

GRADUATE SCHOOL ADMISSIONS GUIDE

WHAT IS GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Graduate school refers to an advanced program of study after receiving a bachelor's degree. The main difference between graduate and undergraduate programs is that graduate programs are more specialized in an academic discipline or profession. Faculty members expect more of graduate students — attendance and class participation are not optional. Besides coursework, graduate students may be expected to conduct independent research, complete internships or fieldwork, and/or sit for comprehensive exams.

TYPES OF DEGREES

Master's degrees: Offered in many fields of study. Some are designed to lead to a doctoral degree while others are the "terminal" degree for a profession. For full-time students, completing a master's degree usually takes 2 years.

Specialist degrees: Usually earned in addition to a master's degree, and will require additional coursework, training, or internship experience. This type of degree usually prepares students for professional certification or licensing requirements (e.g., EdS for school principal).

Doctoral degrees: These are the highest degrees possible. They usually require the creation of new knowledge via independent research. The purpose of the program is to give you extensive knowledge of your field, train you to do original and meaningful research, and prepare you to function as a faculty member. Including the time it takes to write and defend a dissertation, this degree may take anywhere from 4-6 years to complete.

Common Degree Abbreviations

MA	Master of Arts	EdS	Education Specialist
MS	Master of Science	PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
MEd	Master of Education	JD	Juris Doctorate (Law Degree)
MBA	Master of Business Administration	EdD	Doctor of Education
MFA	Master of Fine Arts	MD	Doctor of Medicine
MM	Master of Music	DO	Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine
MPA	Master of Public Administration		

IS GRADUATE SCHOOL RIGHT FOR ME?

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Is a graduate degree needed for your professional and career goals, and are you passionate about the field?
- What can you do with a bachelor's degree in your chosen field? Talk to professors, advisors, and professionals in your field about career opportunities.
- Will you need a graduate degree to reach your goals? Have you decided on a specific career path? If not, then graduate school may not be the best option for you at this time. Graduate programs are typically very specialized and will not give you an opportunity to explore a variety of options.
- How will your personal values and goals fit into graduate school life? What is important to you? Prioritize your values to make sure graduate school is a good fit with your other values and goals.
- Are you willing to invest the time, energy, and money associated with going to graduate school? Have you thoroughly investigated these costs?
- Are you a viable candidate for graduate schools? Do you at least meet the minimum requirements for the programs that interest you?
- Do you have the career-related work experience that might help you get into graduate school?
- Does the idea of initiating and carrying out independent research excite you?

You Should Consider Graduate School If...

- Your desired profession either requires an advanced degree or heavily favors people with advanced degrees.
- Advanced education greatly increases your chances of advancement in your field.
- You need an advanced degree to increase your earning potential. You are confident that your increased earnings will outweigh the time, money, and energy you will invest in a graduate degree.
- You have a passion for your field of interest and appreciate the rigors of scholarly work.

You Should Do Further Research and/or Consider Other Options If...

- You do not know what to do with your life and hope you will find direction in graduate school.
- Your major was really interesting, but you do not know what kind of job you can get. You assume that if you go to graduate school, the job search will be easier.
- You plan to go on to graduate school in the same discipline as your undergraduate major, but you are not really sure if you want to continue studying this field.
- You are not ready to join the world of work just yet — college was fun so grad school must be, too!
- All your friends are going on to graduate school, so it must be the right thing to do.

TIMELINE FOR APPLYING

Spring of Junior Year — Summer before Senior Year

- Begin researching graduate programs, including visiting school websites.
- Meet with advisors, faculty members, and career development specialists to discuss programs.
- Make a note of deadlines for tests, registrations, applications, interviews, essays, etc. Most deadlines for fall enrollment are between December and March, while later deadlines fall between March and August.
- Sign up for required standardized tests. Consider preparing for the test and taking it now to allow time for retesting if necessary.
- Identify potential reference letter writers.
- Identify an initial list of 10 to 15 prospective graduate schools based on your career goals and values.
- Begin looking into financial aid.
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service.

