

Graduate School Guide

Is Graduate School for You?

Graduate school opportunities are diverse and many careers today require advanced degrees. Going to graduate school provides you with an opportunity to expand your knowledge and experience in a specific field of study. Deciding to attend a graduate school program is not a decision to make hastily or with limited information. Discussions with your professors and other professionals in the field will help you when making your decision. Clearly defined interests and demonstrated abilities in a particular field will also make the application process easier. While there are poor reasons to continue into a graduate school program, such as to please someone else or avoiding the job market, many good reasons exist:

- You have a passionate interest in a specific subject or an unusual combination of subjects.
- You want continued career advancement.
- Your vocation requires a graduate degree.
- You want a richer, more satisfying life.
- You want to earn more money.
- You like to do research.
- You like school and it is easy for you.

Self-Assessment:

Before applying for further study, consider the working conditions, employment prospects, and physical or mental requirements of your career choice. Assess these demands against your interests, needs, skills, and career goals. Two reasons frequently given by students who have withdrawn from graduate programs are a dislike of the concentrated academic work and the realization they had not defined their career goals adequately and clearly. The Career Planning Office has free assessment tools available to SUNY Potsdam students to help with this part of the application process.

Program Selection:

There is no single reliable ranking of graduate schools and programs. National rankings are available from many sources, but most often, these rankings are based on different criteria. It is up to you to explore each program to assess how well it will fit with your individual needs, interests, and goals; *NOT* how well you can make yourself fit the school or program's prestige. National recognition is not the most important factor to consider when selecting a program.

Important Criteria for Evaluating Graduate Programs:*

- Accreditation
- Admission Standards
- Career Assistance
- Cost/Financial Aid
- Culture
- Degrees Offered
- Faculty
- Location
- Multicultural/Diversity Opportunities
- Physical Facilities
- Reputation/Ranking
- Research/Academic Focus
- Resources
- Size
- State Regulations & Residency Requirements
- Surrounding Community

*Dr. Randall S. Hansen, "Criteria for Choosing a Graduate Program"

APPLY NOW!

THE APPLICATION PROCESS | GRADUATE LEVEL

Applying for graduate school can be complex, time consuming, and difficult if you are not well organized and prepared. Knowing what to look out for and sticking to a schedule is important so keep in mind these 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 and complete the forms digitally or in pen; a neat and attractive appearance is important.

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Essay or Personal Statement:

Writing a personal statement or essay can be difficult but one of the best ways to connect with a potential program is to develop your statement in relation to the question, "What does the reader want to hear?" Think of your responses in terms of how your background, skills, abilities, goals, etc. match the characteristics and opportunities of the graduate school/program, and the career it prepares you for. By organizing the statement to be clear, specific, detailed, and concise you show your written communication skills, motivation, energy level, creativity, commitment, and depth. These are all skills needed in a professional working environment. As you work on the essay writing process outlined below, invite advice from Potsdam faculty and our Career Planning Counselors.

The Process:

No one can, or should, tell you how to write your essay. According to veteran academic consultant Donald Asher, "Your first draft should be totally, brutally honest" and you shouldn't show anyone your work until you have a second draft.

Read the essay questions thoroughly and relate back to them clearly and often. Pay close attention to format and length restriction. If asked to use a letter format, as opposed to an essay format, follow those standards.

Start with an eye-catching first paragraph that shares your interest in this degree or career. If you have one, add a pivotal moment, or story, that led to the evolution of this interest.

Share your related experiences, such as coursework, class projects, internships, volunteer, and/or work experience. Don't be afraid to add vivid details and look for patterns in things like your grades or activities to "connect the dots" for your reader, but avoid self-promotion.

Discuss your interest in their program in particular, including faculty of interest based on their research and/or teachings. Be sure to show interest in any special opportunities the program could present you. This is an opportunity to show you are both knowledgeable and excited about their program.

Share your career goals. What are you hoping to do with this degree? How will the program help you get there? Look at what their alumni have gone on to do and see if it connects with your goals.

