Applying to Graduate School

Before You Start

The first thing to do is consider why you decided you want to attend graduate school. Students often enter their senior year and are unsure what they can do with their major or lack confidence in their ability to secure a job and view graduate school as an “easy” option after college. However, when it comes to applying to graduate school, it is important to understand why you want to go and how it will benefit your career. You will be asked many times throughout the application process why you want to attend graduate school, and in particular the program to which you are applying. By taking the time in advance to begin to articulate your reasons for applying, you will have a head start on the application process.

Questions to Consider:

- What are my long-term career goals and will graduate school be necessary or helpful?
- Do I have the money, time and energy to meet the obligations of graduate school?
- Am I disciplined enough and committed to work hard for as long as it takes?
- Do I need to go right away or can I wait and gain some work experience?
- What topic/subject/idea/issue am I passionate about?

Choosing a Graduate School

The decision about which graduate school to attend should not be made lightly. Do your research and talk to several faculty members and professionals within your field. The most important factor in your decision should be how well suited the graduate program and the institution are to your interests and needs, as well as your academic and career goals. Other factors to evaluate include: university reputation, department, faculty, program, admission criteria, cost, physical facilities, multicultural experiences, career assistance, and geographic location.

Gradschools.com
This online tool allows students to locate schools by discipline and subject area, and supplies basic program description and contact information.

The Princeton Review
The Princeton Review has a website to help you locate schools of interest, provides graduate school tips, and focuses on the application process: http://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school

There are many reference books and websites available to help you locate programs:
Peterson’s Annual Guides to Graduate Study: Book available online at http://www.petersonsbooks.com

Start Class
This website allows you to search for graduate schools by topic: http://www.startclass.com/

PhDs.org
Search masters and doctorate programs throughout the US: http://www.phds.org/

Professional Societies
Many professional societies will offer lists of programs they accredit or endorse. For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) annually prints the APA Guide to Graduate Study in Psychology. Check with the professional society within your subject area to see if they have a graduate school guide.
Things You Should Know About Each Graduate School

**Admissions:**
- What are the academic regulations/requirements for graduating? What is the minimum GPA required for Admission consideration?
- What types of financial aid is offered? What criteria are used for choosing recipients? How many students receive financial aid?
- Does the department prefer applicants immediately out of undergraduate programs or do they prefer applicants with work experience? If they prefer or require experience, what kind of experience are they looking for?
- How many applicants do you receive annually? How many are admitted?
- What is the relative importance of admissions test scores, recommendations, statements of purpose, experience and other requirements?

**Program:**
- What characteristics distinguish this program from others in the same field?
- Are there teaching opportunities, such as teaching assistantships, for current students?
- Do most students publish an article or present a paper before graduation?
- What planned practical experiences are included in the program (i.e. practicums or assistantships)? Ask for examples of practicum placements. What assistance is provided by the department for locating those experiences?
- How diverse is the student body? Faculty?
- What kind of student thrives in the program?
- What is the program’s attrition rate? Do students of this graduate department frequently fail to complete their degree programs? This is not something you will learn from the catalog or department brochure.
- Is there a graduate student organization?
- Are faculty members involved in research? What grants have they received for their projects and where have they been published?
- How independent is the research of the students? Is an advisor assigned to assist with research?
- What size are the classes?
- Is the program interdisciplinary? If so, with what other department(s)?
- What is the department’s philosophy and the professors’ instruction methods?

**Faculty:**
- How many faculty members do they have?
- What have the faculty members published lately? This will give you an idea of whether the faculty’s interests are similar to your own. In many cases, what the professor publishes is what he or she spends the most time talking about, both in and out of the classroom.
- Are there well-known and respected faculty? If so, ask the students how often they actually see or talk with these people. Would you be likely to work with the well-known professor on a research project, see him or her only in class, or just hear about him/her occasionally?

**Career Options:**
- Where are recent alumni employed?
- What do most students do after graduation?
- Are placement statistics on graduates available?
- Does an advisor assist students in finding post-graduate employment?
- To what extent can you use the degree from this department to get into other kinds of work? Is there much latitude for applying this degree to other fields?

