APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Applying to graduate school is an intensive process. And researching the potential graduate programs that you plan on applying to is a puzzle with a great many pieces. Keep in mind that you are not merely choosing an institution at which to get your education, you are also choosing how you will live for the next several years. In order to make an informed decision about what programs to apply to, you need to make sure that you research programs as thoroughly as you can before making any final decisions.

Community

Your community in graduate school will be a combination of the community on-campus and the community off-campus. As a graduate student you are far more likely to live off campus and make connections in the community beyond the university. You may want to consider whether or not you will be able to find services that matter to you such as: religious organizations, access to sports venues, specialty groceries, music venues, volunteer opportunities, or others.

The on-campus community is also an important consideration. You'll want to consider both the culture of your specific program and the campus-wide community. Get in touch with a few graduate students at the school and try to get a sense of the social scene. Be thinking about the following questions: Are there reading and study groups? Do the faculty have formal or casual relationships with their graduate students? Do graduate students tend to present at conferences together? Are there frequent social gatherings? Who organizes them?

Additional Certificates and Interdisciplinary Opportunities

Keeping in mind that finding the right program for graduate study requires a great deal of research, you may also want to consider what other certification opportunities might exist in the programs to which you are applying. For many of graduate students, professional development will necessarily flow over traditional disciplinary boundaries. Different schools and colleges within a university can find ways of making those skills official and measurable through graduate certificates and graduate minors. Look at the requirements for professional certificates and graduate minors. Also, consider the access you will have to faculty and graduate students in other fields of interest that may intersect in your own research.

Funding Considerations

Thinking about funding is not simply a matter of comparing the monthly stipends of different programs. You'll want to consider both the full benefits package, which includes the stipend, student fees, travel funds, health care, childcare, as well as optional costs such as parking fees or the cost of a gym membership if the student facilities are inadequate. These considerations should then be compared with the cost of living factors, the number of years you are guaranteed funding, and/or the likelihood of funding if your program awards it on a competitive basis. Many programs also offer additional funding opportunities such as: additional work appointment/increased workload, employment outside the program, and the chance to apply for research grants.

Work Requirements

Funding packages also vary greatly in terms of what work you will be expected to perform. You may be expected to teach, tutor, grade, work in a lab, log research hours on a faculty member's project, transcribe notes or interviews, staff a library or center, organize events, help the administrative staff, or even be a research subject yourself. While looking for a lighter workload may seem important in the short term, your long-term consideration should be to make sure that the professional experience you gain fits in with your professional goals. Some programs will require relatively little work outside of classes, but when you complete your degree, you will not have much experience. Other programs will require

a workload that does not develop the skill set that you need, like having you grade as a teaching assistant when you have no interest in being an educator after you finish your degree. Some programs will have workloads that, in the end, will better prepare you for your career than your course load. In weighing these options, remember that many skills are transferable and most employers in today's economy expect a range of skills.

Research Resources
Research costs money, and programs range greatly in the amount of those cost that will be covered. Be sure to look into what research support resources will be available to your at the programs to which you are applying. For example, the library and the Interlibrary Loan (ILL) can save you thousands in journal subscriptions. The existence, or non-existence, of labs and expensive computer software can drastically affect what kind of research you have access to and the kind of research you can carry out. Are there special archives located nearby that will benefit your research? If so, this may save you thousands in travel expenses or weeks of applying for grants. Make sure that the programs that you are applying to have labs that can handle your research needs and have access to the major journals in your field. Many departments may have research sharing programs with other universities.

Profiling Research Interests
One's research interests are generally a combination of two factors: what is studied (subject and data) and how it is studied (methodology and theory). As an undergraduate, choosing the right subject is often enough. In choosing a graduate program, however, you need to recognize that some theoretical approaches methodologies will interest you more than others. You want to choose a program that is not only knowledgeable in your chosen field, but also one that is invested in the theories and methodologies that allow you to ask the questions you think are most important. For example, almost any English literature program will have a scholar who specializes in Shakespeare. However, Shakespearean scholars might be interested in the ways Shakespeare treats gender and sexuality, or in the ways that Shakespeare treats issues of class. Some scholars see Shakespeare as an insightful social critic and will explore topics that are still relevant to our world today. Others will see him as the product of a specific historic time and place and will therefore research his biography and the politics of Edwardian England.

Most journals are partial to some methodologies over others. That means that you need to read articles from different journals, not just articles on different topics. You also want to look for special editions, which will help you see the many sub-fields that develop in every topic.

As you read, keep a columned list of scholars' names and key terms from your readings. It might also be helpful to keep track of some of the following questions:
- Who studies topics that interest you?
- What kinds of questions are they asking and what kinds of arguments are they making?
- Are there people who study the right topics but seem to be asking the wrong questions?
- Are there people who ask interesting questions even though you don't find their subjects that interesting? Read the footnotes and citations.
- Who are the influential scholars in the field?

Also keep a look out for controversies. They may not always be obvious, but the more you read, the more you'll see lines being drawn and authors picking sides. Understanding the state of the field, and knowing where particular scholars fall, can give you some idea as the attitudes that a particular graduate program might hold towards possibly contentious issues in a field of study. However, keep in mind that programs often have a number of faculty, some with disparate opinions.

Understanding the Importance of Faculty

An important part of profiling a program is looking at the faculty that make up that program. As a graduate student, you will certainly have access to a number of qualified and engaging professors, but you will also be expected to forge a mentor/mentee relationship with a specific faculty member quite early on. This person will be central to determining what kind of research you will do, what kind of funding you may receive, and even to a degree, what your working habits will be; all factors which can drastically influence your chances of successfully completing your degree.

