

## Graduate School Planning

The graduate school planning process is one which requires a great deal of thought and time. This Success Guide provides an overview of details such as the application process and standardized testing, while providing tips to help you be successful.

### Reasons to go to graduate or professional school...

- Advanced education is required in the career(s) which you are considering.
- A graduate degree can help you advance in your career choice.
- You have a strong interest in a particular subject area, and wish to continue studies within that subject area, either for career advancement, or personal satisfaction.

### Reasons NOT to go to graduate school or professional school...

Graduate school requires a great deal of time, money, support and motivation. You need to schedule an appointment with your Career Consultant if any of the following situations apply to you:

- You are unsure about what you want to do and think graduate school will help you discover your interests.
- Graduate school seems like a safe place to be while you are discovering your interests.
- You are afraid you will not find a job.
- You don't know of any careers available for your major.

### Research and self-assessment

- Define your career goals and potential areas of specialization.
- Schedule an appointment with your career consultant to further discuss your goals and objectives.
- Talk with professors in your area of interest regarding program strength and reputation. Ask them about their own educational experiences.
- Review materials in the Career and Professional Development Center library, such as the books on the graduate school shelf, to assist you in identifying programs and reviewing rankings. Online resources include College Source, <http://www.collegesource.org> or Peterson's: Colleges and Universities, <http://www.petersons.com>.
- Peruse program websites to review important program information such as coursework, faculty members and their areas of research, notable alumni and career resources. It may help you to schedule a campus visit.
- Register online at college/university websites to receive additional information on their programs and events.
- Speak with alumni regarding programs they have completed.

- List tentative decisions about your future and develop several realistic scenarios (whether or not to apply to graduate school, what to do if the schools you are interested in waitlist you, etc.).
- Make careful note of program deadlines.

### **The application process**

- Most applications can now be completed online.
- A typical application includes the application form, an application fee, letters of recommendation, transcripts, an essay/statement of purpose or bibliography, and test scores.
- **Pay attention to application deadlines!!** Begin to review these at least a year before you plan to apply.
- Some types of schools will use a common application which allows you to apply to multiple programs at the same time.
- The best time to apply is when you feel your application is the strongest.
- For programs with rolling admissions, it is to your advantage to apply early and NOT wait until the last minute.
- Check with all institutions before the deadline to make sure your applications are complete.

### **Standardized testing requirements (GREs, GMATs, MCATs, LSATs)**

- Ascertain the entrance exam requirements for each institution to which you will be applying.
- Register for a testing date. Schedule your test early enough in the application process in case you need to take it again before your final materials are due.
- Information is available in the Career and Professional Development Center for the GRE (graduate school), the GMAT (business) and the LSAT (law). Information on the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) and the American Association of Dental School Application Service is available at the Health Professions Program Office, DH 1325.
- Practice your exam using online resources, a practice book from the Career and Professional Development Center resource library or take a course from Kaplan or the Princeton Review. Never go blindly into these exams without practicing! Learning the test structure is important to your success.

### **Further information on common standardized tests**

#### **Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT): [www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com)**

The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) is a standardized test that helps business schools assess the qualifications of applicants for advanced study in business and management. The GMAT exam measures basic verbal, mathematical, and analytical writing skills that you have developed over a long period of time in your education and work. It does not measure your knowledge of business, your job skills or specific content in your undergraduate coursework. The GMAT exam consists of three main parts, the Analytical Writing Assessment, the Quantitative section and the Verbal section.

**Graduate Record Exam (GRE): [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)**

The GRE General Test measures analytical writing and verbal and quantitative reasoning skills that have been acquired over a long period of time and that are not related to any specific field of study. GRE test scores are used by admissions or fellowship panels to supplement undergraduate records and other qualifications for graduate study. The scores provide common measures for comparing the qualifications of applicants and aid in evaluating grades and recommendations. GRE Subject Tests may also be required for specific areas of graduate study including, Biochemistry, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Literature in English, Mathematics, Physics and Biology.

**Law School Admission Test (LSAT): [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)**

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is a standardized test required for admission to all ABA-approved law schools, most Canadian law schools and many non-ABA-approved law schools. The LSAT is designed to measure skills that are considered essential for success in law school including, the reading and comprehension of complex texts with accuracy and insight, the organization and management of information and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from it, the ability to think critically and the analysis and evaluation of the reasoning and arguments of others. The test includes specific sections on reading comprehension and analytical and logical reasoning.

