

# GRADUATE SCHOOL

A Guide for  
Undergraduate  
Students

by Alan Farber, Ph.D.



Dear Student,

The decision to pursue graduate study may be one of the most important decisions of your life. Graduate school represents a major commitment of time, money, and energy. It also has major ramifications for your personal and professional future.

Decisions regarding graduate school need to be based on self-reflection and extensive academic and occupational research. And like all major life decisions, there are a number of factors to consider.

First and foremost, you should be able to answer the question, "What do I hope to accomplish by attending graduate school?" And then there are the "nuts and bolts" issues. What degree to pursue. When to begin. How and when to apply. How to finance it, and more.

This book is designed to help you make well-informed decisions about graduate school, and wise choices regarding your future.

Alan Farber, Ph.D.

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## PART I

# Should You Consider Graduate School?

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If you are considering continuing your education beyond your bachelor's degree, it's important that you understand exactly what "graduate school" is all about. The more you learn, the more confident you will be about your decision.

## What is Graduate School?

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**Graduate schools are institutions that award advanced academic degrees to students who have previously earned an undergraduate degree.**

While there are no universally agreed upon definitions for "graduate school" and "professional school," the former is typically reserved for programs in the arts, sciences, and humanities, whereas the latter often refers to programs in the medical professions, law, business, and other specialized fields.

All graduate programs provide instruction in specific subject areas; however, graduate programs and graduate schools come in all shapes and sizes. In the U.S. and Canada alone, there are over two million graduate students at over 2,000 institutions in over 450 disciplines. The number of programs in each discipline varies considerably. For example, there are over 200 graduate programs in Spanish, but only four in Thanatology (the study of death). Any given program may have as few as five enrolled students or as many as 250.

# Commonly Asked Questions

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**When considering graduate school, students often have the following questions.**

## **Will a graduate degree benefit me?**

The answer lies in the work you want to do. To determine how beneficial a graduate degree might be for you, meet with a career counselor, research careers of interest, and explore your options.

As you narrow your interests, learn about the academic backgrounds of the professionals working in that field. *The more you know about your field of interest, the easier it will be to determine if graduate school is a wise option, and to know exactly what graduate degree to pursue.*

## **Can I get into a graduate program if my bachelor's degree is in an unrelated major?**

Graduate admissions committees will generally consider graduates of all majors, as long as they meet the required admissions criteria.

## **What are some examples of graduate degrees?**

EdD – Doctor of Education

JD – Juris Doctor in Law

MA – Master of Arts

MBA – Master of Business Administration

MD – Medical Doctor

MFA – Master of Fine Arts

MS – Master of Science

PhD – Doctor of Philosophy



For a full listing, refer to *Peterson's Graduate & Professional Programs*.

## How long does it take to get a graduate degree?

While there is considerable variation across programs, most programs take two years or more of full-time study to complete.

- ▶ A master's degree typically takes two years.
- ▶ A doctoral degree takes four years or more.
- ▶ Law school is a three-year commitment.
- ▶ Medical school is generally four years, plus additional years of internship and residency.

## What is a student-at-large (or non-matriculated student)?

Some graduate programs allow students with a bachelor's degree to enroll in a limited number of courses, without being formally admitted to the program. These students complete a student-at-large application rather than an entire graduate school application.



Students who have missed the application deadline, or who do not have the grades or credentials for admission, sometimes apply for student-at-large status in the hopes of being officially admitted to the program at a later date.

## Will an advanced degree increase my earning potential?

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Education pays in higher earnings and lower unemployment rates."

Average annual 2018 salaries

- ▶ Doctoral degree      \$94,900
- ▶ Professional degree    \$98,000
- ▶ Master's degree        \$74,600
- ▶ Bachelor's degree     \$62,300

It is true that, on average, advanced degree holders earn more than those with bachelor's degrees. However, there are a great many factors that determine a person's salary, including the nature of the work, the specific graduate/professional degree held, and the years of experience.

## Can I attend part-time?

There are many part-time and evening graduate programs. These are designed to accommodate working professionals, parents, and others who cannot commit to full-time study.

Because programs vary, students need to check with each individual program regarding their part-time vs. full-time enrollment policies.



## What is a terminal master's degree?

In some fields, a master's degree is considered the "terminal degree." A terminal master's degree provides the knowledge and training one needs to enter a profession. For example, MSW (Master of Social Work) and MFA (Master of Fine Arts) are terminal master's degrees because no further advanced degree is generally required for practice in these fields.

