



To Go or Not To Go?

Graduate school is a big commitment of time and money. Be sure that you are going to graduate school with a clear goal and purpose. Never go to graduate school to simply avoid the job search.

Pros of going to graduate school upon graduation

- Continues the momentum of undergraduate studies-you are still in study mode.
- Commonly you have fewer personal commitments such as children, mortgage etc.
- Advanced degree may be necessary to achieve career goals
- Advanced degrees can be advantageous in scientific or high-tech fields information quickly becomes dated and where additional education is essential for career advancement.

Cons of going to graduate school immediately upon graduation

- Career goals may be undefined. Working first and taking time to research options may be helpful to clarify career aspirations.
- Professional work experience usually makes graduate education richer and more rewarding. Some grad schools prefer applicants to have work experience first.
- Grad school can be costly on top of loans for your undergrad degree. Some employers may pay for your graduate degree if you work first.
- Graduate school is demanding and requires a high level of motivation. If you are burned out from 16+ years of school, it might benefit you to take a break from academia, and give your brain a rest.

Researching & Evaluating Programs

Before you research programs, take a moment to determine your career goal after graduate school and determine what degree you want or need to complete to reach this goal. Faculty and staff can often help you narrow the best degree options for your career goal.

Make a List of Options

Research schools that offer your program of study and create a list of potential schools and programs you could apply to. A few resources for finding programs in your field include:

- Online resources like petersons.com and gradschools.com may also be helpful
- Current students and alumni of graduate programs
- Your professors, instructors, and academic advisors
- Practicing professionals and professional associations

Narrow Your List

Once you have a list of possible schools, take the time to narrow the list to a manageable number to which you will actually apply. The school and department web sites are great places to start researching details of the program. Request application materials and program handbooks if they are not on the web site.

Consider the following as you review programs:

- What courses are offered? Do they adequately address your areas of interest?
- How long does it take to complete the program? What is the program's attrition rate? (How many students left the program before completing their degree, and why did they leave?).
- What financial aid resources are available from the school? Are there Teaching or Research Assistantships available to incoming students? What types of fellowships (scholarships) or grants are available?
- If you plan to conduct research, be sure to research interests of individual faculty members related to your interests.
- Does the city fit your lifestyle and does the cost of living fit your finances?
- What are the admissions requirements? Are you likely to get into the program?

Use the information above to narrow the list of those schools to which you will apply. We recommend that you apply to several schools – not just one. Consider applying to 1-2 schools in each of the following categories: 1) good chance for admittance 2) may be admitted and 3) much less likely to be admitted.

Timeline

It is common for graduate schools to admit people only for fall semester. Application deadlines for large programs are commonly December or January. As a result, it is important to begin the application process at least one year before you plan to start graduate school. All times indicated below are approximate. Deadlines for specific programs may vary significantly depending on the program to which you apply.

Summer (1 year before you plan to start)

- Research schools and review applications
- Meet with current faculty to discuss plans
- Read about writing effective personal statements
- Study for graduate admissions tests

September

- Meet with faculty members to ask for letters of recommendation
- Begin writing your personal statements
- Sign up for standardized tests

October

- Take standardized tests
- Have drafts of your personal statement reviewed by faculty and the career center
- Fill out application forms
- Give your recommenders the forms and details about letters of recommendation

November/December

- Finalize and send applications
- Confirm recommendations have been sent
- Check to ensure all materials have been received
- Send thank you notes to recommenders

February/March

- Contact programs to conduct a personal visit
- Responses typically received from programs
- Notify schools of your decision to accept or decline
- Inform recommenders of your decision

April/May

- If you are applying for need based financial aid program, you may have to file a copy of your federal income tax return
 - Send the program a final copy of your transcript.
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Applications

Applying to graduate school can be a time consuming and detail oriented process. Taking the time to research programs and fill out applications carefully can save you a lot of stress and ensure you give yourself the best chance of admission.

