the professor knows little of your background, a brief resume including your GPA and some evidence of your class work with the professor is often valuable. Give the letter writer all the help you can to write a good letter. Remember, it is better to have a strong letter from someone who knows you well than a mediocre letter from a famous person who does not know you.
- F. If possible, request the letter at least 3 months before the application is due and give the letter writer at least two weeks to complete the letter. If you request sending directly to the school, check up on the date sent.
- G. Give your full legal name or the name on your application to the provider. Ask that it be written on official school letterhead.
- H. Provide stamped, addressed envelopes to facilitate mailing letters to the schools or returning to you.
- I. Try to avoid requesting letters from faculty at extremely busy times, especially at the beginning of the semester or during exam week.

IV. Financial Aid

Funding can be broken down into two broad categories: need-based and merit-based aid. Upon acceptance to a particular school or department, you may be offered a "package" which could entail funding from both categories. A breakdown of the package can consist of a combination of loans, grants, scholarships, paid internships, work-study, tuition reduction/remission, or fellowships (which may or may not have a service-related component such as being a teaching or research assistant).

Consult the financial aid websites included in the *Graduate School Websites* handout. For Dominican's graduate programs, the Financial Aid Office in Bertrand Hall can assist you with information on financing your graduate study.

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

I. Determine your purpose in writing the statement

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant they should choose. You may wish to show that you have the ability and motivation to succeed in your field, or you may wish to show the committee that, on the basis of your experience, you are the kind of candidate who will do well in the field. Whatever is the purpose, it must be presented to give coherence to the whole statement.

1. Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out.
2. Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember, your audience is made up of the professionals in their field and you are not going to tell them how they should act or what they should be. You're the amateur in the field.
3. Write in the first person.

II. Determine the content of your statement

Be sure to answer any questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. For example: "What are your strengths and weaknesses in setting and achieving goals and working through people?" In this question there are actually six parts to be answered: (1) strengths in setting goals; (2) strengths in achieving goals; (3) strengths in working through people; (4) weaknesses in setting goals; (5) weaknesses in achieving goals; (6) weaknesses in working through people. Pay attention to small words. Notice! This question says through people not with people. Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following:

1. Your purpose in graduate study. This means you must have thought this through before you try to answer the question.
2. The area of study in which you wish to specialize. This requires you that you know the field well enough to make a decision.
3. Your future use of your graduate study. This will include your career goals and plans for the future.
4. Your special preparation and fitness for study in the field. This is the opportunity to join and correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.
5. Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores such as a bad quarter. Be sure to explain in a positive manner and justify the explanation. Since this a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities.
6. Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application such as a large (35 hour a week) work load outside of school. This too should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
7. You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?" This requires that you have done your research about the school and know what its special appeal is to you.
8. Above all, this statement is to contain information about you as a person. They know nothing about you that you don't tell them. You are the subject of the statement.

III. Determine your approach and the style of the statement

There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement." There is only the one that is best for and fitting for you.

1. There are some things the statement should **not** be:
 - a. Avoid the "what I did with my life" approach. This was fine for the grade school essays on summer vacation. It is not good for a personal statement.
 - b. Equally elementary is the approach "I've always wanted to be a ____." This is fine when you're twelve, but hardly appropriate for mature adults.
 - c. Avoid a catalogue of achievements. This is only a list of what you have done and tells of nothing about you as a person.

2. These are some things the statement should do:
 - a. It should be objective yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells about your experience and what it means to you. Do not use "academes." This is not a research paper for a professor.
 - b. Indicate the basis of your realistic knowledge of the field.
 - c. Write about other things that you do in addition to being a student. "What are your outside involvements?"
 - d. Include any unique information about your background (i.e. first person to go to college in family, learned English as a second language, family immigrated to this country, member of an underrepresented ethnic/racial group).
 - e. It should form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience such as: (1) what you learned about yourself; (2) about your field; (3) about your future goals; (4) about your career concerns. Draw your conclusions from the evidence your life provides.
 - f. It should be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances or draw your conclusions as the result of individual experience. See the list of general words of which to beware.
 - g. Including anecdotal information not only emphasizes the point, but is much more interesting and memorable.
 - h. It should be an example of careful persuasive writing. After reading the personal statement, the reader should know who you are and more importantly, be convinced that you know yourself, your goals, and your capability for your graduate program. Your faculty advisor and Career Services' counselor will help you determine if this is so.

****WORDS TO AVOID WITHOUT EXPLANATION**

significant	invaluable	appealing to me	stimulating
interesting	exciting	appealing aspect	incredible
challenging	excited	I like it	gratifying
satisfying	enjoyable	it's important	fascinating
satisfaction	enjoy	I can contribute	meaningful
appreciate	feel good	meant a lot to me	helping people
remarkable	rewarding	useful	valuable

A CHECKLIST FOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

- _____ Prepare for and take appropriate admissions tests (i.e. GRE, LSAT, GMAT, MCAT). Take early. Pick up applications in Career Library. Use study guides/courses.
- _____ Get appropriate experience (i.e., research, field work, internships or summer programs).
- _____ Write to graduate schools requesting admission and financial aid applications.
- _____ Write to the department to which you are applying requesting departmental information and forms.
- _____ Select individuals who will write you letters of recommendation. Request letters. (See Letters of Recommendation section of handout).
- _____ Compose your personal statement. (See Personal Statement section of handout). Use resources in the Career Library. See a career counselor in Career Services and your faculty advisor for feedback.
- _____ Complete and send all admission and financial aid applications. Include a self-addressed postcard so the school can notify you when your file is complete.
- _____ Two weeks later and no card? Check with the appropriate admission and/or departmental representative to see if your materials were received and your file is complete.
- _____ Prepare for possible interviews. Check resources in Career and Internship Services. Do practice interviews.

Deadlines for admission vary widely. Deadlines for Financial Aid, Fellowships, etc., are announced in applications and usually are earlier than February 1st.

***Adapted from the Graduate Advising Center, U.C. Berkeley and U.C. Davis 2006*

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