## Do I need a master's degree before pursuing a doctorate?

This depends on the area of study. Many doctoral programs accept students with only a bachelor's degree, whereas others require the completion of a master's degree.

## Is a doctorate better than a master's degree?

This depends on your field. In some cases, a master's degree is the terminal and preferred degree; in other instances a doctorate may be preferable or required. Which degree to pursue will become clear as you investigate your chosen profession, learn the degrees and professional backgrounds of its practitioners, and clarify the nature of the work you want to do.

*All graduate-level careers are not created equal, and a graduate degree alone does not guarantee a high salary. However, the pursuit of an advanced degree that's consistent with your goals and talents often will enhance your long-term career and financial prospects.*

# What to Expect in Graduate School

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*Although graduate programs differ significantly, students can expect to find the following in graduate school.*

## **Older, wiser, and more motivated students**

Graduate students are typically academically prepared and highly focused on their educational goals. There is a place for fun and games during graduate school, but the successful completion of one's program is a priority.

## **A select group of students**

Each year a new group of first-year graduate students is admitted. You'll spend a great deal of time with these students—taking classes, studying, and socializing. Graduate students have similar academic interests, and life-long friendships are often made in graduate school.

## **Relevant coursework**

There are required courses in graduate school, but unlike undergraduate college where some of the required courses (i.e., "Gen Eds") are often unrelated to one's major, most graduate courses are directly related to the academic discipline being studied. Because they are able to focus on subjects that are of greater interest, many students find graduate courses much more relevant and satisfying.

## **Higher expectations**

In graduate school, students generally receive only As and Bs. Students struggling in or failing a class will be required to retake it. Every program has different grade requirements, but they all share the requirement of good to excellent grades.

Many students get higher grades in graduate school than they did as undergraduate students. This is because they are more motivated, studying subjects they enjoy, and devoting less time to partying and "busywork."

## **Experiential learning**

Although you will still be reading textbooks, doing research, taking exams, and writing papers, graduate programs typically integrate real-world applications into the curriculum in the form of research, group projects, case studies, internships, labs, and field studies.

## **Interaction with professors**

It is not uncommon to participate in group activities, joint research, and writing projects with faculty members. Many graduate students report that the highlight of their graduate studies is the mentor-protégé relationship with professors.

## **Thesis / Dissertation / Research**

Many master's and doctoral programs require the completion of a thesis or dissertation, respectively. These are formal and extensive research studies that are conducted under the supervision of a faculty member and/or committee.

## **Busy, busy, busy**

In addition to coursework, you may be conducting research, completing an internship, writing a thesis or dissertation, working at a full-time or part-time job, participating in one or more professional or student organizations, and/or working as a "Graduate Assistant" (teaching courses, conducting research, or completing administrative tasks). Graduate school success requires excellent time management and organizational skills.

## **Comprehensive exams**

A common component of graduate school is the requirement that students pass written and/or oral comprehensive, "qualifying," or "candidacy" exams.

## **Additional requirements**

Some professional fields require the completion of licensure or certification exams. While these are not graduate school requirements, they are required for entry into certain occupations. In addition, some programs require part-time or full-time supervised work experience, typically during the final semester or two of study. An "internship," "practicum," or "clinical" is often a stepping-stone to one's first job after graduate school.

# Why Attend Graduate School

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*Most students pursue graduate study to advance their knowledge in an area of interest, to improve their skills and credentials, or to enhance their marketability in the workplace.*

Unless you elect to study simply for the love of learning, you undoubtedly hope that graduate study will result in gainful employment in your chosen field. As such, you need to be aware that professions differ regarding the need to pursue a graduate education.

When trying to decide if you should attend graduate school, do your research, weigh the pros and cons, and make your decision accordingly.

## Good reasons to attend graduate school

- ▶ **A degree is mandatory** – Certain professions, notably those in the medical field, require professional degrees. You simply cannot be a medical doctor, dentist, or pharmacist without the appropriate degree and subsequent licensure.
- ▶ **A degree is not mandatory, but it's recommended** – Many professions do not require the completion of an advanced degree, but your chances of entry will be sorely limited without one. For this reason, it is critical that you determine the educational level of the professionals in your field of interest.
- ▶ **Skill enhancement** – While many professions don't require graduate study, graduate programs in some fields are available for those who want to enhance their skills and/or broaden their job prospects.
- ▶ **Enhance prospects for advancement** – Many professionals pursue graduate study as a means of advancing their careers. For example, clinical nurses who wish to go into college teaching or administration often pursue an MSN (Master of Science in Nursing). Similarly, teachers often pursue graduate degrees to become school administrators.