Fall of Senior Year

- Take standardized tests.
- Generate a final list of universities to which you want to apply. The Career Development Center recommends applying the “Rule of 6” — choose two “reach,” two “middle-of-the-pack,” and two “safe bets.”
- Write draft of application essays/statement of purpose. Include career goals and areas of interest.
- Apply for financial aid available through program; assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, etc.
- Request letters of recommendation from faculty members and former employers from related jobs.
- Order official transcripts. Be sure to request transcripts from all of the schools from which you have earned college credit, including hours obtained while in high school.
- Finalize your essay/statement of purpose and have it reviewed at the Career Development Center.
- Submit application for programs that have a late fall deadline.

Spring of Senior Year

- Fill out the FAFSA form. Get the FAFSA in as soon after January 1 as possible.
- Submit all applications even if they are not yet due. Many schools pay special attention to early applications. Programs that roll admissions could even fill their seats before the stated application deadline.
- You should start to receive admission offers around April. Compare offers based on your top values.
- Visit prospective campuses, if possible, and talk to faculty/students to help you make your final decision.
- Research deadlines to apply for graduate assistantships offered by your program or other campus departments.
- Make a decision — call other programs to decline or withdraw.
- Send thank-you notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters or helped you during the application process, informing them of your success and future plans.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Accreditation: There are two main types of accreditation, institutional and program specific. You need to determine the properly accredited degree programs in your field. While accreditation is not necessarily the key indicator of quality, you could face negative consequences if the program that confers your degree is not accredited.

Admission Standards: Most schools publish this kind of information, so look for the number of applicants compared with the number of acceptances and the base requirements for admission, which usually include undergraduate grade-point average and scores on standardized tests.

Reputation: While rankings are an important measure of quality, you also need to investigate the source of the rankings as each use a different set of criteria. Examples of organizations that rank graduate programs include U.S. News & World Report and Business Week.

Faculty: Are the program's faculty members well published? Do they publish in well-regarded peer reviewed journals? What are they currently researching? Does this research match your interests?

Multicultural/Diversity Opportunities: Better programs tend to be diverse because diversity of all types often can signal a broader worldview. Examine the composition of both the faculty and the students in the program. You need to determine a mix where you'll feel both comfortable and appropriately challenged.

Current Students: Request contact information or arrange a talk with current students to learn the pros and cons of the program from an insider's view. What is the average age of the students enrolled? Do students attend primarily full or part-time? Are there any student organizations? Where do most of them live with respect to the campus? What support services are on campus?

Location: Where is the school located? What is the climate? What recreational activities are available? What is the social atmosphere? Can you be happy in this environment for the duration of your program?

Cost: What is the tuition for the program? What kind of financial assistance is available? Do they have a variety of assistantships, fellowships, grants, and loans? Make sure you examine all associated costs, including tuition, books and supplies, housing, and miscellaneous fees and expenses.

Career Assistance: Does the program assist with the job search after you receive your degree? Where do the graduates end up working? What opportunities for internships, research, and jobs are available while you are in the program?

Graduation Requirements: Does the program require an exit project, such as a thesis, dissertation, or comprehensive exam?

APPLICATION MATERIALS

A complete graduate school application usually consists of:

Application Form

Applications are often online and help to determine that you meet the minimum qualifications for the graduate school. You will likely have to apply to the graduate school as well as the specific department.

Application Fee

You should plan to have approximately \$300 to \$500 available, as application fees can be as much as \$80 per school. These fees are typically not refundable for any reason, so do your research and be fairly certain of your interest in a school before applying.

Official Transcripts

Just about every graduate program requires an official transcript from every post-secondary institution you have attended, even if you took only one course at an institution. An “official” transcript bears the university’s seal and the signature of its registrar. You can order UCO official transcripts for free through UCONNECT, fax, mail, or in person.

<https://www.uco.edu/em/registrar/transrequest.asp>.

Admission Essay

Also called a personal statement, letter of intent, letter of purpose, and other titles, the admission essay is your chance to influence the admissions committee beyond what is apparent in a transcript or resume. While most schools want you to address such basic questions as “Why are you interested in the field?”, “Why are you interested in this program?”, and “Why do your experiences make you a qualified candidate?” be aware that the wording of the essay question varies from school to school. Pay very close attention to how the question is worded and be sure to answer the question that is actually asked. For more help writing essays, visit the Career Development Center or Tutoring Central’s Writing Center.

General Essay Tips:

- Essay should be typed, not handwritten, and error free.
- Read the questions! Make sure you respond to the questions asked. Follow instructions regarding length of essay. If there is no limit, two double-spaced pages is a good rule of thumb.
- Use a strong opening sentence or paragraph. Try to grab the reader’s attention.
- Be clear and concise. Organize your essay effectively.

