

## **FIRST THINGS FIRST: IS GRADUATE SCHOOL FOR YOU?**

In a sense, a four-year undergraduate college is a continuation of high school, a place where students are nurtured, guided, scolded, encouraged and shaped by teachers, administrators, and by their peers. Graduate school is, in contrast, a place where the workload is often incredibly heavy, the competition fierce, and the days generally unrelieved by organized extra-curricular activity or sports.

At its best, graduate school is a time of remarkable collegiality, of being at the same time at the feet of your teachers and working with them as colleagues. You are being called into a learned society, from which you should emerge with an increased capacity for service - to an organization, to a community, even to friends and family. But to succeed you must be highly organized, and prepared for a demanding way of life.

As you consider the option of attending graduate school, a simple but important question must be answered. Why do you want to go? That may seem obvious, and yet some graduating seniors continue on with their schooling with a variety of misconceptions, unclear goals and inadequate research. The result can be disappointment and unrealized expectations.

Often, the graduate school decision is made on the basis of a program of coursework that sounds good and holds vague promises of interesting employment. In too many cases, the graduate school applicant has only a dim awareness of the kinds of work which lie at the end of the graduate school program.

There are 3 basic reasons (or a combination of them) to go to graduate school\*:

**1. A graduate degree is essential for going into certain professions:**

Law, health care (medicine, dentistry, public health, veterinary medicine, mental health), teaching at the college level, engineering, library administration, scientific research, technical administration, etc., all require advanced degrees.

**2. A graduate degree can help to advance your career.** Those with a Master's in Business Administration on the whole have more opportunity for advancement and greater responsibility than non-MBA'S. The same could be said for engineers and teachers with advanced degrees. But note that the above statement says that it *can* help you, not that it will; an advanced degree is not a guarantee of a job or of a certain income level.

**3. A graduate degree can give you the personal satisfaction derived from advanced learning.** Some work for years on a Ph.D. because they are on a learning adventure and need the guidance and structure university-based

study offers. Many earn a law degree with no intention of practicing law, but because what they learn will have so many implications in business, education and administration.

\*From *Beyond the Ivy Wall* by Greene and Minton (Little, Brown & Co).

## **SECOND QUESTION: WHY NOW?**

Timing is a critical concern when it comes to graduate school and it is one of the issues you will want to thoroughly research. Most Master's of Business Administration programs today, for instance, look for individuals with at least two years of work experience prior to enrollment. Many other graduate and professional schools also prefer applicants who have had some relevant experience beyond their undergraduate years. Notable examples are: schools of journalism, law, social work, education and counseling. Medical schools are a prominent exception and there are others who still prefer to take applicants directly from college.

Topping the list of poor reasons to go on to graduate school is the seeming lack of any other good options. It is better to wait than to be tempted to choose a course of graduate study before you have sufficiently explored the world of work to chart your career direction. Also, some students have a natural tendency to continue their education simply because it offers the opportunity to stay in an environment which they find familiar and comfortable. Graduate work immediately following your baccalaureate degree is not necessarily the best option.

## **HOW TO BEGIN: GATHER INFORMATION**

*Research is an important part of graduate education, so consider this your first (and perhaps most important) research project.*

Talk to your professors. It is amazing how many students are well along in their planning and have failed to take this *first step*. If you are reading this and have not discussed your plans with faculty in the field you intend to pursue, do it now! If they don't know the answers to your questions, chances are they will know where to send you to find out. They will also be able to help you assess your capability for graduate school and advise you on the advantages for you of a particular graduate program. And don't just talk to them about the academic details; discuss the impact graduate education had on their personal life as well.

Talk to professionals. Part of the process both of determining the appropriateness of graduate school and then selecting the best one, should involve talking to those working the field you wish to pursue. They may have important suggestions and guidance, including things they would do differently if they had it to do again. As noted earlier, too many students enter graduate

school with only the vaguest notion of what they hope to do when their program is completed. Discussions with several professionals in the field will provide invaluable information to help with the decision-making process. They can also suggest possible resources in the professional literature.

Look at graduate school catalogs on the internet. Most programs will have helpful websites that provide detailed information, including class and staff descriptions.

Look at profession-specific guides to graduate programs. One example is the American Psychological Association's *Guide to Graduate Schools in Psychology*.

Look at Peterson's Guides to Graduate and Professional Programs online. This multi-volume set has brief descriptions of graduate programs by field of study. Information about entrance requirements, application dates, tuition costs, etc., along with addresses and phone numbers, will be provided in this resource (website: [petersons.com](http://petersons.com)).