## Bad reasons to attend graduate school

A surprising number of students enter graduate school for the wrong reasons. If you are thinking of attending graduate school for any of the following reasons, you may want to reexamine your options.

- ▶ **You don't know what else to do** – Graduate school can be a means of delaying a career decision or entry into “the real world.” If you are uncertain about your career plans, schedule an appointment with your college’s Career Services.
- ▶ **You can't find a job** – While graduate school is ideal if it enhances your prospects for employment in your chosen career, never assume that an advanced degree will guarantee employment.
- ▶ **You want to please your parents (or someone else)** – It's seldom wise to devote extensive time, effort, and money simply to please others, especially if you are ultimately dissatisfied—or not suited to the academic field or profession.
- ▶ **You want the prestige of an advanced degree** – Some people may be impressed with “letters after your name,” but a graduate degree alone doesn't ensure happiness or pay the bills.
- ▶ **You want to keep your eligibility for student health insurance and/or delay repaying student loans** – Through hard work and diligence, most college graduates are able to find work in their field, obtain health insurance, and begin repaying their loans. Attending graduate school only delays the repayment of even more educational debt.

*As appealing and advantageous as graduate school can be, it can also be ill-advised. A job candidate with an unrelated advanced degree may be viewed as inappropriate or overqualified for certain positions. This is why it is so critical to have solid career plans prior to embarking upon graduate school. You want your graduate degree to work for you, not against you.*

# When to Begin

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Everybody seems to have an opinion about the timing of a graduate education. Some will advise you to continue immediately, while you are still “in the student mode.” Others will encourage you to work for a while to earn some money, improve your credentials, and confirm your plans.

People enroll in graduate school in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and beyond. Some students enroll straight out of college, while others work for many years, raise a family, or serve in the military before enrolling. In reality, there is no absolute “right” time or age to attend graduate school.

*Here are some considerations to help with this decision.*

## Reasons to attend immediately upon graduation

If some of the following statements are true for you, then you may want to consider going to graduate school immediately after receiving your bachelor’s degree.

- ▶ You know exactly what you want to do and have thoroughly researched the profession and the graduate programs.
- ▶ You have met all of the application requirements and can complete the application process prior to the deadline.
- ▶ You have the financial means to attend, or are comfortable with the amount of debt you will incur.
- ▶ Your chosen profession does not require students to have years of work experience.
- ▶ You feel it would be less disruptive to your personal life to study sooner rather than later.
- ▶ You’re eager to get started, confident in your ability to excel, and are likely to get admitted to your program of choice.

## Reasons for delaying graduate school

You should probably delay graduate school if any of the following are true for you:

- ▶ You are uncertain about your career plans and have not thoroughly researched careers and graduate programs.
- ▶ You need more time to study for the required admission test or to complete the application process.
- ▶ You have a job opportunity that will provide valuable work experience and help you determine the need to pursue graduate school. (Note: Some employers will partially or fully finance your graduate studies if further education will enhance your value to their organization.)
- ▶ You must complete additional undergraduate prerequisite courses.
- ▶ You want to earn money to help pay off college debt and/or finance graduate school.
- ▶ You are experiencing issues in your personal life that may interfere with your ability to excel in graduate school.
- ▶ You believe that additional work experience will improve your chances of getting into an excellent program and/or enhance your chances of getting a good job after completing graduate school.

*Be aware that some graduate programs prefer or require years of work or volunteer experience.*

- ▶ *Top ranked Business schools typically accept applicants with three or more years of business experience.*
- ▶ *Some Education Administration programs require candidates to have teaching or administrative experience.*
- ▶ *Some programs in the helping professions (e.g., social work, nursing) require candidates to have social service experience.*

*By researching your field, you'll learn if real-world work experience is necessary or recommended.*

## PART II

# Evaluate Your Options

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Students often attend a graduate school close to home, or they continue their studies at the same college they earned their bachelor's degree. Many students are, therefore, choosing among only a handful of programs. Students who seek a program that is highly ranked, specialized, or not widely offered, will have more to consider, and will therefore need to do more research.