Revise, revise, revise! But if you are throwing out most of your first draft, you are probably being too critical. Above all, remember "the best essays will have one thing in common: They will be honest and forthcoming."*

* Donald Asher's, *Graduate Admissions Essays*

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Interviews:

- The interview will permit the school to determine if your personal attributes are as appealing as your academic record, and if your personal attributes will place you in the overall acceptable range (if you are borderline).
- You will obtain firsthand answers to questions about the school that may not have been answered and familiarize yourself with the campus, its facilities, faculty, and student body.
- Go to an interview well prepared with knowledge of the program offered and questions you may have.
- Contact the Career Planning Office to prepare and practice for the interview process.

Questions to Ask Any Graduate Program:*

- What do you teach here?
- What is the largest and most typical class size for a graduate class? Are classes restricted to graduate students? To majors?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages to going to grad school immediately after completing an undergraduate degree? The advantages and disadvantages of waiting a few years? The best use of interim time?
- What is the criteria and process for selecting TA's RA's and Fellows?
- Will I get to develop my own research topics, or will I be expected to work on a professor's ongoing research?
- What facilities are available for graduate students? Are there any restrictions on access?
- What is the typical time to complete (a) classwork, (b) research, (c) thesis or dissertation? (That is, what is the mean time to complete a master's or Ph. D.?) Ask about the program as a whole, but perhaps more importantly, by professor.
- What is your attrition rate? Of those who don't finish, what are their reasons?
- What kind of student thrives in your program?
- How reliable is your financial aid support year to year? Is the first-year offer always sustained, given attainment of academic goals?
- What are the age range, gender balance, ratio of married/single, and geographical origins of graduate students in the program?
- Can you tell me who is launching new projects? Which professors have won awards and grants lately? (These presumably need graduate assistants.)
- Can you tell me about placement rates and types of jobs obtained by recent graduates? (Avoid relying on testimonials and anecdotal evidence.)
- May I meet some currently enrolled students? In person, or later via phone or email; be sure to ask about their research topics and be sure to take notes on specific professors mentioned.)
- How can I be a strong candidate for a program like this?

* Donald Asher's, *Graduate Admissions Essays*

Reference Letters:

- Select recommenders who you know well enough to write detailed letters for you, and when requesting letters from recommenders provide them with a statement of purpose to jog their memories and enrich their remarks.
- Allow recommenders ample time to complete your letter and always follow up to insure completion.
- You must decide between "preserved rights of access" (you can read a recommender's letter) or "waived rights of access" (only schools or programs may read them). Many schools require "waived rights of access."

Transcripts:

- Requests for official transcripts must be made in writing via mail, email, fax, or in person.
- Allow the Registrar's Office at least 10 working days to process your transcripts.

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

- Find out test requirements for each graduate school you are applying to because programs may require general and subject tests and/or multiple testing.
- Register for tests six weeks in advance of the test date so you have time to prepare, minimize costs, and ensure your acceptance for the test date. Take tests early! This allows for time for retakes and reporting scores.
- Study and prepare to take the tests. Use test preparation and resource guides to improve test scoring potential.
- Check with faculty in your subject area to determine the best time to take a subject exam. Sometimes it is best to wait for specific course completion before taking subject related tests. In these cases, testing later could be better.

Financing:

A major concern and obstacle in pursuing an advanced degree is financing it. If you are willing to consider a variety of financial aid avenues, most students can completely cover the cost of graduate school. In addition, financial aid information can be found in most graduate/professional school catalogs and/or specific department brochures. The key to obtaining maximum financial aid is to, "leave no stone unturned." Be aware that financial aid deadlines are usually earlier than the comprehensive application material and many programs will not state these deadlines without your assertive inquiry.

Deadlines:

Preparation and planning will have you effectively meeting graduate admission deadlines. Research the specific time requirements for sending in applications, test scores, financial aid information, and other related material. Develop checklists of requirements for each program, noting all pertinent deadlines and build a comprehensive calendar. The Career Planning Office has digital pre-made checklists available for your convenience.



EARLY APPLICATION CAN PAY OFF!

Especially when programs are offering rolling admissions and awarding financial aid packages

What to do if you don't get in:*

- Apply to more schools
- Apply to more safe schools
- Apply earlier
- Get an intermediate degree
- Take one class at a time as a non-matriculated student
- Go to summer school at one of your target schools
- Get an internship in the targeted field
- Get an "real job" in the targeted field
- Visit in person and wow them
- Get older and try again

* Donald Asher's, *Graduate Admissions Essays*