

APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

CAREER PLANNING

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Is Graduate School for You?

Graduate school opportunities are diverse. If you have developed interests and abilities in a specific field of study at Potsdam, you should explore the options of attending graduate school. Many careers today require advanced degrees: medicine, social work, law, higher education, specialized research, etc. Going to graduate school provides you with an opportunity to expand your knowledge and experience in a specific field of study.

However, do not use graduate school to delay or postpone job searching. You should have clearly defined interests and demonstrated abilities in a particular field before conducting the application process. ***Remember, an advanced degree in many disciplines may not necessarily increase your chances of initial job search success.***

Self-Assessment

Deciding to attend graduate school is not a decision to make hastily or with limited information. Discussions with your professors and other professionals in the field will help you obtain information when making your decision about attending graduate school.

Before applying for further study, you need to consider:

- 1) the working conditions, employment prospects, and physical and mental requirements of the field you plan to pursue.
- 2) The demands of a graduate school experience (research, course work, papers, teaching, etc.). You must look for a match between demands and your interests, needs, skills, and career goals.

Two of the reasons frequently given by students who have withdrawn from graduate programs are a dislike of the concentrated academic work and a realization that they had not defined their career goals adequately and clearly.

Selection of a Program

Students considering graduate education are often concerned they will need to attend the best program of study. National rankings are available for review from many sources, but most often, rankings are based on different criteria. There is no single reliable ranking of graduate schools and programs.

Is the national recognition that a school or program has received the most important factor to consider when selecting a program? As discussed earlier, a program should meet your individual needs, interests, and goals. To identify these programs, information about various schools and programs is available for review and comparison. Graduate catalogs are available on microfiche in Crumb Library.

Talk to the faculty about the graduate school(s) that you are considering and solicit their help with contacting professionals in your field of interest. Faculty members are invaluable sources for helping students learn more about graduate schools relating to their area of study.

When selecting a program you should consider the following information:

- Departmental course offerings
- The ratio of graduate students to on-campus faculty
- The ratio of graduate students to those receiving a degree this year
- The probability of the faculty you want to study with being on campus your first two years
- Theoretical or pragmatic approach to the subject matter
- Philosophical or professional attitudes of the faculty members and the department
- Specific specialties and interests of the faculty
- Current research, publications, and professional involvement of the faculty
- Flexibility of the curriculum and length of the program
- Availability of placement services and career outlook
- Size, geographical location, type and availability of housing, and community environment
- Application requirements (test scores, essays, interview, etc.) and required background and credentials of students
- Financial aid resources, cost and residency requirements

It is extremely important that you visit the graduate school department and talk with professors and other graduate students. The visit will reveal whether the program is for you.

Application Process

Applying for graduate school can become complex, time consuming, and difficult if you are not well organized and prepared. You should keep in mind the following requirements when applying to schools:

Application Forms:

- Follow instructions and carefully complete all requested information.
- Direct your answers to the specific aspects of the graduate program.
- Complete the forms using a typewriter or pen keeping in mind that a neat and attractive appearance is important.
- Include all requested documents and materials: resume, fees, autobiographical sketch, etc.
- Always make copies for your records before you send your materials.

Reference Letters:

- Select recommenders who you know well enough to write detailed letters for you. When requesting this service, be specific of your goals and purpose.
- Provide recommenders with a statement of purpose to jog memories and enrich remarks.
- Allow the recommender ample time to complete your letter and always follow up to insure completion.
- “Preserved rights of access” versus “waived rights of access” you must make this decision. “Preserved rights of access” means you get to read. “Waived rights of access” means you do not read. Many schools require the “waived rights of access” format and these letters tend to carry more “weight”.
- Most graduate schools have their own reference forms. It is a good idea to ask faculty members to write a reference on our form for your Career Planning file. Students have applied to graduate school several years later and they found that the faculty whom they want to have write them a reference moved or retired.

Transcripts:

- Allow the Registrar’s office at least 10 working days to process your transcripts for graduate school referral. Your request must be made in writing.
- Official transcripts are required.

Essay or Personal Statement:

- Often underestimated, this portion of the application is extremely important. Create and develop your statement in relation to the question(s): What does the reader want to hear?
- Organize the statement to be clear, specific, detailed, and concise. Think of your response in terms of how your background, skills, abilities, goals, etc. match the characteristics and opportunities of the graduate program/school, and the career for which it prepares you.
- Show your written communication skills, motivation, energy level, creativity, commitment and depth of response.
- Invite critiques by Potsdam faculty.
- Use the book *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School (GIA)* located in the Career Planning Library to help you.

Additional Credentials:

- Ensure proper provisions for test score reporting, personal interviews, and other requested information.

Admissions:

- Note the specific deadline and due date of the comprehensive application package.
- Early application will pay off; especially when programs are offering rolling admissions and awarding financial aid packages.

Financial Aid:

- Be aware that financial aid deadlines are usually earlier than the comprehensive application material. Many programs will not state these deadlines without your assertive inquiry.

