

SELECTING AND APPLYING TO GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL



Office of Career & Professional Development
Administration Building
careercounseling@Upike.edu

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WHY PURSUE GRADUATE EDUCATION?

Excellent reasons:

1. A graduate degree is a prerequisite for entering certain careers, such as law, medicine and university teaching. Therefore, to pursue such positions, advanced degrees are necessary.
2. The love of a particular subject and the desire to study it in-depth and/or specialize.
3. You can get a better job in your field with a graduate degree.

Poor reasons:

1. You want to avoid looking for a job. You are afraid of finding or not finding employment.
2. You don't know what you want to do for a career and you think that graduate school will help you decide. In reality, choosing to go to graduate school should be the result of making a career direction choice.
3. You believe the liberal arts degree has not prepared you for the world of work since it is so broad.
4. You cannot get a job with a B.A. because of overcrowding in your field. Many occupational areas that are glutted for those with undergraduate degrees are also glutted for those at the graduate level. Check it out – you may be no better off with a graduate degree or you may be overqualified.
5. It is expected now after college (e.g. your parents or professors expect it).

Graduate School is highly self directed; it is difficult to make a go of it when you are unsure of the reasons why you are there.

Analyze your motives for considering advanced study.

- A. What kind of position am I interested in pursuing after graduation? Does it require a graduate degree? -- **Attending grad school should not be a way of postponing a decision, in fact, it should be the logical result of making a decision.**
- B. Are my interests compatible with the activities I will be involved in during advanced training?
Am I motivated to explore the detail of a specialty area?
- C. Am I familiar with the variety of positions held by individuals with advanced degrees in my field?
- D. Do my achievements and academic background reflect the ability to successfully complete a graduate program?

WHAT GRADUATE SCHOOL IS ALL ABOUT?

A. Similar to undergraduate school in that you continue coursework. Main differences are:

1. Many more seminar type courses, especially at advanced level.
2. More papers, projects, presentations, fewer tests.
3. More research-oriented approaches.
4. Increased specialization of subject matter studies.
5. More independent work requiring self-discipline.
6. Less short-term feedback about how you are doing academically.
7. Increased pressure to maintain high grades; generally, B or above is the expected minimum.

B. Master's Degree (M.A. or M.S.)

Four typical types of programs:

1. Coursework & thesis - A thesis is an independent research project which the student designs, carries out, writes and defends before a committee of graduate professors.
2. Coursework and exams - Some programs give the student the option of not writing a thesis, but taking comprehensive exams instead.
3. Coursework and internship - An internship is a supervised, experiential learning situation, usually on a part-time, voluntary basis. The student may spend one or two semesters working in a setting compatible with his/her area of study to develop knowledge and skills in that area.
4. Combination of the above.

C. Doctoral Degree (Ph.D.)/Other Professional Degrees

Usual requirements include:

1. Preliminary coursework.
2. Some programs require a master's thesis.
3. A comprehensive examination covering required coursework which may be written and/or oral.
4. Dissertation which is an original, independent research project. The student usually presents the project to a faculty committee for approval and defends the completed project before the same committee. Differs from a thesis in that it must be original, is usually more complex and in-depth, and must be judged to be a significant contribution to knowledge in the student's field.
5. Requirements for applied programs such as counseling, clinical psychology, nursing or social work may involve some practical experience.
6. Some professions may require some licensing procedure, e.g. a bar exam or state license exam.

SELECTING A GRADUATE SCHOOL

Students select graduate schools based on a number of variables with differing levels of importance to the individual.

1. **Reputation** - Is the program nationally, regionally or locally recognized? Be advised that there is no universally accepted ranking for graduate or professional schools. Read several reports and ask your professors about school reputation. Rank your schools of interest then consider 2-4 schools in each of three categories: a.) reach b.) probable and c.) safety.
2. **Program of Study** - What emphasis does the program use? Theory? Research? Case Study? Thesis versus Non-Thesis? Look closer than the degree area and title.
3. **Degrees Awarded** - How many degrees have been awarded each year? What is the attrition rate? How long is the average time for which it takes a person to complete his/her degree?
4. **Faculty** - Have you spoken with faculty to discuss the program? Do faculty emphasize teaching or research? Which do you prefer? Are the faculty conducting research in areas that are of interest to you? Are professors on the cutting edge of their field? What is the student:faculty ratio?
5. **Finances/Costs** - What is the cost of tuition, room, board, fees? How will you pay? What financial aid exists? Are assistantships, fellowships, grants, and loans available?
6. **Facilities** - What type of housing is available? How extensive and available are labs and facilities? How comprehensive is the library?
7. **Geography** - Is this an area where you would want to spend two or more years? Small, medium or large city? Ties you develop here could lead to jobs in the area. Are the climate, scenic beauty and recreational possibilities in line with your interests?
8. **Campus Community** - Small or large campus? Public or private? Urban or rural? Class size? Intellectual and cultural stimulation?
9. **Admissions** - Where do students come from? What are their ages and backgrounds? Do they require work experience? Are they “successful?”
10. **Flexibility** - If you change your mind about your career goal, does the program contain materials/skills which are transferable to another area of interest? Can you attend part-time or must you attend full-time? Are there assistantship requirements? What are the residency requirements? Can you transfer in graduate level courses from other institutions?
11. **Post-Graduate Employment** - Will this program contribute to the expansion of career possibilities for you? Where do graduates of the program typically find work? Does the college provide assistance with the job search process?
12. **School Visitation** - Visit the school to make a personal assessment of your fit. Will you be comfortable and challenged? Will you enjoy what you are doing and who you are doing it with?

