

PENNSSTATE



Altoona

# Applying to Graduate and Professional School



## Unlock your Future at Career Services

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# **Applying to Graduate and Professional School**

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## **SHOULD I WORK FIRST OR GO DIRECTLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?**

An argument can be made for going directly after graduation, as well as for going after you have gained a few years of experience. If you are considering a profession such as law, medicine, and college or university teaching where education beyond the baccalaureate level is required, going immediately after graduation would probably be your choice. Many new college graduates, though, are unsure of their career interests and goals and view the graduate experience as a way to “find” themselves. This view can present a problem at the graduate level as many programs and professors expect you to have clearly defined interests and an area of specialization.

In many ways, work experience related to your interests prior to entering graduate school can lead to a more effective graduate program. Work experience can help clarify ambiguous career goals and focus you on an area of specialization. Also, the perspective, learning, and maturity acquired from practical experience can be applied to the theoretical concepts promoted in your studies and should increase your understanding of them.

Your decision depends on your situation and field of study. Consider the following factors:

- some graduate programs, including many MBA programs, strongly encourage people to get work experience first. See if this is the case for your field of interest
- how do you feel about more tests, papers, reading, etc.? Does the thought of more studying leave you cold? If so, you may need a break, even for only six months or a year
- how does a graduate education fit into your personal and professional interests and growth? Try not to use graduate school as a way to postpone making difficult decisions. You might feel even more pressure and confusion later on
- if your undergraduate grades are marginal, you may need to work while taking courses part-time to demonstrate to a graduate department (and perhaps also yourself) that you are capable of succeeding

## **HOW CAN I DECIDE WHICH FIELD IS BEST FOR ME TO STUDY?**

You need to think about what you want to study, the skills you would like to enhance through your graduate work, and how they relate to your interests, values, abilities, and possible career direction.

Get information about the field you are considering. One of the biggest mistakes people make is to jump into a program based on inadequate information, perhaps because it has been highly recommended. If you feel unsure about your direction, you can come to the Career Services Office for career counseling.

## **WHERE CAN I GET INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS?**

First, you need to decide what you want and what is necessary for your field. In your junior year, you should begin to explore schools offering the type of program you want.

The single most effective method is talking to professors and graduate students. Since many of them have studied or worked with professors at other schools, they know about the reputations and research orientations of departments across the country.

Guides to graduate study are located in the Career Library in 126 Slep or in the Eiche Library. Some books describe graduate admissions and education in specific disciplines such as medicine, law, business, and psychology, while others are directories for a wide variety of graduate programs and institutions of higher education. These guides identify and briefly outline academic programs, financial aid resources, costs of study, application requirements, and other helpful information.

Some graduate program offices, such as pre-law and pre-medicine, have small information centers with pamphlets, books, graduate school bulletins and other resources.

You will also find many resources on the Internet. A good place to look is <http://www.petersons.com>.

Bulletins and pamphlets from graduate departments describing specific programs often include course titles and descriptions, names and degrees of faculty, areas of specialization and/or research, and admissions criteria. You can send a postcard to a university or specific department requesting your own copy. Visit some schools if at all possible. This will give you a much better “feel” for the programs you visit. Make arrangements in advance to meet with faculty, the individual who coordinates the applicant review, and some graduate students. If you cannot visit, call someone there. Request specific information about the research being conducted, course content, and admissions criteria.

To evaluate programs you should look at several characteristics. You should consider:

- quality of the faculty (including research interests and how they match your own interests)
- courses and concentrations related to your interests
- prestige of the institution facilities
- overall costs and financial aid opportunities
- geographic location
- opportunities available for experiential learning
- placement opportunities
- accreditation in your field, if applicable

Many different organizations and publications offer ratings of graduate schools and programs, but they vary on the criteria used, so read each rating and its introduction carefully to learn how judgments were made. Much of the decision is based on factors of personal importance over the ratings a school receives.

