SELECTING A GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL
Why Attend Graduate or Professional School

The decision to attend graduate school often depends on either a prerequisite to enter a chosen career field or a long-term interest in a particular field. Many students contemplate attending graduate school because they are unsure about their career path and their future.

If you are considering graduate or professional school ask yourself these questions to gain some clarification about continuing education:

• What are your career goals? Would they change if you became employed immediately after graduating with a bachelor’s degree?
• What is your motivation for deciding on graduate school? Will this motivation sustain me through 2-4 years of graduate-level work?
• In your field, is it easier to attend graduate or professional school right after graduating or is post undergrad experience required?
• What is the cost of graduate or professional school- direct (tuition) and indirect (loss of possible earnings)?
• Will your job and salary prospects be enhanced by graduate studies?
• Are there employers who would assist in paying for graduate or professional school?

How to Start- Looking at Programs

Questions to consider:
• What programs do I want? What school has this program?
• Does location matter? Rank? Well-known faculty? A focus that I am interested in pursuing?
• Can I contact the program and ask for details?
• How specific are their requirements? Am I eligible to apply? Could I do post-baccalaureate work to become eligible for the program if I don’t meet the requirements?
• Similar values? Research goals? Faculty I want to work with?
• What is it about the program that matters to me?

Online resources for searching graduate programs:

• GradSchools.com
• Petersons.com
• Gradview.com
• USnews.com/colleges
The Application Process

The application forms should be treated with great care and attention to detail. Your application is the picture of yourself that you want to present to the selection committee; therefore, it’s to your benefit to keep some suggestions in mind as you complete the process:

• Read and follow the instructions carefully
• Pay attention to all deadlines
• Be open and honest about information you report
• Have at least two people proofread your information

Many elements of the application process can be used when applying to multiple schools but it is important to tailor your application for each program.

Entrance Examinations
Almost all graduate schools require an entrance exam such as the GRE, GMAT, MCAT, and LSAT. Generally, these exams are used as part of the screening process, so students are encouraged to do well. Information on campus is provided by Testing Services located at 286 Lighty Student Services or you can visit these websites:

PrincetonReview.com
The Princeton Review has long been a leader in helping college and graduate school–bound students achieve their higher-education goals through test-preparation services, tutoring and admissions resources, as well as online courses and resources and print and digital books.

Kaptest.com
Kaplan test prep offers preparation services for multiple entrance examinations and field specific licensing.

Overview of common entrance exams:
GRE: The GRE is a very common entrance examination in that it is not area specific. It consists of three sections, analytical writing, verbal reasoning, and quantitative reasoning.
GRE website: http://www.Ets.org/gre

GMAT: The GMAT is specific to business and management programs. It consists of four sections; analytical writing, verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and integrated reasoning.

LSAT: The LSAT is designed to measure skills that are considered essential for success in law school: the reading and comprehension of complex texts; the organization and management of information and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from it; the ability to think critically; and the analysis and evaluation of the reasoning and arguments of others. The test is entirely multiple choice with three different types of questions focused on either reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, or logical reasoning.
LSAT website: http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat.asp
**MCAT**: The MCAT is a standardized, multiple-choice examination designed to assess the examinee's problem solving, critical thinking, and knowledge of science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine. Scores are reported in the sections of physical sciences, biological sciences, and verbal reasoning.  
MCAT website: [https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/](https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/)

**Personal Statement**
The personal statement or autobiographical essay is often the most important item in the application packet. This is where you tell the committee about yourself, including the attributes that make you a unique individual and how you stand out among the other applicants. Pay attention to the format with which this is required, either essay or letter. On average personal statements will be around 2-3 pages but some programs will specify length. Each program will give some direction as to what information to include or discuss in the personal statement. If little direction is given here are some possible points of discussion:

- Future career aspirations
- How the program will help you meet your goal
- Experience you have that will help you be successful in the program
- Aspects of the program that appeal to you
- Understand the program’s philosophy and include how you would be a good fit
- Faculty/Staff who you are interested in working with, including any research they have done
- How you can grow in the program and what you would contribute back

For more information visit:
- [Owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/](Owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/)

Information about writing personal statements for academic and other positions.

Take note that some programs may require a resume or CV as well.

**Letters of Recommendation**
Strong letters of recommendation are an essential element of your application. Ask professors, employers, and activity advisors who know you and your work to write these letters. It is highly recommended to provide them with a copy of your personal statement and career objective statement. Make sure you check to see if the school has specific guidelines as to whom recommenders can be. For example some programs require mostly academic references while others ask for only activity or work related recommendations. It is important to give your recommenders plenty of time to complete your recommendation so that your application will be submitted on time and with all of the materials. Also be sure to provide clear instructions to your recommenders on how to submit their letters.

