Choosing and Applying to Graduate School: Where do I start?

There are more than 1,800 institutions in the United States that offer graduate degrees. Narrowing down which schools to apply to is a time consuming but invaluable research process. Navigating test deadlines, recommendations, and essays can seem daunting as well. The Office of Career Services offers this “checklist” of important questions and steps in the search process, to help you on your way.

First things first…should I even go to graduate school right out of college?
Ask yourself these questions as you make your decision about whether to go “straight” to grad school:
- Am I considering graduate school only because I don’t know what else to do right now…as a way to postpone job hunting?
- What do I see myself doing ten years from now? Is graduate school going to help get me there?
- What will my graduate degree provide for me? (Advancement in my field, higher salary, personal satisfaction, etc.) Can this be achieved in other ways?
- Have I talked with enough individuals who are accomplishing what I think I want to do? (i.e. Informational interviewing)
- Do I have a realistic idea of the kind of work and employment opportunities that exist with the type of graduate degree I’m interested in pursuing?

I’ve decided I want to go to graduate school.

NARROWING DOWN THE LIST

How do I go about choosing a school?
BEGIN by looking through graduate school guides (such as Peterson’s Guides in the Career Services Resource Library). Websites such as Petersons.com, gradschools.com, graduateguide.com, christianconnector.com are also helpful. You may want to go to about.com, a search engine, and type in ‘graduate schools’ – the list will be endless!

I have compiled information from websites and graduate school guides.

Who can I talk to about where I want to go to graduate school?
- Who are your current professors who are teaching what you’d like to study? Make an appointment with them and ask how they went about choosing their graduate institution.
- Look at your current undergraduate textbooks in your field of study – who wrote them? Do a websearch and find out where they went to graduate school, or where they are currently teaching.
- Talk to people who are currently employed in your field. Where did they go to school? Where would they recommend?
- Do a search of the Challenger Alumni Consultant Network through the Office of Career Services. This will put you in touch with Asbury grads in your field of study. Call or e-mail them and talk about their graduate school decision making process.

I have talked to (either/and/or/ALL) professors, friend/contacts employed in the field, Asbury alumni about their graduate school choices and recommendations.

I have requested initial brochures from several schools of interest.
What are things I should consider about each school?

This next step will most likely be the most time consuming part of your process — but it is also the most important! Using the information you’ve compiled from profs, alums, websites, and guides, choose several schools. Then take the following factors into account and narrow down your list, looking at the guides, brochures and websites. Keeping a journal, paper file, or computer file with this information about each school will be essential...

- School’s reputation – is it regional or national? How important is this to you? (usnews.com gives rankings of grad schools)
- Admission requirements – will you have to take the GRE? Subject tests? Certain pre-requisite undergraduate courses? Required undergraduate GPA?
- Average time to complete a degree – do they offer full and part time study? Do they have a flexible curriculum and schedule?
- Geographic location – the school’s alumni network may be local – which means potential jobs may be as well -- do you like the area? Also, consider advantages/disadvantages of urban or rural environments.
- Size of institution – this is important for your personal taste and for future job prospects
- Research interests – certain schools have reputations that emphasize certain curriculum.
- Library resources, computer resources, archival resources
- Student/faculty ratio – how available are faculty? How well published?
- Graduate employment statistics; size of Career Services office
- Attrition of students -- how many students who enroll actually finish the program?
- Diversity of campus population?

___ I’ve considered/collected much of this information on several graduate schools.

THE APPLICATION TIMELINE

(This is based on typical progression. Your timeline may differ – adjust dates accordingly. And don’t be discouraged if you feel “behind” – just take one step at a time!)

What else should I be doing to prepare for graduate school entry?

JUNIORS:

___ Take into account what prerequisite courses you may need to take next year.

___ Consider doing a Christmas/summer internship in your desired field, or taking on an extra project with a professor. Join an organization or volunteer group that may add to your application’s “experience” section.

___ Be thinking who you would like to write your recommendations, and cultivate those relationships.

___ Determine what graduate admissions tests you need to take. Consider a preparatory course. You may want to take the test the summer after junior year.

CONTINUED…
SENIORS:

_____ Summer before senior year:
- Consider visiting your top schools.
- Request applications in late summer. Log schools’ admissions deadlines on your calendar and plan accordingly.
- If possible, enroll in a graduate admissions test prep course, and then take the ‘real’ test.

_____ September/October:
- If you did not in summer, consider taking a prep course in early fall. Take graduate admissions tests by deadlines your application suggests.
- Research sources of financial aid.
- Examine all applications. You may need to collect information from several different resources to complete it.
- Work on essays – get feedback from career counselor, professors.
- Continue cultivating recommendation-relationships. Obtain recommendations in early fall. Make sure you provide them with any necessary information.
- Consider what spring semester or summer courses you may need to take as prerequisites for your program.

_____ November/December:
- Have your official transcript sent to each program you are applying to. You may request that the registrar hold your transcript until the fall semester grades are in.
- Finalize essays. Edit, edit, edit!
- Apply for fellowships and other sources of financial aid.
- Again, check and record due dates for all applications.

_____ January:
- Complete all application forms, if you have not already. Keep a copy of your application for your file. Mail application and record date sent.
- RELAX AND BREATHE!
- Many schools will notify you with a postcard when they receive your application. Keep this in your files. If you do not receive notice, contact their admissions office by e-mail or phone to ensure your application has been received. Keep a copy of the e-mail, or log when call was made.
- Fill out the Federal Student Aid application. You will need to gather your tax forms for this.

_____ February:
- Depending on the admissions requirements, start planning for the admission interview. Prepare your questions about the school’s program ahead of time, and anticipate answers to common questions. Mock interviews are available in the Office of Career Services, to increase your confidence in the process. The Career Resource Library also contains books on commonly asked interview questions.

_____ March/April:
- Visit schools to which you’ve been accepted and are at the top of your list.
- Discuss acceptances and rejections with a professor, advisor, or career counselor.
- Notify the program of your acceptance.
- Notify programs that you’re declining.

CONGRATULATIONS! You did it!