### **WHAT ARE THE ADMISSIONS CRITERIA?**

The specific criteria and their relative weights vary, depending on the academic discipline, particular education institution, and number of applicants. The most important criteria generally include:

- undergraduate grade point average
- success in relevant courses
- admission test scores
- strong, descriptive letters of recommendation
- evidence of genuine interest on application and/or a cover letter
- relevant work experience and/or undergraduate research experience
- interview (when required)
- well-written admissions essays

Faculty, books, and articles can provide specific information about grade point average, and admission test score criteria. Certain programs have very high grade point average or test cutoff points, while for others, work experience and evidence of success in relevant courses are much more important. Do not assume that you can never get into a discipline. Remember that course requirements differ from one graduate program to another.

You generally do not need to have an undergraduate degree in the same or a closely allied field. Law and medical school, for example, prefer that the applicant’s major be in an area of the student’s interest. Check to see what courses are required, however. The course work can be taken subsequent to graduation, if necessary. At some universities you can complete these courses as a non-degree graduate student seeking to become qualified for a program.

If the programs you first investigate have admissions criteria that you cannot meet, look for related programs in other fields with less stringent criteria. You may discover a challenging, relevant program or field that you have not considered.

Do not underestimate the importance of relevant work, independent study, or research experience if you have borderline grades or test scores. You can also increase your chance of being admitted, if on your application, you demonstrate a genuine interest in the field.

If you have graduated and been successful in your career, you may be pleasantly surprised to discover that your post-graduate achievements have more weight than your undergraduate grade point average.

In addition to the complete application form, items required by you for application might include graduate admission test scores, transcripts, letters of recommendation, and an essay or statement of intent.

## **Graduate Admissions Tests**

The tests required vary by type of graduate study. Typical admissions tests include:

- GRE (Graduate Record Exam)
- GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)
- LSAT (Law School Admission Test)
- MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)
- DAT (Dental Admission Test)
- OAT (Optometry Admission Test)
- VAT (Veterinary Aptitude Test)

The graduate schools' catalogs will specify which test you need and will often indicate average scores needed to be competitive for acceptance. You should plan to take the appropriate test approximately one year before your anticipated matriculation date.

You may need to brush up on your test taking knowledge and skills. Studying for any of these exams is best done by following the suggestions in the registration booklet. There are many books and services available for practice and strategy development. Before you buy a book or enroll in an often costly review course, decide if you learn better by reading and practicing independently (books) or by instruction and group practice (review course). If you can, evaluate the content and style of the books or programs, you are considering to see if you can understand them and can learn from them.

## **Transcripts**

Official transcripts of your undergraduate work and any other graduate work you have completed must be sent to the graduate schools. This may be done at the end of your junior year or in the middle of your senior year or, for those going on later, at any point after you have graduated. Contact the Registrar's Office to have your transcripts sent; anticipate a fee for this service.

## **Letters of Recommendation**

Ideally, you should begin to think about this a year before applying to graduate school in order to ensure that professors and other relevant professionals have gotten to know you well enough to write good references. Most graduate programs require that two or three recommendation letters be sent. Some programs enclose evaluation forms to be filled out by each reference.

Schools prefer and sometimes require that at least one and sometimes two references be on the faculty or staff of a university or college, preferably in the same department where you are currently studying and/or in the same field in which you are applying to do your graduate study. If you have worked in a job related to the field, a supervisor may provide an excellent reference.

When choosing reference people, an important consideration is how well and in what depth the individual will describe you in the letter. If a doctoral teaching assistant knows you better than a full professor, for example, she/he may write a better, stronger reference.

When approaching people for reference letters, ask each person if she/he knows you well enough to write a meaningful letter. Also, provide as much "lead time" as possible, a month or more if possible. If the individual appears reluctant, politely say you can find someone else.

To help the person write a relevant, favorable letter, it is best to provide a copy of your resumé, your goals for graduate school, the schools to which you are applying, and any forms the person has been requested to complete. Also include a stamped, self-addressed envelope unless the school has specified a different procedure.

Don't be afraid to check with each reference one or more times prior to the deadline to see if the letter has been sent. Many people with good intentions get busy and forget the deadline.