## Things to consider when choosing a school/program



### Likelihood of admission

Look at the program's admission criteria to see if you meet their requirements. Also check to see if your GPA and test scores are similar to those of recently admitted students.

Create a hierarchy from "most desirable" to "least desirable" schools. If your credentials aren't comparable to those of recently admitted students, consider whether applying is worth the time and expense. Conversely, if your credentials far exceed those of current students, you may not find the program suitably challenging.

### Cost and availability of financial support

Gather as much information as possible and run the numbers. Factor in tuition (in-state vs. out-of-state in the case of public schools), fees, and living expenses. Also consider opportunities for scholarships, fellowships, graduate assistantships, and on- or off-campus employment.

### Facilities and geographic location

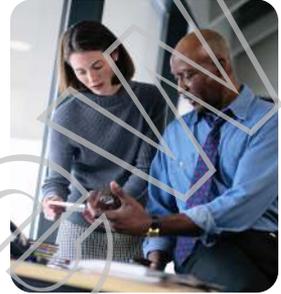
Check out the campus and the community, as well as the university and departmental libraries, labs, computer facilities, and other amenities.

## Accreditation, rankings, and reputation

Determine each program's accreditation status and rankings (if applicable) and research each program's offerings, along with the faculty's qualifications and research activities. Also speak to current students, alumni, and knowledgeable professionals. With this information, you should have a handle on the quality and reputation of each program.

## Opportunities to conduct research

If research is an important component of your studies, or an area of interest to you, determine the opportunity to conduct research under the supervision of faculty members with expertise in your area of interest.



Review the online profiles and CVs (curriculum vitae) of professors to determine their research interests and publication record.

## Likelihood of employment upon graduation

Although departments can't guarantee jobs, many programs:

- ▶ invite recruiters on campus
- ▶ offer job search assistance
- ▶ provide job postings
- ▶ offer support through an alumni network

Ask current graduate students and recent graduates about the quality of the department and the university's Career Services.

## The intangibles

All major life decisions have subjective and intuitive aspects. How did the faculty, staff, and students treat you in your communications and visits? Did you "click" with them? Did you get a good or bad "vibe?" Were the surroundings comfortable and inviting? Will you fit in with the types of students who typically attend? If you have any special needs or circumstances, did you sense that reasonable accommodations would be made available?

## PART III

# Search for a Program

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If you don't know which school you want to attend, or you are searching for a specific or prestigious program, give yourself sufficient time to do the following:

- ▶ obtain accurate information
- ▶ check accreditations
- ▶ consider rankings

*The following information will help you identify and evaluate the programs in your field of interest.*

## Obtain Accurate Information

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### Use reliable comprehensive directories

Despite the convenience of the internet, there are no free and exhaustive online directories of graduate programs. Avoid online sites with “grad school” or “graduate school” in the URL. They are not comprehensive and typically feature programs that have paid to be listed.

Instead, ask for *Peterson's Graduate & Professional Programs* series at your college library or Career Services. These six books, published in 2018 and 2019 are the definitive resource for graduate and professional school information. Avoid older, outdated editions. *Peterson's* lists 44,000+ graduate programs at 2,000+ institutions in 476 disciplines, from Accounting to Zoology.

Although *Peterson's Guides* are available online, the print versions are better organized, easier to navigate, and ad-free.

## Locate directories in your academic discipline

Once you have identified all the programs in your area of interest, do the following:

- ▶ Determine if there is a directory of accredited programs provided by a professional accrediting agency. For example, the American Psychological Association and the Council on Social Work Education publish directories of accredited graduate programs in their respective disciplines.
- ▶ If no such accreditation list exists, check to see if a trustworthy professional association publishes a directory of programs. These programs are not accredited per se, but are recommended by a reputable professional organization.

## Research programs online

Once you have narrowed your search, visit each program's official website. Gather information on the admission requirements, application and tuition costs, faculty profiles, course offerings, financial aid information, and more.

## Meet with advisors

Advisors are available to discuss prerequisite coursework, internships, application procedures, and more. Most colleges have Pre-Health Advisors for students preparing for health careers requiring graduate school (e.g., medicine, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech pathology, optometry). For students contemplating law school, Pre-Law Advisors may be available.