**Official Transcripts**
Each school requires official transcripts but not student copies, transcripts must be sent directly from the school. For official transcript requests visit the Office of the Registrar at French Administration 346 or go to this website:  
[https://transcripts.wsu.edu/Default.asp](https://transcripts.wsu.edu/Default.asp)
The Interview Process

Many graduate and professional schools require a selection interview. The interview is your opportunity to learn more about the program, but most important for the committee to learn more about you! Remember to emphasize your unique attributes, and show the committee that you are knowledgeable in your field. You can learn more about the program by reading the faculty’s research and becoming aware of the program’s philosophy and training objectives. It may be helpful to practice before the interview. Practice keeps the things you want to highlight about your personal and professional goals fresh in mind. Things to remember:

• Dress in appropriate professional interview attire
• Come prepared with any materials that your program requires of you (resume, references, etc.)
• Know where the interview is taking place beforehand and arrive before your scheduled interview time
• Maintain a positive and energetic persona
• Come with a typed list questions that you have for them about the program (curriculum, research, graduate assistantships, etc.)
• Review the program characteristics and values

Commonly asked questions:
• Why did you choose this field?
• Why did you choose this specific program?
• What qualities do you have that would make you a good _____?
• What was a situation where you were faced with conflict and how did you handle it?
• What is a weakness you posses?

For more information on interviewing, see the Interview Packet in the Academic Success and Career Center (ASCC).

The Decision Process- Accepting or Rejecting a Program

You may be notified in writing or by telephone that you were accepted for admission into a program or that you are on a waiting list. After notification, ask for up to a week to make your decision and then consider the following:

• What first attracted you to this program? How many of your personal criteria (such as location, research, and stipend) does the school meet?
• Decide which program meets your needs, especially those you consider essential.
• When you receive a satisfactory offer from your most preferred school, accept and then notify the other schools. Do not take this decision lightly because withdrawing your acceptance will diminish your credibility.
Graduate School Preparation: Four Year Plan

First Year
☐ Visit the ASCC homepage to find various resources at ASCC.wsu.edu
☐ Attend well being workshops focused on pre-professional topics (wellbeing.wsu.edu)
☐ Meet with a program advisor for program planning and/or course selection
☐ Get involved! Join extracurricular activities including pre-professional student organizations
☐ Consider summer internship, work, or volunteer experience
☐ Build relationships with faculty members
☐ Develop your CougLink account at www.couglink.org

Second Year
☐ Continue with extracurricular activities- explore leadership opportunities
☐ Begin thinking about the appropriate entrance exams (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, etc.)
☐ Explore internship and international opportunities
☐ Think about research programs/opportunities and see what is available in your department
☐ Continue to build relationships with faculty members, this is important when needing letters of recommendation
☐ Get involved with the community by volunteering. For volunteer opportunities visit the Center for Civic Engagement’s website at cce.wsu.edu

Third Year
☐ Study and register for an entrance exam – consider taking a preparation course or practice exam
☐ Meet with your career counselor to review application timeline
☐ Meet with program advisor to review academic plan and make sure you are meeting all requirements
☐ Research your graduate programs of choice – check websites, look for special programs, talk to current students
   ☐ If possible, it is highly beneficial to contact a specific school and set up a time to meet with them and discuss their program
☐ Request letters of recommendation
☐ Develop your personal statement
☐ Start applications during the summer
☐ Study for/take appropriate entrance exams

Fourth Year
☐ Sign up for a mock interview at the ASCC
☐ Finish applications, check to see if there is an early application deadline
☐ Review graduation requirements
☐ Follow up applications to make sure all pieces have been received
☐ Send thank you notes to recommenders, after interviews, following meetings, etc.
**Graduate School Selection and Decision Chart**

*Personal Criteria may include: Assistantship, Research Possibilities, Location, etc. In the columns below list your top 10 criteria and then use a + (the program has this requirement), a – (the program doesn’t meet your needs), or a ? (there is uncertainty if the program meets that criterion, and needs follow-up inquiries). After you have made additional inquiries and have ascertained what the program offers and its congruence with your personal criteria, count the number of plusses and minuses for each school and give each school a final ranking.*

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# Graduate School Application Checklist

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<th>Schools &amp; Codes (GRE/LSAT)</th>
<th>Faculty Contact</th>
<th>Request Applications &amp; Fee Waivers</th>
<th>Application Deadlines (Program &amp; Grad School)</th>
<th>Application Fees</th>
<th>Request Transcripts (If Required, must complete portfolio)</th>
<th>Request Strong Letters of Recommendation (Give faculty a draft of your essay)</th>
<th>Mailed Application(s) (Transcripts &amp; Letters of Recommendation)</th>
<th>Networking: Contact w/Faculty</th>
<th>Receipt of Application (Including: Transcripts, GRE, Letters, Financial Aid)</th>
<th>Confirm with School</th>
<th>Accept or Reject Program</th>
<th>Confirm with School</th>
<th>Deadline of Interviews &amp; Selections</th>
<th>Accept or Reject Program (Refer to your Selection and Decision Chart)</th>
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Graduate School Glossary

Important terms used in discussion of graduate education

**Assistantship:** A form of financial aid in which the graduate student is paid for work performance. This work is often related to the student’s studies or area of specialization. A research assistantship or “RA” pays a student to assist a professor on an experiment or research project; a teaching assistantship or “TA” pays a student to teach sections or classes of undergraduate courses, or to help grade papers and examinations.