## **Application Essay**

Most schools will require that you write an essay or statement on your background and interests as they relate to your field of study. These are often used as an opportunity to see you beyond the “numbers” in the admissions criteria. Many schools will also ask you to provide short answer essays to specific questions within your field to assess your knowledge and understanding of the field you are entering. These essays are one measure of your ability to write, to build arguments, and to think critically. They also assess your enthusiasm for the field of study, creativity, maturity, and uniqueness.

Applications differ in the extent to which the writer is requested to write essays or short answers. MBA applications are noted for including one or more long essay questions about the applicant’s purpose and direction. Some applications for science programs do not even have short-answer questions about the candidate. In this case, a cover letter addressing the three points listed above will help you “stand out from the crowd”.

Have someone review your essay for content, grammar, and spelling. Often the best people to critique your essay are your advisor or your recommendation letter writers, as they will be able to tell you what to stress and what to minimize or delete. You can also bring your essay(s) to the Career Services Office. Take your time developing your essay(s); they are often the most crucial part of your application.

## **HOW MANY SCHOOLS SHOULD I APPLY TO?**

A common recommendation when selecting graduate programs is to apply to five schools, reflecting the following categories:

- one program that is extremely desirable to you, with competitive admission standards
- three programs that are realistic for you in terms of admission standards and also meet your criteria
- one program you are confident about getting into which meets your criteria
- some students choose to apply to 10 or more graduate programs. This can become costly in terms of time filling out the forms and money (most application fees are \$35 and up). Some professors are reluctant to complete more than 5-7 recommendation forms, especially since they tend to be slightly different for each school

If you are having difficulty narrowing your list of graduate schools, take the following steps:

- think carefully about exactly what aspects of the field you want to concentrate on, the types of research you are interested in, etc
- have you gotten *specific* information about the faculty, facilities, and programs of interest to you? Compare that information carefully with your academic and/or career interests
- consider criteria about the institution and community, such as size, facility location, cultural factors, cost of living, and weather conditions

## **WHEN SHOULD I START SENDING OUT APPLICATIONS?**

Many graduate programs have February or early March deadlines, while for some it is best to apply in November or December of your senior year for admission the following fall. Generally, the more competitive the program, the earlier you need to submit all the application materials.

Professors in a given discipline usually know the general guidelines regarding the best time to apply. It is also essential to carefully read the application from each school. It is best to start filling out applications and soliciting recommendations two to three months prior to the deadline. It can be hard to anticipate what types of problems will delay the process. For example, letters of recommendation are often delayed when professors are busy. Most schools that fail to receive all your application materials (application, test scores, transcript, letters of recommendation) by the deadline date will not consider your application.

## HOW CAN I BEST FILL OUT THE APPLICATION?

The application should be completed neatly, accurately, and completely. It must be easy to read, free from any errors, and include all the information requested. You need to convey three important points in your application:

- your sincere interest in that particular program
- your future goals and direction, and the relevance of the program
- your major strengths, skills, and achievements

Each of these three points need to be elaborated concisely and in a clear, organized writing style, with specific details and examples as space permits.

## WHAT FINANCIAL AID IS AVAILABLE?

Three kinds of financial aid are available: (1) work programs, such as graduate assistantships and college work study programs; (2) monetary awards, including grants, fellowships and scholarships; and (3) loans, usually administered through banks, the government, or the educational institution. *Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs: An Overview*, provides a detailed description of each type of financial aid.

Because every graduate school has its own application process and system of awarding aid, you must obtain that information directly from each of the institutions to which you are applying. You can check with both the financial aid office and the graduate academic department.

Loans and college work study programs are awarded on the basis of financial need. To determine need, many graduate schools require that the applicant submit either the G.APSFAS (Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service) form, or the FAF, (Financial Aid Form), both of which are administered by the College Scholarship Service of the College Board. You will be considered a dependent of your parents if you have been claimed on their last federal income tax form, have lived with them for a specific period of time, or received more than a specified amount of money from them. To obtain the most up-to-date information on these restrictions, talk with a graduate financial aid officer.