Finally, it is important to determine how selective the program is. What is the ratio of applications to acceptances? Highly selective schools will accept highly qualified candidates. Be honest about your chances of getting in. Schools are reviewing applications and letters of recommendation with an eye toward finding the best candidates for their program. To ensure your application is among those considered, be sure to complete the application in its entirety and submit all required materials on time or in advance of deadline.
Financing Your Graduate Education

One of the most common questions asked by graduate school applicants is, “How do I pay for graduate school?” Here are a few basic types of available financial aid:

**Fellowships, Grants, and Scholarships:**
This is what is considered “free money” since you do not earn the money or pay it back when you complete your graduate work. Some fellowships, grants, and scholarships are tied to a specific university, college, department, or program, while others such as the White House Fellowship, J. William Fulbright Grants, and K. Bienecke Memorial Scholarships are available for anyone to apply.

Receiving this type of aid requires hard work on your part, if you are to succeed in funding or subsidizing your graduate school costs. Competition for this type of aid can be tough, but does not mean your chances are so remote you would be wasting your time. What it does mean is you must be committed, thorough, and tenacious in order to secure this type of funding.

**Assistantships:**
Assistantships and work programs allow you to earn money in return for services you provide to the college or university. Often you will receive a tuition waiver (meaning the college will pay for your tuition) and/or salary or stipend. With this type of aid, as with fellowships, scholarships, and grants, not all schools are created equal. Some schools will waive half of your tuition; some will waive all of it. Some will waive your tuition, provide you with room and board, and pay you a competitive hourly wage, while others only offer an hourly wage for work completed. You need to research each institution to determine what types of assistantships are available and the benefits they provide.

Typical Assistantships Include:
- **Teaching Assistantships (TA):** teach an undergraduate level class and assist a professor with grading papers, advising students, and supervising labs. Teaching assistantships are often reserved for second-year Master’s students or Ph.D. students.
- **Research Assistantships (RA):** assist a faculty member with research activities
- **Administrative Assistantships/Graduate Assistantships (GA):** work within a specific department or office on campus, such as career services, admissions, financial aid, student life, etc. in an administrative capacity.

**Loans:**
Loans are available through graduate schools, the government, and commercial institutions, such as banks. Loans through graduate schools and the government tend to charge lower interest rates. The Stafford and Perkins Loans are the most common government loans and have relatively low interest rates. Perkins loans are awarded solely on need; therefore qualification is based upon the institution’s financial aid office. Stafford loans can be subsidized (you pay no interest while you are attending school) and unsubsidized (you will be charged interest while you are in school, but if you cannot afford to pay the interest while attending school, it is added to the loan balance). Generally, all graduate students are considered to be financially independent, and therefore parental contribution is not expected.

**Tips:**
- Apply for aid even if you think you are not eligible. Some grants are not based on need.
- Contact the financial aid office of the graduate schools for which you will be applying and ask for the information on every possible type of financial aid, and do it early to ensure you meet the deadlines.
- If you are currently a high need student, you may be eligible for a fee waiver for graduate school applications and the GRE. Contact ETS at www.ets.org or at 609-771-7670.
- Consider your long-range goals. If you think you might want to teach or do research in your field, experience as a Teaching Assistant or Research Assistant could be invaluable.

The Application Process

Once you have compiled a list of graduate schools, it is time to begin applying. Applications for graduate school are made for a specific program or department. Application materials may be received from a central office, but the evaluation of you as a candidate is made by both the department and the institution.

You will want to apply to several different programs which suit your needs. Doing this gives you the greatest opportunity for acceptance. Be sure to apply to some programs at prestigious universities, or reach schools, as well as those programs that can serve as insurance, or those where you feel certain you will be accepted.
The application process can take a lot of time, energy, and money, depending on how many programs to which you apply. Application fees may range from $40-$200 per school. You may want to look into application fee waiver programs. These programs are available to applicants who show significant financial need.

Determine application deadlines for each school in which you are interested. Deadlines can span anywhere from December to May if you are planning on beginning during the fall semester. By the deadline, the schools will want to have a completed application file; if they do not, your application will not be considered.

**The Application Form:**
Application forms for many schools may be accessed online. In most cases, you will have the option to either complete the form online or download and print the form for completion at a later time. Some tips to consider while filling out applications are:
- Provide complete and accurate information.
- Be sure to carefully read instructions and check carefully for typos, spelling and grammatical errors.
- Carefully check the school’s website to determine if additional forms are required.

