

Guide to Graduate School

Engage in self-reflection and examine your reasons for pursuing an advanced degree.

Why Should I Get A Graduate Degree?

- To gain a high-level knowledge of a specific area of study or professional practice.
- To increase your professional options and open new career paths in certain fields.
- To increase your lifetime earning potential.
- To nurture your intellectual curiosity and spark passion.
- To help you build a network in a specialized field.

Why Shouldn't I Get A Graduate Degree?

DON'T get a graduate degree:

- If you don't know what to do with your undergraduate degree.
- Out of pressure from parents, faculty or friends.
- To avoid doing a job search.
- Because you don't like your current job.
- Assuming that you can easily get a full-time teaching job afterward. There is intense competition today.
- Without considering the debt you will be taking on. Calculate it first.

Getting practical work experience and further developing skills like teamwork, timeliness and project management in a work environment is very different than being in school. It can:

- Allow you to gain content-specific experience.
- Help you to gain confidence.
- Spur motivation.
- Offer you the chance to investigate a field that interests you.

This kind of experience, and the skills you develop in a work environment, are what employers are looking for when they hire. Graduate degrees are for very specific roles, and not often required.

Applying to Graduate School

Is the cost of potentially taking out more loans worth the investment you are making in yourself? Will you make this money "back" having this degree? E.g. will you increase your job prospects with this degree?

There is no best time to apply for graduate school. However, if you are planning on going directly after obtaining your undergraduate degree, you should begin gathering information during your junior year.

Choosing a graduate school is all about finding a good fit for you. Be sure to look nationwide and do not limit yourself geographically. Consider:

Requirements and Materials: Do you meet the requirements of the program, such as required undergraduate coursework, grade point average and GRE test scores? Make sure to understand all the required materials such as personal statement, letters of reference (you typically want to give professor three months to write one), transcripts and research publications.

Type of Program: What specializations are available? Does the program focus on theory and original research or practical applications of knowledge and skills? Does the program require real work experience such as practicums or internships? What career planning and job search assistance is available through the department?

Reputation: Is the university accredited? Is the program nationally ranked? Look at the reputation of the institution as a whole. Remember that the reputation of the specific department and individual faculty members of the graduate program hold more weight than the reputation of the overall institution.



Size of the Institution: Look at the size of the department as well as the university. A large institution may have more extensive facilities and libraries. A smaller school may offer more personal attention and a sense of community.

Faculty: Strong programs have faculty members that are active in their fields. What are their academic degrees/credentials and research specialties? What is the student/faculty ratio? Look at faculty websites if available. If possible, contact a faculty member or the program before you apply to get more information. See if they are taking on any graduate assistance for that semester.

Alumni and Current Students: An excellent way to determine if a school is a good fit is to research alumni. Look them up on LinkedIn using the “Find Alumni” tool. Reach out to alumni to schedule an informational interview to learn more about the program from a former student’s perspective. Current students can be a great resource, also.

Facilities: Consider the quality of on-site facilities such as libraries, computer labs and research facilities.

Cost & Financial Aid/Scholarships: What are the tuition and fees? Consider this carefully. Do not assume you will receive tuition waivers/scholarships, stipends or teaching assistantships. Conduct extensive research to make sure you can afford a graduate degree.

Once you’ve considered all criteria, you can now rank your list of schools. As criteria, use your personal interests and the relative likelihood of admission. Use three categories to rank:

- Reach schools (“I don’t think I have a good chance for admission but I am interested”)
- Possible schools (“I have a fairly good chance for admission”)
- Safety schools (“I will definitely be accepted.”)

You should apply to at least two schools from each category.

Resources

Council of Graduate Schools www.cgsnet.org

Grad Schools.com www.gradschools.com

Graduate Career Consortium <https://gradcareerconsortium.org/>

