

# GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

Choosing a Field, Applying to Schools,  
Action Plans

The Best Way to Prepare for Graduate School!

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# Introduction



After four (or more) years of study at the undergraduate level, college students must choose between the job market or additional academic training.

Assess the value of a graduate degree in terms of personal/professional development, earning potential, entry into a profession, advancement and competitiveness.

Don't assume that you can't get into a program. You generally do not need to have an undergraduate degree in the same field or a high GPA. If you are lacking in one area, compensate in another.

Consider taking time off to gain "real world" experience if you aren't ready to commit to grad school.

If graduate school is in your plans, start the exploration process early because many graduate programs have deadlines as early as December for admission in the Fall.

# Choosing A Field of Graduate Study

Since graduate school requires specializing in a field, you must first decide on the field you're interested in. Don't underestimate this step! Many grad students switch programs because they made faulty assumptions about their field of interest. Talk to faculty, graduate students, the CELCD, and professionals in a variety of fields. Some resources include:

- ▶ RU Career Services has several books and directories.
- ▶ Peterson's or Barron's guides to graduate programs
- ▶ Accounting To Zoology, Graduate Fields Defined
- ▶ The College Board Index of Majors and Graduate Degrees
- ▶ The Official Guide to MBA Programs
- ▶ Looking at Law School
- ▶ College Source Online
- ▶ About.com Guide to Graduate School Admissions
- ▶ Gradview.com
- ▶ GradSchools.com
- ▶ Web U.S. Higher Education
- ▶ Internet Legal Resource Guide: Law School Rankings
- ▶ US News and World Report Best Grad Schools

# How Many Schools to Apply To?

It's common to apply to 4-10 schools. This depends on your qualifications, willingness to relocate, field of interest, etc. Apply to a range of the following categories:

- 1-3 extremely desirable programs with very competitive admission standards.
- Various realistic programs that meet your needs.
- 1-3 programs you are confident in being admitted to (Safety Schools).

## Choosing A School

A closer look should be taken at the curriculum, research, and faculty, as they play a major role in the reputation or quality of a program. The curriculum should be able to meet your expectations regarding what you hope to gain from your experience.

Talking to current students and faculty can give you a better picture of what the program offers. Also, the graduate catalog will detail courses and requirements.

Remember, the university's undergraduate reputation has little to do with its graduate programs. Some questions to consider are:

# Choosing A School (cont.)



## Overall Program

- ◆ What will this graduate degree do for me that my undergraduate degree won't?
- ◆ What characteristics distinguish this program from others in the same field?
- ◆ What is the average length of time students spend in the program? Does the program require summer attendance? What are the total credit hours required to complete the degree? (Compare this to other programs.)
- ◆ Does the program lean toward theory or application?
- ◆ Is the program accredited? (i.e. certified by a national board)
- ◆ What opportunities for leadership are provided?
- ◆ Does the program require a thesis, dissertation or passing comprehensive exams?
- ◆ What planned practical experiences are included in the program? (Ask for examples of internship placements.)
- ◆ What percentages of students in the graduate program attend full time/part time?
- ◆ What is the level of student retention?
- ◆ What is the student satisfaction with program? Also consider student gender/ethnic diversity, academic ability, and professional accomplishments of graduates.
- ◆ May I have the names of current graduate students so that I can discuss it with them?

# Choosing A School (cont.)

## Faculty

- What is the size of the faculty, and what is the faculty/student ratio? Are the faculty teaching and/or conducting research? Consider how much time they will be able to invest in you.
- What have faculty members published? How often do they publish?
- Does the faculty focus on an area that is of interest to you? What is their training?

## Financial Aid

- What is the cost of attending (compare to other schools)?
- What types of financial aid are offered: fellowships, grants, scholarships, assistantships, part-time jobs, subsidized (government pays interest while you're in school) and unsubsidized loans?
- How many are awarded each year?
- What are the process and deadlines for applying for the financial aid options?
- What criteria are used for choosing recipients?

