

Exploring Grad School



Is graduate school for you? Let's find out!

Included in this Packet:

- **Survey: Is Grad School for Me?**
- **Types of Graduate Programs**
- **Factors to Consider**
- **Writing a Winning Essay**

Take this brief survey to assess your motivations to continue your education.

Label each statement below as True, False, or Unknown:

- _____ 1. If I do not go to graduate school now, I may never go.
- _____ 2. I can get a job in my field without a graduate degree, but not in my specialized area of interest.
- _____ 3. I am unsure of my career goals and graduate school will help me clarify my interests.
- _____ 4. I am actively exploring both graduate school and direct entry into the marketplace.
- _____ 5. My professors are encouraging me to attend graduate/professional school.
- _____ 6. I cannot work in my field of interest without a graduate degree.
- _____ 7. The job market is crowded, and a graduate degree will make me more competitive.
- _____ 8. A graduate degree will significantly increase my entry level salary.
- _____ 9. I like school; I am not ready to leave the academic environment.
- _____ 10. I have career-related experience as part of my background.
- _____ 11. I have always known that I would go directly from undergraduate school into graduate study.
- _____ 12. Most students enter my field of graduate study directly from undergraduate school.

My primary reason for considering graduate school now is:

The academic programs of study I am considering are:

Learn the differences between academic and professional programs.

Professional Schools

- Professional Schools emphasize the practical application of knowledge and skills. They include dental, medical, veterinarian, law, paralegal, and business schools.
- Many professional schools do not require applicants to have a specific undergraduate degree; however, specific (related or rigorous) undergraduate courses may be an important factor. Typically, professional schools are interested in how academically challenging your previous coursework was.
- Professional schools often evaluate applicants heavily according to responses to application essay questions and/or a personal statement. They are concerned with responses to ethical/ philosophical and scenario questions.
- Professional schools are interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and association involvement, work experience, and the result of tests such as the LSAT and MCAT.
- More students go directly into professional schools (immediately following undergraduate education) than those who go directly on to graduate school.

Graduate Schools

- There are many specialized paths to consider when applying to graduate schools. For example, a student interested in counseling could earn an M.Ed. (Master of Education) in Counselor Education, an M.A. (Master of Arts) in Counseling Psychology or a M.S.W. (Master of Social Work). Each program may have an entirely different philosophical approach and may better prepare students for working in different areas of the market. For example, some programs prepare students for careers as professors or researchers, and others prepare students for careers in varying areas of industry such as business or government. It is important to have a solid grasp of the specialty area you want to pursue and the industry area in which you wish to work when choosing a graduate program.
- Graduate schools are interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and association involvement, work experience and the results of standardized tests. (Some programs require both general and subject area exams and have minimum standards for admittance.)
- Some graduate programs may require you to obtain a credential file (typically education and pharmacy programs).
- Graduate degrees may or may not increase salaries depending on the academic area. (Investigate.)
- Many students take time off between undergraduate and graduate studies in order to acquire valuable work experience and further confirm their specialty area of choice. (Some industries and graduate schools prefer this.)

These nine criteria will help you find your best program match.

Geographical Area

Consider whether you can afford in-state vs. out-of-state tuition, how much you can spend on travel expenses, how far you want to be from loved ones and how far-reaching the reputation of the program is.

Finances

Consider how much you can pay toward tuition, books, housing, living expenses, etc. Are you interested in fellowships, scholarships, tuition waivers or graduate assistant stipends, and are they available?

Experiential Learning

Does the school offer graduate assistantships? If so, are they related to your studies and will they afford you related practical or professional experience, or only teaching experience?

Reputation

Are the programs accredited by the appropriate accreditation boards?

Quality

Consider the quality of the academic courses, the library, the equipment or labs, advising, etc.

Demographics and Culture

Consider these factors for both the student body and the faculty. What is your impression of faculty/student interaction? How is morale of the department? Do you "fit" with the environment?

Publications and Faculty Research

How well known are professors in the academic marketplace? Do you wish to study or conduct research under a particular "expert" in the field who teaches at a particular institution?

Requirements

How many credit hours (or years) is the program? Does the program require students to take comprehensive finals (final exams which cover the entire curriculum), or research and write a thesis?

Preparation/Placement Record

What types of positions have previous graduates of the program gone on to hold?

How to set yourself apart on an essay using a unique personal statement for a graduate application.

Writing an essay or personal statement is often the most difficult part of the application, as well as the most distinguishing. It is the one portion of the application that allows you to really set yourself apart and tell the admissions committee what you have to offer that is unique from other applicants. It should be something that only you could write and does not resemble what all other applicants are likely writing. It should be a well thought out, clear, and succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of your goals. It must be grammatically perfect.

Types of Essays

Some programs request only 1 or 2 paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study. Others require 5 or 6 separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about your motivation for graduate study, your strengths and weaknesses, your values and philosophies on a given topic, your greatest achievements, an influential life event and solutions to hypothetical problems. Business schools are notorious for requiring several time-consuming essays.

Content

A graduate school essay should be a statement of your ideas or goals. Usually it includes a certain amount of personal history, but you do not have to supply autobiographical information unless required by the school. In deciding whether or not to include personal history, consider its influence on your future plans and ability to distinguish you further from other applicants. Keep your essay positive and upbeat. It is better not to mention low grades or test scores unless specifically asked to. If negative circumstances must be addressed, they should: 1) be in the past; 2) be currently resolved; and 3) be unlikely to recur. Avoid long, tedious excuses. You may also wish to ask one of your references to address these issues in the recommendation letter.

The admissions committee may be trying to evaluate some, or all, of the following things from your essay:

- A clear reflection of your writing abilities (both grammatical and creative).
- The clarity, focus, and depth of your thinking.
- Level of maturity.
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution.
- Motivation, commitment and enthusiasm to pursue a particular field of study.
- Major area of special interest.
- Expectations you have with regard to the program of study and career opportunities.
- Immediate and long-term goals and how previous research, education, and work experience relate to your future plans.

Approaches/Tips

- Jot down the most unique things about you. List your goals, accomplishments, and influences.
- Concentrate on the opening paragraph. Avoid "I have always wanted to be a ____." Consider opening with an epiphany – the moment you realized your passion.
- Have an angle or a "hook" that emphasizes a distinguishing characteristic about you or a life event.
- Tell a story. Even if it includes autobiographical information, it does not have to be written chronologically.
- Demonstrate that you have researched the program(s) and know why you are choosing to apply.
- Consider the reader's point of view. Avoid any statements that could be interpreted as dishonest.
- Less is more. Illustrate the salient points in depth and refer to supporting materials for more detail.
- Open or end with a quote that has particular relevance to you, your philosophies or the field.