**Statement of Purpose:**
Writing a statement of purpose is often the most time-consuming and difficult part of applying to graduate school. It is a significant part of your application for a number of reasons. First, it provides the faculty with an important impression of you as an individual. Second, it is a way to measure your writing ability. Thus, it is important to use graduate level language and carefully edit for spelling and grammatical errors. Finally, the statement of purpose can be used to determine your enthusiasm for the field, your maturity, and creativity.

There are two types of statements: (1) the general, more comprehensive statement which allows you the most flexibility, as you determine what you want to say, and (2) a statement in response to more specific questions, which provides you with more direction.

**Choosing your Approach and Style:**
Your statement of purpose should clearly present to the committee how and why you became interested in a particular area of study. It should also provide them with a pattern of growth and interest over a period of time. Try to make your statement interesting and dynamic. A successful statement:
- Has interesting and intriguing opening statements that are concise and grab the reader’s attention.
- Demonstrates specific academic preparation and knowledge in the field and explains the value and meaning of your experiences.
- Gives specific information with details and conclusions
- Displays high level writing skills
- Follows character count and/or page length instructions

**Topics and Questions to Consider for a Statement of Purpose**
- Why are you applying? In what area of study do you want to specialize? What are your research interests?
- What are your career goals (both short and long-term)? Support how you became interested in the subject area, and what you specifically hope to accomplish with this degree. How will graduate school facilitate your plans?
- Why are you specifically interested in a particular program: (i.e., depth of faculty, research, specialization, internship opportunities, career goals, geographical advantages). Go beyond a school’s reputation. Do not mention reasons about convenience or ease of location.
- Highlight research you have conducted, or any direct experience in the field.
- What makes you a special and unique applicant? What did you study in your undergraduate education? What special preparation have you received?
- What about your extracurricular activities? Talk about your accomplishments and leadership experiences.
- Address any “discrepancies” in your academic history (i.e., not doing as well your first couple of years, a semester you overloaded on difficult classes, etc). If your grades or test scores do not represent your true potential, you need to eliminate any uncertainties that you are not capable of doing graduate level work!
- Talk about your epiphany—the event, or series of events, leading up to your decision to pursue this field.
- In my frequent correspondence with Drs. _______, ________, and ________, I realized…
- Fill in more of the blanks: “I would like to do _____, learn ______, explore _____, master ______, and discover more about _________.”
**Letters of Recommendation:**

Letters of recommendation can make the difference between acceptance and rejection. Often an admissions committee will use them to make a decision between two applicants. One of the biggest mistakes a graduate applicant can make is to submit weak letters of recommendations or letters from non-credible sources. With this in mind, select three or four individuals, such as professors, advisors, or supervisors, who will communicate positively about your work habits, academic ability, and character.

Additional skills and attributes to be included in a strong letter of recommendation:

- Coursework in which you did well
- Teamwork
- Whether you are a self-starter and/or have the ability to work independently
- Communication skills
- Ease in working with and for people
- Enthusiasm for work
- Responsibility/dependability

As soon as possible, provide recommenders with:

- A copy of your statement of purpose (it lets them understand why you are interested in the program)
- Instructions on how to submit the letter
- Curriculum Vitae or Resume (it provides background information to assist them in knowing you better)
- Forms or guidelines for the letters, if provided by the program
- Addressed envelopes or link to website for application
- Honors and awards, professional recognition in your field
- Deadline for submitting the letters, always up-date a week to ensure letter is submitted on time

Begin early. Ask your recommenders at the beginning of your senior year or earlier. Discuss with them why you are going to graduate school and to which programs you are applying. Listen to them. If you sense reservations, if you hear time constraints, or if they do not feel they have known you long enough or well enough, think of another individual to ask. A weak or unenthusiastic letter can be detrimental to your application.

If you apply online, many schools will require you to submit the name, title, address, institution or business name, and e-mail address of each recommender as part of the application process. Your recommenders will receive instructions from the school on how to submit their letters of recommendation electronically.