**Committee:** This may refer to one of several types of important committees:

1. **Admissions Committee:** This committee considers applications for graduate school. Decisions are made by a committee of faculty members within an academic department. For example, students applying to an engineering department will be admitted or denied by the admission committee composed of faculty members in engineering rather than by a central admissions director within the university’s administration.

2. **Thesis/Dissertation or Examination Committee:** A committee of faculty members usually chosen by the graduate student from his or her department or from closely related departments. This committee helps the student plan the thesis/dissertation or determines the general content of the qualifying examination for the final thesis/dissertation defense. These committees usually serve both as advisors to the student and as examiners on the material studied or research performed.

**Defense:** This is the final examination on a graduate student’s dissertation, and the final requirement for the Ph.D. The defense may take one of several forms, such as a lecture on the dissertation topic, or a formal oral examination. The graduate student explains and defends the accuracy and significance of the research and arguments in his or her thesis.

**Director of Graduate Study:** Also called a Graduate Advisor. The faculty member in a department who is responsible for disseminating information about the graduate program, answering questions from the applicants, and advising graduate students who have not yet selected a dissertation topic. The Director of Graduate Study usually sits on or chairs the department admissions and is the best source of information for the potential applicant.

**Discipline:** A broad field of study such as psychology, physics, English, or computer science.
**Dissertation:** The independent project conducted by a graduate student after completing coursework and general examinations. The dissertation will vary in form and length depending on the discipline and nature of the research project; it usually requires one to three years to complete. The dissertation is supposed to show mastery of knowledge and research tools, and should contribute something new to the discipline in which it is written.

**Doctorate:** Another word for the Ph.D. or Doctor of Philosophy degree. Those who earn the Ph.D. are entitled to use the title “Doctor.”

**(GAPSFAS):** The Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service. The GAPSFAS form is a standardized, detailed financial aid form many graduate schools ask applicants to complete if they apply for financial aid. GAPSFAS is a department of Educational Testing Service.

**(GRE):** The Graduate Record Examination is for graduate school applicants what the SAT is for college applicants. It is a standardized test designed by the Educational Testing Service to measure knowledge and skills; it is scored on a 200-800 scale. The GRE Aptitude Test has three sections: verbal, quantitative, and analytical. There are also GRE Advanced tests in specific disciplines such as French, mathematics, philosophy, engineering, and so on. GRE scores are often an admissions application requirement.

**General Examination:** This is also called the preliminary or qualifying examination. The general exam tests the depth and the breadth of a graduate student’s knowledge in his or her discipline. It may be written or oral, is often divided into sections corresponding to the specific fields within the discipline, and is usually taken after the completion of coursework. The student prepares for it independently. After passing “generals” or “qualifiers” the student begins work on the dissertation.

**Master’s Degree:** The degree of professional certification in the field, following the Bachelor’s. A master’s curriculum usually rests on one to three years of course work and may involve a thesis or limited research project as the final requirement. The master’s is not often a prerequisite for admission to a Ph.D. program.

**(MGSL):** Minority Graduate Student Locator Service: A service offered free to minority students by Educational Testing Service’s GRED Department. Students who provide certain information about themselves, their academic backgrounds, and educational goals are included on lists requested by graduate schools participating in the service. Students who sign up for the Locator Service make themselves available for recruitment by graduate schools which offer an appropriate program.

**(NDSL):** A federal program through which loans are available to eligible graduate students.

**Outside Fellowship:** A fellowship awarded by a source outside the student’s university or graduate department such as a corporation, government program, or foundation.
**Ph.D.:** The Doctor of Philosophy degree, a research degree which usually involves coursework, special and general examinations, a major research project leading to the writing of a dissertation, and defense of the dissertation. The Ph.D. can require anywhere between three to seven years to complete depending on the discipline, institutional policies, and the student’s preparedness.

**Postdoctoral “Postdoc” Position:** A position which allows individuals who have completed a Ph.D. to gain additional experience in their chosen field.

**Proposal:** Also called a prospectus. A statement or paper in which the graduate student proposes to his or her department committee a dissertation topic with details on what the dissertation will accomplish, and how the research will be conducted. The proposal must be approved before work on the dissertation begins.

**Reader:** A professional responsible for advising, reading, and approving a graduate student’s dissertation. A student usually has two or three readers (the “first” reader being the main adviser), all of whom have some special interest or expertise in the student’s field, and are thus in a good position to help supervise the research and writing of the dissertation.

**Research Degree:** A degree, like the Ph.D., which prepares the student for a career in research, scholarship, and college or university teaching. The program of study requires substantial independent research and presentation of the results in a dissertation.

**Stipend:** A grant of money to a graduate student for expenses beyond tuition and fees. Graduate fellowships sometimes pay both tuition and a stipend, which can be applied toward living expenses.

**Thesis:** A research paper presented as a major, and usually the final, requirement of a degree program. The thesis is sometimes used interchangeably with “dissertation,” in Ph.D. research. More often it refers to a project more limited in scope completed as a Master’s requirement.