## Talk with professors and others

"Pick the brains" of two or more professors and professionals in your field of interest. Although their suggestions and advice are subject to personal preferences and opinions, knowledgeable individuals can often provide valuable insights into which programs might be best suited to your particular needs.

If possible, arrange a visit. Many programs offer open houses, tours, or orientation sessions for prospective students. During your visit, make an effort to talk to faculty, administrators, and current students.

# Check Accreditation

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*There are two types of graduate school accreditation—regional and professional. Both are important.*

## **Regional accreditation of colleges and universities**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, “the goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions and/or programs of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality.” The most recognized and accepted type of accreditation in the U.S. is regional accreditation.

Regional accreditation is important because it ensures that an institution meets rigorous educational guidelines. Such accreditation distinguishes legitimate institutions from dubious schools and diploma mills seeking to “sell a degree” to naive and unsuspecting students.

To determine if the schools you are considering are regionally accredited, check program descriptions and school catalogs, and go to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation’s website.

## **Professional accreditation of individual programs**

Many graduate programs are also accredited by professional accreditation associations. These associations develop rigorous educational standards for particular areas of graduate study. There are many specialized accrediting agencies in such areas as art and design, dance, dietetics, engineering, forestry, audiology and speech-language pathology, interior design, and medicine.

## **Consider these examples:**

- ▶ In order to sit for the bar exam, most state bar associations require that an applicant’s law school be accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA). In addition, many (but not all) law firms will only hire graduates of ABA approved programs.



- ▶ The American Library Association accredits over 60 graduate programs in Library and Information Studies in the United States and Canada. According to the ALA, “The vast majority of employers require an ALA accredited master’s degree for professional positions in the field of library and information science.”

There are also many fields where no such accreditation exists, or where accreditation is not vital to post-graduate employment. It is, therefore, critical that you understand the role accreditation plays (or does not play) in licensure and/or employment in your field of interest.

Refer to *Peterson’s Graduate & Professional Programs* for a list of accrediting agencies.

*All students considering graduate study should familiarize themselves with the professional associations in their field. Professional organizations provide a wealth of information regarding graduate studies, scholarships, career paths, licensure, research opportunities, and more.*

### **Distance (online) education**

The decision to enroll in an online (as opposed to “residential”) graduate program is an important one. Distance education

has increased in popularity in recent years and is particularly appealing to those who cannot relocate or afford to attend a residential (“brick and mortar”) program. Some traditional residential programs also offer online courses or degrees.

Although all students investigating graduate school should apply “due diligence” when researching programs, special care should be taken when considering online graduate education. Speak to professionals in the field to determine if an online degree will provide the same career opportunities as a more traditional degree from a residential program. Also check for accreditation by the Distance Education and Accrediting Commission ([www.deac.org](http://www.deac.org)).



# Consider Rankings

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Graduate program rankings are a controversial topic. Opponents feel the criteria are biased and subjective. They also believe that the rankings fail to accurately measure program quality, assess student satisfaction, and predict career success upon graduation. Proponents believe that rankings are a valuable means of measuring a program's worth in a competitive academic marketplace.

*One thing is certain: students and professionals read the annual ranking data, and most of the ranked programs actively publicize their rankings to prospective students.*

## Who ranks whom?

- ▶ *U.S. News & World Report* annually publishes a "Best Graduate School" edition with rankings based on data collected from each educational institution. (Some programs refuse to participate.)
- ▶ *Princeton Review* published the *Best 294 Business Schools (2019)*, the *Best 173 Law Schools (2019)*, and the *Best 167 Medical Schools (2016)*.
- ▶ *Business Week*, the *Economist*, *Financial Times*, and *Forbes* rank business schools on an annual basis.

Don't confuse the reputation of a university as a whole with the quality of a specific graduate department. There are universities with rather noncompetitive undergraduate admissions standards that offer highly ranked and competitive graduate programs.

*Hiring practices vary widely by industry. Graduation from a highly ranked program might be critical in one industry and irrelevant in another.*

## PART IV

# The Application Process

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The graduate school application process requires preparation, accuracy, professionalism, and attention to detail. All materials must be well written, well organized, and submitted on time. *The better you understand the application and admission process, the greater your chances of success.*

## Admission Criteria

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*Graduate school candidates are evaluated on a variety of criteria. The relative weight of each factor differs by program.*

### GPA

Most graduate school applicants possess above average GPAs. In addition to your cumulative GPA, admissions committees will review your grades in relevant upper division and Honors coursework. For example, an A (or a D) in a freshman American History course won't have the same positive (or negative) impact for a Biology graduate school candidate as an A (or a D) in a 400-level Biology course.