Graduate Admissions Deadlines

Preparation and planning will be the keys to your success in effectively meeting graduate admissions' deadlines. Research and discover the specific time requirements for submitting applications, test scores, financial aid information and other related material. Develop a checklist of requirements noting all pertinent deadlines. Use the "Time Line Checklist" and the "Application Checklist" at the conclusion of this handout to help you with this.

Tests: (GRE, LSAT, MCAT, MAT, DAT, etc.)

- Find out test requirements of each graduate school application. Many programs will require the general and subject tests and /or multiple testing.
- Application booklets are available in Career Planning.
- Plan on registering for the test at least six weeks before the actual test date to ensure proper preparation, minimal cost, and your acceptance for that test date.
- Study and prepare to take the test(s). Use test preparation study books and resource guides to improve test scoring potential.
- Take the test early, allowing time to retake them if necessary and providing adequate time for reporting scores. However, check with Potsdam faculty in your subject to determine the best time to take the subject exam. Sometimes it is best to wait for specific courses to be completed before taking the subject test. In these cases testing later could be better.

Financing Your Graduate Education

A major concern and obstacle in pursuing an advanced degree is financing it. If you are willing to pursue a variety of financial aid avenues, most students can completely finance the costs of graduate school. ***Check the career resources available in the Career Planning Library on financing graduate school.*** In addition, financial aid information can be found in most graduate/professional school catalogs and/or specific departmental brochures. The key in obtaining maximum financial aid is “do not leave any stone unturned”. The following sources will offer you a variety of financial resources to explore.

Graduate Assistantships:

- Teaching and/or research assistantships are common opportunities for financing your advanced degree. These awards usually carry full or partial tuition remuneration plus a stipend.
- Your commitment normally involves 10-20 hours per week dealing with teaching, tutoring, proctoring exams, developing lesson plans, and/or doing a variety of research activities.
- Assistantships are typically available through the specific department you are applying to however; many related areas of study may also have opportunities available.
- Competition for these awards can be intense. Apply early and always submit a resume with your inquiry. If possible, visit the department and arrange a personal interview.

Fellowships and Grants:

- Consists of outright awards usually requiring no service to the institution in return. Awarded on a competitive basis, grants vary in terms of monetary amount and length of funding.
- Explore institutional, private and governmental fellowship opportunities. Do not limit your application to one type of grant because it may take several combined awards to fund your entire graduate degree.
- Consult with faculty and the resources available in Career Planning for information about fellowships and grants.

Resident Assistantships:

- Graduate programs also may offer financial assistance in the form of resident assignments involving room, board and stipend by working as managers in undergraduate residence halls.
- Enlist professors' help in preparing a winning application.
- These comprehensive opportunities are often the most lucrative because some schools will also include tuition remuneration with the assignment.
- Competitively based, resident assistantships will involve using your job search skills.
- Always include your resume and cover letter requesting an interview for available jobs.
- Ask about these opportunities at the institution's residence life or student affairs office.

Loans:

- Remember that any undergraduate loan can be deferred while you are full-time graduate students.
- Most institutions have loan programs for graduate students including private, state, and federally sponsored Guaranteed Student Loan opportunities.

College Work Study Programs:

- Eligible students are provided part-time jobs on-campus. These federally funded programs are usually administered by the institution's financial aid office.

About The Interview

The interview will permit the school to determine:

- If your personal attributes are as appealing as your academic record;
- If your personal attributes will place you in the overall acceptable range (if you are borderline).

The Interview will permit you to:

- Have an opportunity to sell yourself by projecting as favorable image;
- Familiarize yourself with the campus, its facilities, faculty, and student body;
- Obtain firsthand answers to questions about the school that may not yet have been answered.

The Interviewer Is Looking For:

- Physical appearance.
- Personality: Friendliness, ability to establish rapport.
- Communication Skills; ability to express ideas clearly, fluently, and intelligently.
- Motivation: Soundness of career choice, conviction of interests.
- Maturity: Ability to undertake responsibility that the career entails.
- Interest: What education, social and cultural interests you have.

Preparing for the Graduate School Interview

Rehearse answers to the typical questions that may be asked at an interview. You should tape record your response and hear how you sound or schedule a mock interview in Career Planning.

- See if you can appropriately fit or slip your rehearsed answers in during the interview in a manner that is casual and doesn't sound planned. The latter can be accomplished by pausing for a moment before answering a question that you are prepared for, acting as if you are preparing your answers.
- Sell your favorable assets by fitting them into the interview (e.g., related work, research experience, community activities, research articles published, etc.). Know your strengths thoroughly.
- Establish a rapport with the interviewer from the very outset. Walk in with a greeting, a smile on your face and a firm handshake. On leaving, express your appreciation for the time the interviewer gave you.
- Avoid, where possible, "yes" or "no" answers. Rather, give the pros and cons of the issue and your views in a brief and concise manner. Show that you can be analytical but avoid being overly talkative.
- If you don't understand the question, ask the interviewer to clarify it.
- Don't open up discussions on your own, such as on politics or religion. If asked, don't be defensive. Interviewers seek a sense of confidence even on controversial issues. Don't disparaging your school or specific instructors or students. It will not help make you look better.