After your recommenders commit to writing a recommendation for you, do not be passive about your letters. Keep checking back with them until it happens. After they have written the recommendation, be sure to write a thank-you note. Your recommenders may also be interested in knowing where you finally decide to go to graduate school; after all, they had a hand in the process of getting you there.

**Diversity Statements:**

Many schools are now requiring diversity statements to accompany the personal statement. In this statement, you have to provide further examples of your experience, and talk about how these have made you a mature, more diverse person. You do not have to be an Under-Represented Minority (or, URM) to write one. There is a common misconception a diversity statement should only be about ethnicity or race. A diverse experience can be related to ethnicity and race, but it can also relate to your sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, religious belief, or age. It is more than just the color of your skin; it is about any circumstances, experiences, and exposure to diverse cultures that have made you different from the rest of the applicant pool. This also applies to your home life as well—whether you grew up in a non-English speaking household, an adoptive home, or any otherwise “non-traditional” household.

It is up to you to decide what diverse experience to focus on. Below are some ideas and questions for you to begin brainstorming the focus of your diversity statement:

- Reflect on your background or upbringing
- How did these experiences allow you to have a different perspective?
- How has this perspective changed your outlook? Your career and life goals?
- How will this experience help diversify the student body?

**DON’T:**

- Be antagonistic. Being critical of greater social and cultural forces is one thing, but using your diversity statement as a soapbox is another.
• **Throw yourself a pity party.** Admissions counselors want to see how you have matured and grown. Do not trivialize yourself by coming off as if you are complaining or whining.

• **Blame others.** Instead of pointing fingers at whom or what may have complicated your background, talk about how these things have changed you for the better.

**DO:**

• **Talk about how your life has changed.** Shed light on how you have grown/developed into the person you are now.

• **Focus on positive aspects of your experience.** What good came from your experiences? What are you grateful for?

**Transcripts:**

It is your responsibility to have an official copy of all your college transcripts sent to each school to which you are applying. For those of you who transferred to UWRF from another school, you will have to contact the other school(s) to obtain complete transcripts. At UWRF, requests for official transcripts should be directed to the Registrar’s Office (http://www.uwrf.edu/Registrar/Transcripts/Index.cfm). There is a $10.00 charge for each official transcript requested at UWRF.

**Tests:**

By the end of your junior year, you should have determined whether you have to take any of the standardized tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), or the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). Each school will tell you which test may be required.

**Check List of Activities**

**Pre-Application Preparations:**

- Read the materials identifying various graduate schools; list the ones of interest.
- Visit Career Services to talk about the graduate school application process.
- Request program information from the graduate programs of interest.
- Visit the school and meet with the faculty of the department; inquire about possible visit days.
- Finalize the list of programs of interest to you.
- Study for the admission test (GRE, GMAT, or MAT) if a test is required.
- Review the writing sample requirements to determine if they require a statement of purpose or essay questions.
- Write a draft copy of your statement of purpose/essay questions, and curriculum vitae/resume. Ensure you have multiple individuals critique and proofread your documents to ensure there are no errors.
- Request official transcripts from all schools you have previously attended.

**Prepare Application Materials:**

- Register for and take any required admission tests
- Write the final version of your statement of purpose and curriculum vitae/resume – have someone from Career Services proof your statement.
- Ask professors, advisors, and supervisors to serve as references
  - Provide information about each program to which you are applying, copies of your personal statement, and curriculum vitae/resume
  - Inform them when the letter is due
  - Supply them with instructions on how to properly submit this information – online or by mail

**Sending the Application:**

- Send the following at this time:
  - Application(s) for admissions
  - Application fee
  - Statement of purpose
  - Transcripts from all institutions attended
  - Curriculum vitae/resume
  - Any other information required by the program
- Request test scores be sent to the school(s)
- Verify letters of recommendation have been sent by your references
- Call the department to confirm all parts of your application have arrived and ask when admission decisions will be announced
Interviewing

Some graduate programs require applicants to visit with the department chair or members of the faculty for a personal interview. The purpose of the interview is to get to know the applicant more personally and is an opportunity for you to look more closely at the program. This is your chance to distinguish yourself from the other applicants and show the interviewer(s) what makes you a great candidate.