### Admission test scores

It can be difficult for an admissions committee to compare the grade point averages of students with different degrees from different colleges and universities. Because all candidates take the same admission test, no such problem exists when comparing admission test scores.

### Work / Internship / Community service experience

First-hand experience in your area of interest demonstrates a commitment to and familiarity with that profession. And some graduate programs, especially those in the health and medical fields, require that students have a given number of hours of relevant volunteer, internship, "shadowing," or work experience.

Although relevant experience is ideal, all work, internship, and volunteer experiences speak to your work ethic, maturity, and time management skills. Such experiences also provide a valuable source of references.



## References

Most graduate school applications require three or more letters of recommendation from individuals who can speak to your potential for academic and professional success. Your references typically address your academic abilities, work ethic, personal integrity, and your character.

“Academic references” come from college professors, instructors, advisors, or administrators. “Professional references” are from supervisors or managers in work or volunteer settings. Regardless of your year in college, now is the time to start fostering relationships with individuals (especially faculty members) who can serve as future references.

*It is your responsibility to submit all graduate school application materials on time. This requires giving your references adequate time to prepare letters of recommendation—preferably several months in advance. Many ill-prepared candidates run around at the last minute trying to cajole letters from busy faculty members.*

## Leadership skills

Undergraduates with on- or off-campus leadership positions demonstrate many of the skills and qualities that predict success at the graduate level: initiative, problem solving, interpersonal communication, and conflict resolution skills. Your resume and essays can highlight your leadership roles and responsibilities.

## Research and professional association activity

Research experience and active involvement as a student member of a professional association demonstrate your commitment to the profession. Publications, research reports, Honors program projects, and participation at regional or national conferences are particularly impressive.

## Essays / Personal statements

Nothing evokes trepidation in candidates like the prospect of writing graduate school admissions essays. They are an important and labor intensive component of the application.

It is critical that your essays portray you in a favorable and professional manner. Essays are writing samples, so pay attention to spelling, grammar, and overall organization. Demonstrate your ability to follow directions by answering the questions and addressing the pertinent issues without exceeding the specified word or page count.

Essays provide an opportunity to reveal who you are, what obstacles you've overcome, what motivates you to excel in your chosen field, and why you want to attend a particular program. Have essays (and resumes) critiqued and proofread at your college's writing lab, Career Services, or by professors or professionals in the field. Several excellent books are available on the topic, including *Graduate Admission Essays* by Asher.

## Visits / Interviews

Some programs require in-person, phone, or Skype interviews. If you are invited to interview, you have made the first cut. This is your opportunity to impress upon the committee your commitment to the profession and your genuine interest in the program. Thoroughly research the program, dress in business attire, and ask and answer questions in a thoughtful manner.



If the interview is optional, make every effort to arrange an interview. You are at a distinct advantage if you go to the trouble and expense to interview *and* you make an excellent impression.

## Personal qualities

Graduate committees seek students who will succeed academically, graduate on time, and do the program proud by excelling in their subsequent professional careers. In addition to the aforementioned criteria, committees attempt to assess such qualities as integrity, maturity, cultural competence, and the ability to manage stress and overcome personal obstacles. *Everything you submit to a graduate school (every written and personal communication) represents an opportunity for you to demonstrate these qualities.*

# Admission Tests

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Most graduate programs require candidates to submit admission test scores. These are the graduate school equivalent of the ACT and SAT.

## Which test to take

The most widely used test is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The GRE includes a General Test and six Subject Tests (required by some graduate programs). Other exams include:

- ▶ Miller Analogies Test (MAT)
- ▶ Law School Admissions Test (LSAT)
- ▶ Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT)
- ▶ Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)
- ▶ Optometry Admission Test (CAT)
- ▶ Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) – generally required of international students

Visit the website of the required test for details regarding test locations, dates, cost, and the procedures for submitting scores to graduate schools.