APPLYING FOR ADMISSION

Applying for admission to graduate and professional schools can require a variety of procedures. Typical application requirements include:

Application Form: Make sure the form is complete and neat. It is usually best to type the application rather than have it handwritten. Before writing the final version, it might be helpful to prepare copies for practice versions. Proofread the form and have someone else proof it as well.

Essays: Be sure to address the specific prompt if there is one. Most graduate schools require that you write an essay or personal statement. Essays vary by school, but are often the most difficult part of the application. Put time and thought into its development and reflect clearly defined goals. Your essay should be organized, concise, specific, customized and should communicate why you wish to attend graduate school and what you hope to gain from the experience. Your Career Development Office can assist in critiquing and proofreading your essays.

Transcripts: Admissions committees always require official transcripts of your grades as part of the selection process. Your GPA is one of many criteria evaluated. The content of your courses, your course load and major and the reputation of your undergraduate institution are also important. Requests for transcripts need to be made online and/or in writing to the Registrar's Office.

Letters of Recommendation: Most schools want 3-5 letters. Provide your references with: schools you are applying to and information about your qualifications e.g. resume. It is a good idea to start this process early, allowing enough time for the author of each letter to complete the task. Choose faculty or professionals in the field who know you well. Ask them if they will be a "good" reference for you. Make sure they know the deadlines. Pick one extra reference in case you fall short. Remember to thank them and stay in touch with them. Keep them up to date on the status of your applications.

Application Fee: Don't forget that many graduate schools require an application fee. Occasionally a fee may be waived if you meet certain financial criteria.

Interview: Some graduate schools (especially medical and business) require a personal interview. Interviews can often be the opportunity for borderline candidates to convince an institution of their potential success. The interview is also a chance for the institution to see how you react to stress and handle pressure. Keep in mind, as the interviewer is asking questions, that they are more interested in how you think, not what you think. Prepare for a graduate school interview just as you would for an employment interview. Try to think about what you want the interviewer to remember about you. The ideal candidate is thoughtful, mature, well prepared and has a life mission. You may schedule a mock interview with the Career Development Office.

Admissions Tests: Many graduate programs require that you submit scores from a standardized test. All standardized tests are offered periodically throughout the years. Paper and pencil test results typically take 4-6 weeks to be scored. However, many standardized tests are beginning to be offered almost daily at computerized sites with scores available immediately. The following is a brief outline of common standardized tests:

A. Graduate Record Exam (GRE) - There are two areas of the GRE. The GRE aptitude test is about 3 hours long and measures general scholastic ability at the graduate level. It is only offered on the computer. The GRE subject tests (offered 3 times annually in paper and pencil format) measure mastery of content in a particular field. A subject test may or

may not be required in addition to the general test. Check with the schools you are specifically interested in. Advanced tests are given for such fields as Psychology, History, English, and Economics. A general writing assessment is also offered.

B. Miller Analogies Test (MAT) - This test consists of 100 analogies arranged in order of difficulty (50 minutes working time and about 30 minutes administrative time). The MAT may be required at some schools instead of the GRE.

C. Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) - This test is a 3 1/2-hour computerized aptitude test designed to measure certain mental capabilities important in the study of management at the graduate level.

D. Law School Admission Test (LSAT) - Designed to measure certain mental abilities deemed important in the study of law and thus to aid law schools in assessing the academic promise of their applicants (3 1/2 hours).

E. Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) - Designed to measure general academic ability, general information, and scientific ability (4 hours).

F. Other tests such as the Dental Admission Test (DAT), Veterinary College Admission Test (VCAT), Optometry College Admission Test (OCAT), and Pharmacy College Admission Test (PCAT) are also administered prior to entry into professional school.

FOLLOW-UP

1. After submitting your application materials to graduate schools, follow-up to ensure the admissions office received them and to ensure that your file is complete.
2. Accepted: Find out the due date for a deposit. Read the catalog and course schedule to become more familiar with policies and procedures. Look into campus housing options and contact rental agencies. **Actively pursue financial Assistantships if you are interested! (see later section)**
3. Rejected: Get feedback as to why. One can appeal a decision or begin working toward enhancing qualifications for future application periods.

FINANCIAL AID

The range of financial assistance available at the graduate level is very broad. There are three basic types of aid – grants and fellowships, work programs, and loans – and various sources – the federal government, state governments, educational institutions, foundations, corporations, and other private organizations such as professional associations.

Fellowships & Grants - An outright award of money (called a stipend) based on merit that requires no work or service in return. Competition is very keen.

Teaching Assistantships - Usually a full or partial remission and sometimes a stipend. Requires undergraduate teaching, lab supervision, proctoring exams, or grading papers depending on the level of the student.

Research Assistantships - Similar to a teaching assistantship except the responsibility is to assist a faculty member in research efforts rather than teaching.

Administrative Assistantships - Work in an administrative office on campus as opposed to teaching or doing research.

Residence Hall, Student Personnel, or Counseling Assistantships - Frequently given to Student Personnel, Counseling, Psychology, Higher Education, and Social Work Graduate students. Sometimes include room, board and salary in addition to tuition remission.

GI Bill - Veterans can get assistance for graduate as well as undergraduate school.

Loans - Through banks, government agencies and universities. Usually have lower interest rates.

Military - Can often get support for graduate and professional education in exchange for a commitment to future military service.

Employment - It is difficult to manage both full-time work and full-time graduate study. It may be wise to consider doing one or the other part-time, even if this means it will take longer to earn a degree. Find out whether a graduate co-op program is available; this can give you an income plus practical work experience in the field.