Graduate assistantships pay tuition and a stipend for living expenses. Most are administered by academic departments and involve either 10 or 20 hours of work per week. Teaching assistantships involve assisting a professor with grading, office hours, and recitation sections or being responsible for the entire teaching of one or more courses. Research assistantships involve assisting ongoing research and can evolve into conducting your own research project for a thesis. Administrative assistantships are much less common and can involve managing a small facility such as a computer lab.

## GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL APPLICATION ACTION PLAN

### Junior Year, Fall and Spring

- research areas of interest, institutions, and programs
- talk to advisors about application requirements
- register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission tests
- investigate national scholarships
- if appropriate, obtain letters of recommendation

### Junior Year, Summer

- take required graduate admissions tests
- write for application materials
- visit institutions of interest, if possible
- write your application essay
- check on application deadlines and rolling admissions policies
- for medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use

### Senior Year, Fall

- obtain letters of recommendation
- take graduate admission tests if you haven't already
- send in completed applications
- register for Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service (G.APSFAS), if required

### Senior Year, Spring

- check with all institutions before the deadline to make sure your file is complete
- visit institutions that accept you. Send a deposit to your institution of choice
- notify other colleges and universities that accepted you of your decision so that they may admit students on their waiting list
- send thank you notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters, informing them of your success

## Resources Available in the Career Library

*American Association of Dental Schools Admission Requirements*, 2000  
*Bear's Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning*, 2006  
*Finding Your Way With an MBA*, 2000  
*Game Plan for Getting Into Business School*, 2000  
*Game Plan for Getting Into Graduate School*, Marion B. Castellucci, 2000  
*Game Plan for Getting Into Law School*, 2000  
*Game Plan for Getting Into Medical School*, 2000  
*Get Into Law School: A Strategic Approach*, 2004  
*Getting Into Law School*, 2000  
*GMAT Test Prep Guide*, 2003  
*Graduate & Professional Programs: An Overview*, 2003  
*Graduate Admissions Essay*, 2000  
*Graduate Medical Education Directory*, 2002-2003  
*Graduate Programs in Arts and Architecture*, 2001  
*Graduate Programs in Biology*, 2001  
*Graduate Programs in Business, Education, Health, Information Studies, Law & Social Work*, 2003  
*Graduate Programs in Education*, 2003  
*Graduate Programs in Engineering & Applied Sciences*, 2003  
*Graduate Programs in Engineering & Computer Science*, 2003  
*Graduate Programs in Humanities*, 2002  
*Graduate Programs in Physical Sciences*, 2002  
*Graduate Programs in Psychology*, 2003  
*Graduate Programs in Social Sciences*, 2003  
*Graduate Programs in the Health Professions*, 2002  
*Graduate Programs in the Physical Sciences, Mathematics, Agricultural Sciences, the Environment & Natural Resources*, 2000  
*Graduate School Admissions Adviser*, 2001  
*Graduate School Guide*, 2000  
*Guide to Medical and Dental Schools*, 2000  
*Health Professions Admissions*, 2004  
*How to Get a PhD - A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*, 2001  
*How to Prepare for the GRE Test*, 2000  
*Law School Admissions Adviser*, 2001  
*Law School Confidential*, 2004  
*Law Schools*, 2004  
*Logic & Reading Review for the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT*, 2003  
*LSAT Test Prep Guide*, 2001  
*Making It Into a Top Graduate School*, 2001  
*MBA Programs*, 2001  
*MCAT Sample Exams*, 2002  
*Medical School Admissions Adviser*, 2002  
*Negotiating Graduate School Second Edition*, 2002  
*Osteopathic Medical College Information Book*, 2003  
*Peterson's Graduate Schools in the U.S.*, 2007  
*Podiatric Medicine: A Career That Fits Your Future*, 2002  
*PRAXIS II Exam Prep Guide*, 2001  
*Teachers Certification Tests*, 1999  
*The 2004 Pfizer Medical School Manual*



**This publication is available in alternative media upon request.**

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