*Graduate school financial awards are often based on admission test scores. If you tend to score well on standardized tests, take the admission test and submit your scores, even if the test is optional.*

## Where and when to take tests

Students thinking of entering graduate school in the fall after their senior year often take their required test late in the summer after their junior year. This provides plenty of time to study during the summer. It also allows enough time to retake the exam prior to the typical early spring graduate school deadline. *Do not wait until the last minute.* You do not want to be rushed or risk missing the application deadline. It can take weeks or even months for your scores to reach graduate schools.

The GRE General Test and GMAT can be scheduled on most weekdays and some Saturdays. The MCAT is offered 30 times a year, whereas the LSAT is only offered four times a year. Tests can be taken at testing centers located in larger cities and college towns. (Some universities have their own test centers.) Accommodations can be made for students with disabilities.

## Test preparation

The three most common test prep options are self-study, commercial test prep courses, and individual tutoring. To determine which approach will be most effective for you, consider cost, convenience, your schedule, and your personal learning style.

- ▶ **Self-study** is a good option if you are self-disciplined and learn well independently—and it is the most affordable alternative. You can also arrange study groups with other motivated students.
- ▶ **Test prep courses** are advisable if you benefit from the structure of a classroom and learn best by listening and discussing. A test prep course takes a significant commitment of time, effort, and money, so select your course carefully. Some university testing departments offer courses similar to commercial test prep classes. Speak to former students, read online reviews, attend orientation sessions, and/or sit in on sample classes.
- ▶ **Individual tutoring** is preferable if you benefit from one-on-one instruction and feel there are only specific portions of the exam that require special attention. In the GRE, for example, students often devote the majority of their preparation to the Quantitative Reasoning (Math) portion of the exam. You may be able to find a tutor to help you with a specific subject area through a test prep company or through your university.

*Some students take admission tests with minimal preparation in order to determine if further study is necessary. This is not a good idea. Tests are expensive and graduate programs may receive all of your test results. Instead, diagnose your strengths and weaknesses through practice exams available from test prep companies and test publishers.*

## Practice exams

Take as many practice exams as possible. Many unsuccessful test takers report that their problems stemmed from having insufficient time on one or more sections. You should, therefore, make sure that you don't exceed the allotted time when taking practice exams.

## Test scores

Some graduate programs have strict score cut-offs, and you will not be considered for admission if your score falls below a designated point. In most cases, however, the scores are factored in combination with other admission criteria. A particularly strong admission test score, therefore, may compensate for a subpar GPA.

Since many programs provide the average test scores of previously admitted candidates, you can usually determine how your scores stack up.

*The key to doing well on admission tests, as with all aspects of graduate school preparation, is early, unrushed, and thorough preparation.*



# The Application

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Many professional programs, including schools of Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Optometry, Pharmacy, Physical Therapy, and Public Health use “centralized application services” that allow candidates to apply to multiple programs with a single application. This is a significant time and labor saver for candidates. For most other graduate programs, you need to apply to each program separately.

Most universities have a “Graduate School” department that oversees the operation of their various graduate programs. Once an applicant’s file is complete, this department forwards the file to the academic department. A faculty committee or the department chairperson then makes a recommendation to the chief graduate school officer (typically a graduate dean or program director), who then makes the final admission decision.

While most programs have a set application deadline, programs with rolling admissions review applications as they arrive. Application deadlines for the Fall semester are typically in January or February, with notification occurring in March or April. Some candidates may be placed on wait lists while the programs await responses from their accepted candidates.

## Graduate school applicants typically submit the following:

- ▶ **Application form**
- ▶ **Application fee** – Fees average about \$70. If you have financial need or participate in one of your college’s TRIO programs, you may be eligible for an application fee waiver.
- ▶ **Undergraduate transcript(s)** – You need to notify the registrar’s office at each college you’ve attended to have your transcript sent directly to the graduate school. Graduate schools typically require “official” transcripts; photocopies may not be accepted.
- ▶ **Resume** – Some programs require resumes; others have you enter your experiences on an online application form.

- ▶ **Admission test scores (if required)**
- ▶ **Essays / Personal statements (if required)**
- ▶ **Letters of recommendation** – Some programs will instruct you to have your reference letters (typically three) mailed or emailed directly to the department under separate cover. Others will have you collect the letters in separate sealed envelopes and mail them yourself. You may be asked to sign a waiver which releases your right to view the letters of recommendation.
- ▶ **Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity form**  
This information is requested by the Graduate School for statistical purposes. It will not be seen by the admissions committee, nor will it impact your application in any way.
- ▶ **Scholarship applications** – Complete any optional scholarship application materials included in your application packet.