Before the Interview:
- Practice, practice, practice.
- Do your homework. Know who you will be interviewing with. Utilize LinkedIn.com or other professional websites to learn about the program/faculty. Read recent faculty publications to learn more about their labs.
- Be clear on what your long-term goals are.
- Prepare intelligent questions.
- Participate in a mock interview at Career Services to strengthen your interviewing skills.

Questions to be Prepared for:
- Tell me about yourself.
- Did you read my last book or article?
- Who do you read, follow, admire? Read any good books lately?
- Where else did you apply?
- Why did you choose to apply to our program?
- What will you do if you do not get in?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What do you believe your greatest challenge will be if you are accepted into this program?
- In college, what courses did you enjoy the most? The least? Why?
- Describe any research project you’ve worked on. What was the purpose of the project and what was your role in the project?
- What are your career goals? How will this program help you achieve your goals?
- How do you intend to finance your education?
- What skills do you bring to the program?
- What motivates you? Explain and provide examples.
- Why should we take you and not someone else?
- What do you plan to specialize in?
- Explain a situation in which you had a conflict. How did you resolve it? What would you do differently?
- Describe your greatest accomplishment.

During the Interview:
- Dress professionally and comfortably, and arrive early.
- Bring copies of your resume (or CV), papers, and research.
- Be specific in your answers. Use the STAR technique (read more about this in the interview packet) to provide examples to support your statements.
- Be professional by demonstrating maturity. A sense of humor is a plus, when used appropriately.
- Clearly express why and how you would be successful in the program.
- Try to meet graduate students for a one-on-one conversation so you can find out about their experience in the program.
- Demonstrate your interest in the school and program in a passionate and enthusiastic manner.
- Follow standard rules of interviewing (i.e., eye contact, self-confident presentation, conservative dress).
- Ask for business cards from each individual you interview with to send thank you notes after the interview.

Post Interview:
- Immediately following the interview, write a brief note to the interviewer(s), including students, thanking him or her for taking time to see you, and reiterate your interest in the university and the specific program to which you have applied.
- If you are not accepted, call or write to ask why not and what you can do to improve your chances in the future. If possible, personal appointments might be appropriate for your top choice schools.
Graduate School Timeline

18 Months Before you Hope to Start Classes (Spring of Junior Year):
- Begin deciding if graduate school is an option and what area you are interested in pursuing.
- Start researching schools.

12-14 Months Before you Start Classes (Summer between Junior and Senior Year):
- Write to or visit schools that interest you, request catalogs and application materials as well as information on financial aid and visit days planned.
- Use the summer to review the information received. Determine a strategy for which school to apply to (ex. two reach schools, two safe schools, two maybes).
- Begin studying for entrance exams.
- Ask a small group of friends to be your “Grad School Buddies” – those individuals will ask how it is going and keep you accountable for deadlines.
- Draft your statement of purpose, determine goals for pursuing study, your career goals, and how each particular program will help you accomplish those goals.
- Attend an open house sponsored by either the graduate program or the school.

9-12 Months Before you Hope to Start Classes (Fall of Senior Year):
- September
  - Meet with faculty members to ask for recommendations for graduate school and for programs to consider.
  - Ask for letters of recommendation from faculty, staff, and supervisors. Give recommendation forms to letter writers. Include a resume and draft of your personal statement for the recommenders and any deadline information.
- October
  - Take entrance exams.
  - Have faculty and Career Services review your statement of purpose. PROOFREAD!
  - Mark application deadlines on your calendar. Remember financial aid deadlines may be earlier.
- November/December
  - Request transcripts from all schools attended.
  - Complete and submit application forms, including those for financial aid. Photocopy everything!

6-9 Months Before you Hope to Start Classes (Spring of Senior Year):
- Call graduate program departments to make sure they have received your materials.
- Check with faculty to make sure they have sent in their letters.
- Upon notification of your status (accepted, provisional, waiting list, denied), you will need to decide which school to attend. Be sure to notify other schools so they can offer your spot to another student.
- If you are not accepted, consult with faculty and Career Services regarding your options. For example, working for a year, preparing to re-take the GRE and reapplying; applying to similar fields if you have not explored those options.

Additional Information
For additional information, visit the Graduate School section of the Career Services webpage:
https://www.uwrf.edu/CareerServices/Students/GradSchool.cfm