Content Tips:

- Include a combination of personal and academic information.
- Discuss the history of your interest and your goals for obtaining the graduate degree.
- When talking about yourself, use examples rather than just stating facts.
- Do not simply repeat information found elsewhere in your application, such as extracurricular activities. Go beyond the obvious and indicate how these activities have impacted you or your choice of career.
- Substantiate your academic preparation and ability to perform. Be as specific about your career goals as possible. Emphasize your passion for the field.
- Indicate some knowledge of the program to which you are applying — the more specific, the better.
- Be yourself. Don’t write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear.
- Be positive and enthusiastic. Help the admissions committee learn who you are beyond the “numbers.”
- Avoid controversial topics like politics and religion. Don’t criticize the profession that you plan to join.
- Avoid clichés, for example, “I want to be a doctor because I’m good at science and I like to help people.”
- The statement can include some explanation of less-than-stellar grades or test scores.

Before You Send It:

- Ask yourself and others if your essay is relevant, interesting, and memorable.
- Always have someone proofread your essay — particularly a professor or someone familiar with admission essays.
- Don’t send exactly the same essay to several schools if the questions asked are different.
- Never send an essay to one school with the name of another school in the text! This happens, and it’s a serious turn off to admissions committees.

Resources

- <http://www.gradschools.com/get-informed/applying-graduate-school/essay-writing>
- www.statementofpurpose.com
- www.accepted.com/grad/personalstatement.aspx

Test Scores

Most graduate and professional schools require scores on at least one standardized test for admission. Typically getting a minimum score is required for consideration for a program, but getting that score does not guarantee admission. We encourage you find out about the “average” test scores of people admitted to a program in which you have an interest.

Types of Standardized Tests:

- Graduate Record Exam (GRE) General and Subject test — the most commonly required exam by many academic programs (master’s and doctoral degrees), <http://www.ets.org/gre>
- Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) — MBA and other management programs, <http://www.gmac.com/gmat.aspx>
- Law School Admission Test (LSAT) — <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat/>
- Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) — www.aamc.org/students/mcat
- Dental Admission Test (DAT) — <http://www.ada.org/en/education-careers/dental-admission-test/>
- Optometry Admission Test (OAT) — <http://www.ada.org/en/oat>
- Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) — English proficiency test for international students, www.toefl.org
- Miller Analogies Test (MAT) — Accepted by a variety of graduate programs, http://www.pearsonassessments.com/postsecondaryeducation/graduate_admissions/mat.html

Letters of Recommendation

While your grades, test scores and experience will weigh the heaviest in admission decisions, a well written recommendation can often be a deciding factor. You will typically be asked for 2 or 3, but each university will specify exactly the number they require. A program may provide a recommendation form for your recommenders or simply request a letter.

When deciding who to request letters from, you should consider the following:

- A professor in your field who knows you well and can speak to your academic (and possibly research) abilities.
- Someone in your field who has supervised you through an internship, field work, job, etc.
- Start thinking about potential recommenders early. Visit professors during office hours, get involved in research or community service projects, and/or have conversations with supervisors about your career goals.

FUNDING GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate school can be expensive; however, financial aid is available in several forms. Depending on your program and school, you may qualify for scholarships, fellowships, grants, assistantships, loans, and more.

- **Fellowships:** Are designed to encourage study in your area. Applications are generally available from departments or agencies. Fellowships vary and may include tuition and a stipend. They usually require full-time enrollment.
- **Assistantships:** Are teaching, research, and other staff positions that usually include tuition, a stipend, and some benefits.
- **Scholarships:** Are awarded to incoming graduate students with proven academic records of achievement and typically focus on a specific area of study. Applications are generally available from departments or agencies.
- **Loans:** Are available through the government or private lenders. Private loans generally cost more than federal loans. Many students have to borrow money, but remember that it is an investment in your future.

To apply for federal aid, you must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Your school may also require this to apply for scholarships and other forms of aid. To complete your FAFSA online, visit <https://fafsa.ed.gov/>.

For more information on your financial aid options, visit...

- <http://www.uco.edu/graduate/financial/index.asp>
- <http://www.gradview.com/finaid/index.html>
- <http://www.finaid.org>
- <http://www.fastweb.com>