Is Graduate School For Me?

This information is adapted from materials available at UC Berkeley’s Career Center website (https://career.berkeley.edu/). Additional information on admissions tests, the statement of purpose, and letters of recommendation may be obtained at https://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/Grad.

What is Graduate School?
Graduate school constitutes an advanced program of study focused on a particular academic discipline or a specific profession. Traditionally, graduate school has been “academic” (centered on generating original research in a particular discipline), but it may be “professional” (centered on imparting skills and knowledge to future professionals), or a combination of both traditions.

Do you really want to be a graduate student?
- Are you willing to invest the time, energy, and money associated with going to graduate school? Have you thoroughly investigated these costs?
- Are you prepared to spend the majority of the next 2-7 years studying while living with a reduced income?
- Can a single topic or narrow range of topics sustain your interest for the next 2-7 years?
- Do you need a break from school?
- Will career-related work experience help you get into graduate school?
- Are you comfortable initiating and carrying out independent research?

Why do you want to go to graduate school?
- Do you want to enter a profession that requires an advanced degree?
- Do you want a higher salary? (Will a graduate degree really affect your salary?)
- Are you uncertain about making a career decision? (Have you talked to a career counselor?)
- Are you applying to graduate school because “everyone else is doing it?” (The decision to attend graduate school is ideally based on your own criteria, including how graduate education will fit in with your goals).
- Are you applying to graduate school because you feel like you have no career options? (Have you used all job search methods? Have you talked to a career counselor?)
- Do you know what your short and long term goals are and how a graduate degree can help you achieve them?

Gathering Information
- Talk to faculty on campus and at other institutions that teach in the field you plan to pursue; they often can provide you with the best information that will help steer you in the direction of good programs.
- Since most universities have websites, the Internet is a great resource to find information quickly and easily. Some sites will provide complete information, while others may tell you where to write to get additional information.
- Contact programs directly to get more detailed program information such as courses, professors, costs, financial aid and application forms.
- At the Career Center Info lab, or local library, you will find books, brochures, catalogues, directories and guides that list information on universities that grant graduate or professional degrees. One such guide is the Peterson’s Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs, which contains both short and long descriptions of virtually all accredited graduate programs.
- Conduct informational interviews with current graduate students, professionals, and faculty in the graduate programs you are considering to gain insider information about programs.
- Read professional and academic journals related to your area of interest.

Decide Where to Apply—Factors to consider:
After researching your options, the next step is to decide where to apply. Here are some factors to consider when evaluating programs:
A.
The Reputation of the Faculty: What are their academic degrees/credentials and research specialties? What is the student/faculty ratio? Some faculty may have homepages that include some of the above information.

B.
The Quality of the Program: This is measured by many different factors, many of which are mentioned below. Talk to several faculty members and graduate students in the field you are pursuing to get an informed view on the variety of graduate programs available. You may choose to look at graduate school rankings to help you assess a program’s quality; however, you need to realize that the rankings may be based on criteria that are different from your own, and that many scholars, deans, and advisors question the validity of such rankings.

C.
The Financial Cost of the Program: What are the opportunities for fellowships, assistantships, or scholarships? What other sources of financial aid are available?

D.
The Program Requirements: Inform yourself of specific requirements to gain admittance into your programs of choice in terms of GPA, test scores, undergraduate coursework, and specific entrance examinations.

E.
Available Course Offerings: Are courses you need to fulfill degree requirements frequently offered? Will the course offerings help you meet your professional or educational goals?

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

G.
Employment: Where are graduates of the program working, and how much are they earning?

H.
Geographic Location: Will studying in a particular location help you meet personal or professional goals?

I.
Student Life: Consider the diversity of students, student organizations, housing, and campus support services.

What kinds of admissions tests are there?
Most graduate and professional schools require that you take a standardized admissions test. The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) General and Subject tests are required by many academic programs (Masters and Doctoral degrees). MBA programs usually require the GMAT. Other tests are required in other fields, such as the LSAT for law school, the MCAT for medical school, the DAT for dentistry school, the OAT for optometry school, and the TOEFL English proficiency test for international students.

Getting Started
One of the initial steps in applying to a graduate or professional school is to research application deadlines so that you can develop a timeline of when to submit test scores, letters of recommendation, personal essays, etc. Below is a timeline to help you in planning your application process:

Junior Year
- Begin researching available programs by talking to faculty/alumni/current students in the program, reviewing grad school guides/directories, requesting promotional materials and visiting schools’ websites
- Start exploring financial aid resources
- Study, then take practice tests for standardized exams
- Sign up for required standardized test
- Attend Career Center Graduate/Professional School Workshops
- Identify potential letter writers
- Order an unofficial transcript and check for and correct any discrepancies
- Take the required standardized test

Senior Year – Fall Semester
- Write the first draft of your statement of purpose
- Request your letters of recommendation from faculty
- Order official transcripts
- Write final draft of statement of purpose
- Complete and mail your applications
- Apply for aid available through departmental programs; assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, etc.
- Complete and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Senior Year – Spring Semester
- Visit prospective campuses if possible, and talk to faculty/students to help you make your final decision
- Follow-up with schools to make sure your file is complete
- After receiving acceptance from the school of your choice, send in the required deposit, and contact other schools and decline acceptances
- Write thank you notes to people who helped you