(Adapted from "Graduate School in Science and Engineering: Tips for Students and Faculty", by Martha Lake Matyas)

Sample Interview Questions

- Why did you attend your undergraduate college?
- What are your extracurricular activities?
- What books and newspapers do you read?
- What other schools have you applied to?
- What do you plan to specialize in?
- Why did you get a poor grade in?
- Which school is your first choice?
- What kind of social life do you have?
- Do you feel you should have gone to a different college?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- Describe your study habits?
- What experiences led you to your career choice?
- Why do you think you are better suited for admission than your classmates?
- What has been your most significant accomplishment to date?
- How do you cope with frustrating situations?
- Have you ever worked with people, and if so in what capacity?
- Who has the greatest influence on your life?
- What made you apply to our school?
- What are your weaknesses?
- If you are accepted to more than one school, how will you decide which to attend?
- How do you see yourself ten years from now?
- If you were to have a year off, what would you do with it?
- What do you think of and how did you prepare for the entrance exam?
- What message would you like me to convey to the admission committee in your behalf?
- What were your most favorite and least favorite courses in college?

Questions You Should Ask During A Graduate School Interview

- What are the academic regulations/requirements for graduating?
- What percentages of the students pass the qualifying exams the first time? How many chances are there?
- Are a large percentage of the students graduating with a terminal master's degree?
- What is the average time to obtain a Ph.D.?
- How many students will be in my entering class?
- When (and how) do you choose your advisor? How difficult is it to switch advisors after a year?
- Who selects the thesis/dissertation committee? Is the support offered in the form of a teaching or research assistantship? How much is the stipend?
- How many working hours per week are expected for a TA (teaching assistant) or RA (research assistant)?
- Are you guaranteed support for the entire time or is it on a year-by-year basis?
- If it is, year by year, what would disqualify a student?
- Is there a teaching requirement? How are teaching assignments made (lottery or choice)?
- What sort of computing facilities do they have? Do they have easy access to electronic mail?
- What are their provisions for housing, day care, health insurance, etc?
- What is the actual time commitment for a TA/RA? Is the stipend enough to live on in that area?

TIME LINE CHECK LIST

Researching and applying to graduate schools is a very time consuming process. To facilitate this process, a time line has been provided to give you a quick overview of necessary steps. This time line assumes that you are applying for fall admission upon graduation from college. ***Check with the individual institution(s) to obtain their specific deadlines.***

Junior Year, Fall & Spring

- _____ Research areas of interests, institutions and programs. Books are available at Career Planning that list colleges by academic programs. Also, academic departments often have literature on graduate programs.
- _____ Get to know Potsdam professors and discuss your future and graduate schools that offer programs of interest.
- _____ Receive information about appropriate graduate admission tests. Register and prepare, if appropriate. (You may choose to take exams during the spring or summer of your junior year or fall of your senior year.)
- _____ Consult with a graduate student at the graduate school you are interested in. Meet them at conferences or through your professors, alumni, and list servers on the internet.

Junior Year, Summer

- _____ Write to a specific professor or director of a program for more details. (Specific program information, school catalogs, and financial aid information, etc.) It is good to establish correspondence with a professor at the graduate school.
- _____ Visit institutions of interest, if possible.
- _____ Finalize the list of schools that you are interested in.
- _____ Check on application and financial aid deadlines with institutions.
- _____ For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service that most programs use. Information on how to register for this service is available at Career Planning in the graduate test application booklets.

Senior Year, Fall

- _____ Take graduate admission test(s), if you have not already done so. Retake grad exams if necessary.
- _____ Start working on your personal statement. Have it reviewed by faculty and others.
- _____ In early October, discuss your future with your major advisor or graduate school advisor.
- _____ By the end of October, obtain 3 letters of recommendation.
- _____ In November/December, assemble and review application forms for accuracy and mail all graduate materials (applications for admissions, financial aid applications, transcripts, reference letters etc.) to selected colleges before their deadline dates.
- _____ Develop a backup plan, in case you are not accepted in graduate school.

Senior Year, Spring

- _____ Check with institutions, prior to deadlines, to ensure they have received all materials and your file is complete.
- _____ Be patient, often acceptances do not come until April. Evaluate offers of admission and make your decision.
- _____ Visit schools to which you have been accepted, if you have not already done so.
- _____ Send a deposit to the institution of your choice.
- _____ Notify other institutions of your acceptance at another school.
- _____ Send thank you letters and followup to people who wrote your recommendation letters informing them of your success.
- _____ Upon graduation, forward an updated transcript to the institution you will attend in the fall.

Note: You may not be able to adhere to this timetable if your application deadlines are early as is the case with medical schools or if you decide to attend graduate school at the last minute. Keep in mind the application requirements and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.