### **Additional application tips:**

- ▶ Follow directions. If you can't follow directions in the application process, the admissions committee will lose confidence in your ability to succeed in graduate school. Do not submit more material than is requested.
- ▶ Ensure that all submissions are neat, well written, organized, and submitted prior to the deadline. Use the same format and font on all your written documents.
- ▶ Apply to as many programs as possible, especially in the more competitive disciplines.
- ▶ If a program uses rolling admissions, submit your application as early as possible. Financial assistance may run out for late applicants.
- ▶ Create a record of all the programs to which you've applied and a checklist of submitted materials. You will be notified that your application is complete, or that there are missing materials. If in doubt, contact the program.

## PART V

# Costs and Financing

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*Graduate education can be quite expensive; however, the expense is justified if it enables you to achieve your career goals.*

Here are some cost considerations:

- ▶ Application costs (application fees, test prep courses, test fees, transcript fees)
- ▶ Cost of visiting and interviewing for programs
- ▶ Moving and living expenses
- ▶ Tuition, textbooks, and other educational expenses
- ▶ Lost income during the graduate school years

## Financial Assistance

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Many excellent books by the College Board, Kaplan, Prentice Hall, and other reputable publishers are available on the topic of college financing. These books and a visit to your college's Financial Aid/Scholarship office may reveal scholarships, grants, and fellowships for which you are qualified. Fellowships are generally based on academic merit rather than financial need and may require work in return for the award.

Government and private loans are available, and many graduate students work part-time or even full-time. Some employers have programs that help pay education costs, and some will offer financial assistance in exchange for a future work commitment. Check the college's Graduate School, Student Employment/Work Study, and Human Resources departments for on-campus work opportunities.

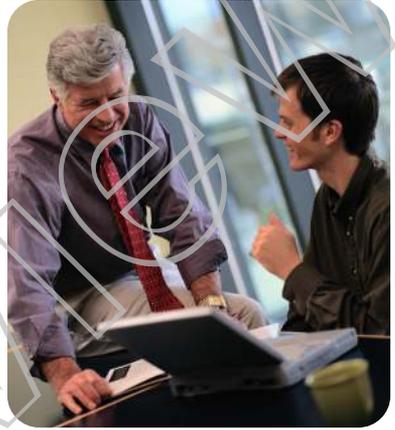
Complete all scholarship applications. Graduate programs compete for the best students, so particularly well-qualified students may be offered scholarships without ever having applied. If you have been accepted to more than one program, it is quite appropriate to inquire about the availability of funding prior to making your decision.

*For information on financial aid, visit the following websites: [finaid.org](http://finaid.org), [fastweb.com](http://fastweb.com), and [scholarships.com](http://scholarships.com).*

## **Graduate Assistantships**

The Graduate Assistantship (GA) is a highly coveted position available at many (typically public) universities.

Teaching Assistants (TAs) teach undergraduate courses or provide support to professors. GAs (sometimes called Research Assistants or Lab Assistants) also work in academic or student service departments such as new student programs, residence life, alumni relations, and academic advisement.



GA work tasks may be associated with or totally unrelated to a graduate student's academic discipline. Because of the experience it affords, an assistantship related to one's academic and career field is preferable. GAs typically work 20 hours a week. For their efforts, their tuition is "deferred" (free), and they receive a modest monthly "stipend" based on the number of hours worked and the department's budget.

Some colleges have centralized listings of GA positions, whereas others require students to independently solicit assistantships from each department. Check with the Graduate School to determine if there is a universal application form and/or a posted list of assistantships. The key to getting a graduate assistantship is applying early and often. Email, mail, or hand deliver a well-written cover letter and resume to numerous university departments as soon as you have been admitted.

## Final Words

*Graduate study is a journey replete with significant challenges, occasional setbacks, and impressive achievements.*

*If you love learning, are passionate about your subject matter, and possess sufficient self-discipline to excel at the next academic level, you will undoubtedly succeed in graduate or professional school.*

*Enjoy the journey!*

# GRADUATE SCHOOL

A Guide for  
Undergraduate  
Students

by Alan Farber, Ph.D.

A valuable resource for  
students considering graduate  
or professional school



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