Because the relationship between graduate students and faculty members is so integral to a graduate education, your research of specific faculty members may not only help you to choose a program; it may also significantly influence a graduate program's decision of whether or not to accept you. Including an argument for why you should work with specific faculty members in your personal statement will not only impress an admissions committee, it will help them to see how you might fit into their program.

Researching Faculty

Researching faculty is not easy. You can't simply got to a website like Rate My Professor and see if they give easy A's—in many graduate programs, you will be expected to get A's in every class. Much of what you need to learn about a faculty member has to be pieced together from what little data is available. Consider the following resources to help you learn more about the faculty in the programs to which you might apply:

Professor's Curriculum Vita

The Curriculum Vita (CV) is an academic resume and should be the first step in researching a faculty member. The CV provides a list of the professor's publications, appointments, and professional service. Most professors post their CV on the department faculty page or on a personal website.

Google Scholar

This specialized search engine has a feature that tells you how often each source is cited in other sources. This can help to gauge just how influential a given scholar is within a field. Keep in mind, though, that some people are cited as much for their infamy as for their contributions. It doesn't hurt to look at some of the sources that cite your scholar and see what it is they're saying.

E-mail

Sending an email to a professor to ask them about their research can be an intimidating task, and not without reason. However, it is unlikely that a professor will resent an honest inquiry. Keep in mind that professors know graduate students are still learning; they don't expect potential graduate students to know everything. As long as your email was worded professionally and warmly, your name will be remembered as that of an engaged junior scholar.

Timeline

When applying to a graduate program you will have to assemble, request, and prepare several elements, many of which are time-sensitive. Graduate programs are strict about application deadlines. Most do not allow extensions; and, even if you are granted extra time, the request may make you look unprofessional and disorganized.

In general, many programs start accepting applications in November with a January deadline. However, you shouldn't count on this. Each individual program may have their own set of admission deadlines, which may be different than the deadlines for the school/college of graduate study. Also, keep in mind that even though graduate programs traditionally start in the fall, some programs have two or three start dates; while others have rolling admission--all of which will affect application deadlines.

The timeline below is based on a traditional fall start date. Adjust dates accordingly if you are applying for admission in the spring or summer.

18-24 Months Prior to Desired Matriculation:
- Scan the landscape. Use multiple sources to research programs of interest.
- Review the application process. Scan application forms, curriculum catalogs and financial aid information to become familiar with requirements, procedures and programs.
- Track deadlines. Note deadlines now for future planning.
- Prep for tests. Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admissions tests.
- Register with national application services, if appropriate. Some programs may require this.
- Ask faculty members and others to write you letters of recommendation

12-18 Months Prior to Desired Matriculation:
- Take the required graduate admissions test. Be aware of deadlines and minimum time needed for scoring to ensure that you meet school deadlines.
- Collect forms. Obtain application forms and financial aid applications so you can begin to prepare them in the early fall. If applying online, print the application form first to make notes and ensure you have complete information available for when you are ready to submit the application online.
- Investigate target schools. Visit or speak with admissions staff, current students and faculty at programs of interest. Be sure to investigate faculty research interests.
- Draft application essays. Begin drafting them now so you have time to get feedback from a career counselor before applying.
- Conduct more detailed research. Find out about financial aid, scholarships, fellowships and teaching or research assistantships.

12 Months Prior to Desired Matriculation:
- Admissions test reports: You must request that score reports be sent to your schools of choice.
- Transcripts: Official transcripts must be sent through the Registrar's office.
- Letters of recommendation: Submit requests to faculty at least a month in advance of application deadlines.
- Application essays/personal statement: Schedule a review with a career counselor.
- Portfolios, resumes, auditions, or other materials: Send as requested.

6-9 Months Prior to Desired Matriculation:
- Track admissions decisions. Follow up to check on the status of your application.
- Visit institutions of interest. Evaluate your options and interview if necessary or desired.
- Choose among schools. Be prepared to consider multiple offers.
- Share your decision. Once accepted to a program of your choice, notify other institutions of your decision.
- Send thank-you notes. Include those who wrote recommendation letters, and inform them of your plans.

Standardized Tests

Most graduate programs require standardized exams, such as the GREs, for admission; however, law, medical, and business schools usually require different exams (the LSAT, MCAT, and GMAT, respectively). Each of these exams is standardized, meaning that they are normed, permitting students from different colleges to be compared meaningfully. The GRE is similar in structure to the SAT but taps your potential for graduate level work. Some, but not all, schools reveal their average GRE scores in their admissions material and in graduate school admissions books.

Test	Web site	Offered	Length of Test
DAT (dental)	http://www.ada.org/dat.aspx	Daily (computer-based)	4 hrs. 15 min.
GMAT (business)	www.mba.com/mba/TaketheGMAT	Daily (computer -based)	3 hrs. 20 min.
GRE general (grad program)	www.gre.org	Daily (computer-based)	4 hours
GRE subject (grad program)	www.gre.org	Nov., Dec., April	2 hrs. 50 min.
LSAT (law)	www.lsac.org	Feb., June, Oct. & Dec.	3 hours
MCAT (medical)	www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm	22 times/year (computer -based)	4 hrs. 30 min.
OAT (optometry)	https://www.ada.org/oat/index.html	Daily (computer-based)	4hrs. 45 min.
PCAT (pharmacy)	www.PCATweb.info	June, Oct. & Jan.	4hrs. 30 min.
Praxis I ® (education)	www.ets.org/praxis/	Daily (computer-based)	4hrs. 30 min.
Praxis II ® (education subject tests)	www.ets.org/praxis/	Sept., Nov., Jan., Mar., Apr., June & July	1-4 hours

*Adapted from Purdue University Graduate School Guide