Contact the department you are interested in, and visit if you can. If you are at the beginning of the exploration process, a phone call could save you a \$30.00 application fee. Admission personnel are generally candid and helpful in discussing your chances of admission and more than willing to discuss individual program characteristics. But if you find yourself seriously interested, if at all possible make a visit and talk with one or more faculty as well as students in the program (phone contact is second-best, but still very beneficial). This kind of involvement will not only help you make your decision, but may well enhance the possibility of acceptance should you choose to apply. There is no substitute for personal contact, for you and for them, in the process of sorting out graduate school direction.

## **EVALUATING A GRADUATE PROGRAM**

The following are important considerations in choosing a graduate program:

Department- Consider the quality of the department, not the institution. Many distinguished universities have a few weak departments and many lesser-known institutions have several excellent departments.

Faculty- The reputation of the faculty in your area of specialization is the most important consideration. Because faculty members are judged by the quality of their research, it is important to find out about their publications and the research projects with which they have been associated.

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.

Facilities- Find out about the libraries, laboratories, and research facilities available. The breadth and depth of the library collections in your particular field of interest, museums, scientific equipment of all kinds, cooperative arrangements with affiliated educational and research institutions, are all of importance.

Size- Consider the size of the program, the most critical factor being the ratio of faculty to students in the specific graduate program. In a large program the applicant should be concerned with the ratio of active faculty to students and the number of students in the common first-year graduate courses. In a small program, the concern is focused upon the number of active faculty members and the number and scope of the graduate seminars offered.

A word on the overall size of the university: 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 many classes of mixed undergraduate and graduate students, restricted class offerings, and a relative scarcity of excellent fellow students.

Language Requirements, Dissertation, etc.- Some graduate programs require demonstrated competence in either one or two languages before the advanced degree is awarded. Universities may also require (or permit as a substitute for foreign language) knowledge of a research tool; for example, computer programming or statistics. If you are weak in foreign languages, you should be careful to include in your estimates of your work load how much more time than your fellow students you will have to spend developing your language skills. Similarly, you should carefully investigate how much major research effort you will be expected to make and whether or not a dissertation is required on the Master's degree level.

Financial Aid- Most large universities are able to provide some form of financial aid to graduate students. Spend time investigating the various resources within the department to which you are applying, and the financial aid office. Typical graduate financial aid packages include grants, tuition waiver, teaching assistantships, work study, and loans (see later section on Financial Aid).

## **GAINING ADMISSION**

The admissions process and requirements can vary greatly depending on the school, so it is very important early on to determine all you need to do. Do not make the mistake of applying too late and do not assume that what you do for one school will apply to another.

1. **The Graduate Record Exam** (website: gre.org)- is a three-and-a-half hour test measuring verbal, quantitative and analytical abilities. While most schools require the GRE, it is best to check with your specific graduate school's admissions office for up to date information.

The ***verbal*** sections of the test measures your ability to:

- analyze and draw conclusions from discourse; reason from incomplete data, identify author's assumptions, and/or perspective; understand multiple levels of meaning; such a literal, figurative and author's intent.
- select important points; distinguish major from minor or relevant points; summarize text; understand the structure of a text.
- understand the meanings of words; sentences and entire texts; understand relationships among words and among concepts.

The ***quantitative reasoning*** sections measure your ability to:

- understand quantitative information.
- interpret and analyze quantitative information.
- solve problems using mathematical models.
- apply basic mathematical skills and elementary mathematical concepts of arithmetic, algebra, geometry and data interpretation.
- includes real-life scenarios.

The ***analytical writing*** sections measure your ability to:

- articulate complex ideas clearly and effectively.
- support ideas with relevant reasons and examples.
- examine claims and accompanying evidence.
- sustain a well-focused, coherent discussion.
- control the elements of standard written English.

\*You will be asked to complete one 'analyze an issue' task and one 'analyze an argument' task

The GRE is only offered only in a computerized form, which can be taken at over 300 domestic and 190 international sites, year round. Official score reports are available within 10-15 days. There are also subject area tests which may be required by a graduate program (e.g., Biology, Chemistry, Economics, History,

and Psychology). Subject test are currently offered three times a year.

Remember that your performance on the GRE is only a part of the basis for the admission decision, and acceptable scores may vary greatly depending on the school and type of program.

**2. Other Tests** - There are specific tests for specialized graduate study including: The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), Law School Admission Test (LSAT), Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), Dental Admission Test (DAT), and the Millers Analogy Test (MAT).

The GMAT is required for most MBA programs and the MAT by certain programs in Counseling, Education and Psychology.

**3. Essays or Personal Statements** - An applicant to graduate school is usually asked to include with the application one or more personal statements, each consisting of a few paragraphs stating motivations for graduate study, plans after graduating, aspirations, interests, accomplishments or anything else that seems relevant to an admissions decision. This should be seen as an opportunity rather than a drudge because it will force you to clarify and focus your thinking.