## Other sources of financial aid include:

- American Association of Medical Colleges ([www.aamc.org/students/medloans](http://www.aamc.org/students/medloans))
- American Association of University Women ([www.aauw.org/fga/index.cfm](http://www.aauw.org/fga/index.cfm))
- FastWeb ([www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com))
- Gradview ([www.gradview.com/articles/financing.html](http://www.gradview.com/articles/financing.html))
- GrantsNet ([www.grantsnet.com](http://www.grantsnet.com))
- Kaplan Educational Centers ([www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com))
- Petersons ([www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com))



# Choosing A School (cont.)

## Student Life and Campus Facilities

- What are the social and cultural activities of the department?
- How adequate are the library, computer, and study facilities?
- What about cost, i.e., cost of living, out-of-state tuition, rent, on/off-campus housing, car insurance, and other miscellaneous expenses?

## Career Information

- Where are alumni employed? What can you tell me about last year's graduates?
- What career planning and job hunting assistance is available?
- What will be your earning potential?

## Admissions Requirements

- What is the relative importance of admissions test scores, undergraduate grades, recommendations, personal statements, related experience, and other requirements?
- How important is related-work experience? What experience is the program looking for?

# Applying



Entrance criteria vary. Deadlines can begin a year before your entrance date. Determine deadlines for graduate school applications, financial aid, fellowship, and assistantship applications. Send in applications early. Criteria for admissions will typically include:

- Undergraduate GPA (Official transcripts sent from all colleges attended)
- Completion of Prerequisites
- Admission Tests: GRE ([www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)), GMAT ([www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com)), LSAT ([www.lsas.org](http://www.lsas.org)), MCAT ([www.aamc.org/students/mcat](http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat)). Study guides can be found at Kaplan, the CELCD, the library, etc.)
- 2-3 Letters of Recommendation: Give reference ample time. Request more letters than needed in case one doesn't get finished in time. Send a thank-you to show appreciation.
- Personal Statement of Goals
- Admission Essays. Topics vary, but generally, what is looked for is:
  - motivation and commitment to a field of study
  - career expectations
  - writing ability
  - areas of interest
  - research and/or work experience
  - educational background
  - immediate and long-term goals
  - reasons for graduate study in specific field and institution
  - personal uniqueness/maturity
- Relevant Work Experience and/or Undergraduate Research
- Submitting a Resume
- Interviews, Portfolios, or Auditions



# Action Plan

Start 16 - 24 months before you wish to begin graduate school

As soon as you decide Grad School is right for you

- ☑ Clarify career objectives and determine if graduate school is the best choice
- ☑ Get to know your faculty; ask for advice
- ☑ Start taking your studies seriously and plan to take relevant courses
- ☑ Consider completing internships, volunteering and other out-of-class experiences
- ☑ Research graduate and professional school programs
- ☑ Develop your application process timeline
- ☑ Let the Career Services Center help you through this process
- ☑ Continue doing the above throughout this process

# Action Plan (CONT.)

## Summer Before Senior Year

- ☑ Sign up for required admissions test(s) offered in fall (GRE, GMAT, etc.)
- ☑ Prepare for and practice to take the admissions test(s)
- ☑ Obtain information and application materials from prospective schools
- ☑ Consult with professionals in the field
- ☑ Research scholarships, fellowships

## Fall

- ☑ Visit institutions if possible; talk to faculty and graduate students
- ☑ Take the required admissions tests (you may be able to retake these)
- ☑ Verify deadlines for admissions and financial aid materials
- ☑ Secure letters of recommendation and compose your personal statement
- ☑ Order transcripts from all post-secondary schools
- ☑ Complete applications forms
- ☑ Re-evaluate your goals and your progress

## Winter

- ☑ Submit Graduate School applications (may be earlier depending on date)
- ☑ Submit Financial Aid applications
- ☑ Follow-up with institutions to confirm that they have received your materials
- ☑ Prepare for personal interviews if required

## Spring

- ☑ Definitely visit campuses, if you have not done so, to see if this is where you want to spend the next segment of your life
- ☑ Evaluate offers and decide; contact the Chamber of Commerce to see what each location offers
- ☑ Prepare to transition (i.e. find a place to live, get familiar with the area, complete the FAFSA and other financial aid, etc.)