**Medical College Admission Test (MCAT): [www.mcat.org](http://www.mcat.org)**

The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a standardized, multiple-choice examination designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking and writing skills in addition to the examinee's knowledge of science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine. Scores are reported in each of the following areas: Verbal Reasoning, Physical Sciences, Writing Sample and Biological Sciences. Almost all U.S. medical schools require applicants to submit MCAT scores during the application process.

**Developing your personal essay (statement of purpose)**

- Most applications will require you to write an essay about why you would like to attend graduate school and in particular, their institution. Other essays may be required.
- Essay topics are very open-ended, and for good reason. You must demonstrate to the admissions committee that you can answer this question in a clear, concise, and personable manner.
- Some schools will give you the opportunity to complete an optional essay in which you detail any weaknesses in your application or additional things you would like them to know about you. It is wise to write this essay even though it is described as optional. This is your chance to discuss your positive attributes and make your case for admittance.
- See sample essays in Don Asher's *Graduate Admissions Essays* and other books in the Career and Professional Development Center library.
- Have your essay reviewed by a professor(s) and your Career Consultant.
- Double check the essay to ensure it is error free.

## Obtaining your recommendation letters

- Three recommendation letters are usually required.
- To write your recommendation letters, you could ask: professors, past or current internship/work supervisors, advisors, or other people who know you well (not your peers or friends).
- Contact faculty members well before they begin their busy fall semesters; summer is an ideal time to reach out to them.
- An effective method to ask a person to write you a recommendation is: *“Would you feel comfortable writing me a good recommendation?”*
- Make sure each person writing you a recommendation knows what type of programs to which you are applying and even the kinds of things you would like them to emphasize about you. Send them a copy of your resume and any supporting materials from your application.
- Send your recommenders polite reminders about application deadlines and ensure that your materials were submitted.
- Decide if you want to manage your letters of recommendation, if you want to utilize the Career and Professional Development Center’s credential file service, Interfolio, or if each referral will handle recommendations directly.
- Note that some programs will accept general recommendation letters, but some will have detailed forms requiring your recommenders to evaluate you on several specified attributes.

## Scholarships, fellowships, grants and financial assistance

- Apply for fellowships, scholarships and financial aid programs early and pursue both individual school and national programs
- Discuss opportunities for graduate, research and teaching assistantships with faculty members and admissions officers. These often come with stipends and tuition waivers to help you finance your education. Completing internships during your study can assist with finances as well.
- Visit our Fellowships and Scholarships Office, <http://www.cmu.edu/fso>
- Review online resources such as Peterson’s, <http://www.petersons.com>

## Examine your options and make your final decision

**Admit:** Congratulations! You have been accepted for admission, and now you have a decision to make. You will need to write a letter to the schools telling them whether you accept or decline their offer of admission. Most schools will give a deadline by which to reply. Again, adhere to the stated deadlines. If you have a valid reason for not being able to decide by the deadline, call the school or program, explain your situation, and discuss your options. It is unethical to accept an offer at one school, and change your mind when you get a better offer from another school. Other actions to take include:

- Speak with alumni who have attended the institutions to which you have been admitted.
- Discuss your options with your Career Consultant and advisors.
- Write thank you letters to people who wrote you recommendation letters or helped you in the application process to inform them of your success.

- Talk to your admissions counselor regarding any concerns with your financial aid package or any questions about the program.
- Send a deposit to your institution of choice. Attend any events they are hosting to welcome students.
- If you are completing a graduate assistantship, establish details such as your first day of work and schedule.
- Check with your new school for information on housing.
- Take time to relax and prepare yourself for the changes that lie ahead.

**Waitlist:** Being placed on a waitlist means you are still being considered if an admitted applicant rejects the school's offer. Remember to be patient. If you are still interested in the school, keep in touch with the program about once a month, inquiring about your status.

**Not accepted:** If you are denied acceptance from one school, remain positive about your other school selections. If you are denied from all schools, you need to ask yourself some questions:

-Do you want to reapply the following year?

-What could you do to improve your application? Contact the schools or programs. They may be able to offer ways to improve your application for admission, such as taking additional courses, providing other recommendations, or getting internship or job experience.

-Is this the right field/program for you? If you have been denied for reasons you do not think you can change or overcome, you may want to think about how true your interest is in this particular field--and how realistic your career goals are.

Your Career Consultant can assist you with this process.