This essay should convey your seriousness in pursuing advanced academic study by illustrating your intellectual growth and how you came to be where you are in your field. Include current interests and activities (intellectual, social, cultural, field work, independent studies, etc.), reading and career plans. In describing your personal objectives, it is better to focus on the discrete rather than the global. Also, it is good to discuss your highest academic objective; that is, if you have serious thoughts about earning a Ph.D., that should be stated as the goal. Share this essay with faculty, preferably those from whom you will request letters of recommendation. This will enable you to solidify ideas and obtain a critical reading in order to have a smooth, concise and substantial essay. Clear, logical expression illustrative of your cognitive style will in most cases count for more than creative writing ability.

If possible, reflect some knowledge and understanding of the institution and program for which you are applying, and the work of professors with whom you want to study.

**4. Letters of Reference** - Statements from faculty may well be one of the most important elements of your application. If you are planning ahead, it would be wise to make it a priority to get to know your professors, and let them know you. The more they know of your abilities, skills, motivations and personal character, the more complete and effective letter they can write on your behalf. Graduate school is primarily an academic environment and admissions

committees (made up mostly of faculty) are very interested in how their colleagues at another institution of higher learning view you and the prospects you have for success in graduate school. You should ask faculty who can comment on your undergraduate academic preparation, your potential for graduate study and your commitment to your proposed field of study. It may help to share your essay(s) and your transcript with potential reference writers as well as discussing your goals and aspirations with them.

5. **Research.** In some fields, research experience is an important criteria for entrance, and the more independent the work, the better.

6. **Deadlines** - Although January 1 is a common deadline for admissions applications for many programs, some of the more popular programs stop accepting applications as early as December 1. On the other hand, many good programs still accept applications as late as June. Be sure and check the deadlines for the programs to which you are applying.

***VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE TO MONITOR YOUR APPLICATION PROCESS, TO BE SURE THAT SUBMITTED MATERIALS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED, AND THAT ALL REQUIREMENTS HAVE BEEN MET.***

## FINANCIAL AID FOR GRADUATE STUDY

Most graduate awards have traditionally been based on academic accomplishment and scholarly promise. The primary sources of graduate student support are the following:

1. **Grants and Fellowships** are outright awards that usually require no service in return. Often they provide the cost of tuition and fees plus a stipend for living expenses. As a rule, grants are awarded based on financial need and fellowships on academic ability. Sources may include Federal and State support and aid from institutions, corporations and foundations.
2. **Assistantships**, which require the performance of services, may range from work in the residence hall or reading freshman papers, to classroom teaching or participation in a research project. Some of the benefits often included are health care coverage, bookstore discounts and tuition waivers. Work-study funds may also be available. In addition to their financial benefits, these positions frequently provide valuable experience that will help you when you seek employment later.
3. **Loans** are available from a variety of sources. The Guaranteed Student Loan Program has been renamed the Stafford Loan Program and is available to those who are enrolled at least half time in a degree or certificate program. To qualify you must demonstrate financial need. Other loan options include the Supplemental Loans for Students, the Carl D. Perkins loan program, institutional loans and specific study loans such as the Health Professions Student Loan Program.

Some institutions may require that you submit a GAPS FAS (Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service) Application Form. The majority of graduate students receive their support directly from their graduate institutions. There are many national awards and private awards for which you may apply; these are monies which you would take with you to an institution (examples: Danforth, National Science Foundations, California State Scholarship, Richard Weaver Fellowship Program).

*Your best efforts would be spent in contacting the financial aid office of the institutions to which you are applying.*

April 1 has been adopted by most universities as the date by which you may expect to learn the status of your financial aid application, and April 15th as the date by which financial aid offers must be accepted or rejected.

Various internet sites may be useful to explore, especially <http://www.finaid.org/>

## **APPENDIX: COUNTING THE COST**

Can you say "yes" to most of the following statements? If not, you might want to think about whether graduate school is an appropriate option for you right now.

1. Living on a strict budget for 4 to 7 years while studying most of the time does not bother me at all.
2. I enjoy writing term papers.
3. I enjoy reading books about my subject area even if they are not assigned in class.
4. On many occasions I have given up desirable social opportunities to study instead.
5. I read over recent issues of professional journals on a fairly regular basis.
6. I enjoy spending a great deal of time in the library.
7. I have a tremendous drive to enter a profession in my field.
8. I am not sick of school right now.
9. I can carry out academic projects without direction and assistance.
10. I like doing research projects.
11. I get along very well with professors.
12. I have a flair for statistics.