A typical application for graduate school includes the following:

- Official University Transcripts from ALL past institutions
- Graduate Test Scores – These are typically sent directly to the schools from the testing service
- Personal Statement – Short essay detailing your interests and experience (see details on next page)
- Letters of Reference – Three letters from faculty or past supervisors are typically required
- Application Forms – Application forms can be several pages long. Some schools require two forms, one for the college and one for the department.
- Other items may be requested such as writing samples, portfolios, photographs, audio/video tapes or face-to-face interviews.

Admissions Tests

Different graduate programs require different types of admissions tests so it is very important to research application requirements before completing tests. In some instances, a standardized test is not required.

Some of the most common admission tests with web links are listed below:

GRE – Graduate Record Exam	http://www.gre.com/ttindex.html
GMAT – Graduate Management Aptitude Test	http://www.mba.com/mba
LSAT – Law School Admissions Test	http://www.lsat.com/

References

Most programs require at least three letters of recommendation. Recommenders can have a big impact on your application so be thoughtful about who you select and how you prepare them for writing your letters.

Who to Select

It is ideal to select faculty or work supervisors especially if they are in a related field. Each school may have different rules or expectations on who you select as references – be sure to ask.

- Choose faculty/staff who know your work well and also understand your professional goals.
- Ask each recommender if s/he would feel *comfortable* making a *strong* recommendation.
- Plan on soliciting at least one extra recommendation than required in case of an emergency.

How to Assist Your Recommenders

- Help them understand your experiences and goals completely – provide a copy of your resume, a draft of your personal statement, and samples of work you have completed related to the field of study.
 - Since each school may have different forms and guidelines, provide clear instructions for your recommender and provide stamped, pre-addressed envelopes.
 - Allow 4-6 weeks for a professor to complete a letter. Consider giving them a false early deadline by which it needs to be completed to provide time to follow up should something unexpected happen.
 - Check in once a week until the recommendations have been completed.
 - Send thank you letters to all of your references.
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Personal Statement

What to Include

A personal statement is an introductory essay you can use to demonstrate how and why you are an ideal candidate for graduate education. In some cases you will be asked to address very specific questions and in other cases you will not be given much guidance. Typically you will want to include:

- Why are you interested in this field of study?
- What skills and experience support this interest and prove your abilities?
- What are your specific research interests and career goals?
- Why are you interested in this school and program?

Strong Personal Statements

Creating a strong personal statement takes a lot of thought and revision. Follow the below guidelines when writing a quality personal statement.

- Be sure to answer questions that are asked in the application.
- Don't write what you think they want to hear.
- Attempt to answer the questions through a personal story or narrative. The narrative should be well organized and answer the questions clearly.
- Don't be general, use *specific* examples to vividly get your point across.
- Think what the most common responses likely would be to the questions and be sure NOT to write that! i.e. "I have wanted to be a lawyer for as long as I can remember..."
- Include reference to research you have conducted on the school and program to make it clear that you know what you are getting into.
- Avoid negative experiences, or generally having a negative tone in your essay.
- If there are any problems in your academic record, you can explain those *briefly*.
- Don't simply re-list everything you have been involved in...make sure your essay provides more depth than your application and/or resume.
- Include details that show your passion for the field and your intellectual abilities.
- Make sure your statement is well written, without errors and grammatically flawless!

Personal Statement critiques are available in the St. Paul Campus Career Center. To schedule an appointment with a career professional, call 612-624-2710.

Related Resources

The St. Paul Campus Career Center in 198 McNeal Hall has additional materials to assist you with your graduate school application process. Stop by our office to check out the following materials:

Online Workshops:

Grad School Planning: <https://umconnect.umn.edu/gradschoolprep>

Personal Statements: <https://umconnect.umn.edu/personalstatement>

Pre-Law: <https://umconnect.umn.edu/lawschool>

Books

- Graduate Admissions Essays, Get into Graduate School, Get into Medical School, Law School Confidential, Getting Money for Graduate School
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