

# Going to Graduate School

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## Introduction

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It is often difficult to decide whether or not to pursue a graduate degree. There are many things to consider, and some students are not sure which questions to ask. We hope that the following information will be helpful in your search.

## Why go to Graduate or Professional School?

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Some common reasons for choosing graduate school include:

- Satisfying intellectual curiosity.
- Postponing the job hunt.
- Remaining in the academic environment.
- Obtaining career entry or advancement in a job.

Things to consider when making a decision:

- Are you confident enough in your decision to make the necessary commitment in time, effort, and resources?
- Will this advanced degree lead you to where you want to be professionally or personally?
- How will attending graduate school affect your family or relationships?
- How will you finance it?
- Do the programs you are considering require or recommend related experience before entry?

## What degrees are available?

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The following types of degrees are available:

### Master's Degree

(M.S., M.A., M.Ed., M.B.A., M.M., M.F.A., M.S.W., etc.)

- Course-type program: Students satisfactorily complete a required program of study.
- Comprehensive exam program: Student is required to complete coursework at the end of which an examination must be passed.
- Thesis-type program: Students complete required coursework and must submit a thesis (original piece of research).
- Proficiency program requirements: Many of the creative disciplines (music, dance, theatre, art) offer programs that require the student to demonstrate proficiency in order to graduate.



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### Specialist and Advanced Masters Degree

(Ed.S., Adv.M.)

Students complete coursework beyond the master's degree but less extensive than the doctoral degree. They are most often offered in education.

### Professional Degree

(J.D., M.D., D.V.M., Pharm.D., D.D.S., D.M.D., etc.)

Professional degrees are awarded upon completion of programs of study that prepare individuals to enter certain professions. Though the degree may contain the term doctor, a professional degree is the initial degree awarded in that area. Higher degrees, such as master's degrees and Ph.D.s may be available.

### Doctoral Degree

(Ph.D., Ed.D., D.M., Psy. D., etc.)

These are the highest degrees awarded. In addition to completion of an academic program of study and a comprehensive examination, the majority require a dissertation, which is a significant work of original research.

### Post-Doctorate

These are not really degrees but simply advanced study/research/training in a particular area.

## How Do I Choose a School or Program?

Like any important decision, selecting a graduate program is often complex. If possible, start early to give yourself a year or more to explore and choose.

### **Step I: Research possible programs**

#### **1. Identify programs in your chosen field.**

There are various resources available to help, including many that are available in the FSU Career Center.

- A. Reference books, such as:
  - Peterson's Guides to Graduate and Professional Programs
  - The Official GRE/CGS Directory of Graduate Programs
  - Edition XII Worldwide Directories of Postgraduate Studies
- B. Computer-assisted guidance programs, such as Choices Planner and eDiscover.
- C. Websites to check out include:
  - [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)
  - [www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)
  - [www.petersons.com/gradchannel](http://www.petersons.com/gradchannel)
- D. Your department or advisor.

#### **2. Gather information on programs of interest to you.**

- A. Get copies of the University bulletins/catalogs.
- B. Contact departments directly for materials describing the department, programs, and courses in detail.
- C. Review institutional and departmental webpages.

#### **3. Check program "ratings."**

- A. Research current issues in your field. Are the programs you're considering active in these areas?
- B. Ask your professors and advisors what they know about the programs you are considering.
- C. Consult resources that review/evaluate programs. Many of these resources are available in both print and electronic formats.
  - The Gourman Reports (several volumes that review programs in different graduate areas)
  - National Research Council Research-Doctorate Program Rankings
  - U.S. News and World Report Graduate School Rankings at [www.usnews.com/sections/rankings](http://www.usnews.com/sections/rankings)

### **Step II: Choose where to apply**

Your initial search should help you identify a manageable number of programs that you want to consider further. Now it is time to select the programs where you intend to apply. Your satisfaction depends on the compatibility of the department and program with your goals and purposes. The kind of information you will need to determine this may or may not be in print. Often, a visit to the program is the only way to acquire the information you will need. Consider the following:

#### **1. What is the culture of the program?**

Is it research or application focused? Are the faculty members active in their field and do they involve students in their professional endeavors (research or application)? How do faculty, staff, and students get along with one another? The best way to answer questions like these is to visit the program, speak with faculty and students, sit in on classes, and observe.

#### **2. What is the quality of the program?**

Information might include: whether the department is accredited by an appropriate entity, are faculty publishing in your area of interest, are any of the faculty recognized as members of distinction in their field (members of NSA, winners of prestigious awards), and how recent graduates are employed.

#### **3. How do you compare to those who are admitted?**

In other words, how do your qualifications stack up against the competition? What are your chances?

#### **4. What is the cost of the degree?**

How much will the degree cost and what forms of assistance are available? Are there assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, or other forms of institutional awards available that would help meet your expenses?

#### **5. Will the program lead to a license or certification?**

If you are entering a field where licensure or certification is required or desirable, will completion of the program meet the necessary educational requirements? You may need to research relevant accrediting bodies and any programs that are accredited by said organization.

#### **6. What other features of the program are important?**

This will depend a lot on your situation, but may include: length of the program, time classes are offered, size of the entering class, actual class size, and if the program requires a comprehensive examination or thesis/dissertation.

## How Do I Apply?

After doing your research, select the programs to which you will actually apply. Most prospective graduate students will apply to several programs, often ranging from the ideal program, through good choices, to a "back-up" program (just in case). Applications to graduate programs are often complicated, require fees, and have specific deadlines. Creating a chart of deadlines, fees, and contacts can help you keep track of this information. Begin the application process early, usually in the fall semester before you plan to enter your graduate program.

## Application Forms and Application Fees

1. Write, call for, pick up, or check the program's website for necessary application materials prior to, or early in the fall before you plan to begin your graduate studies.
2. Complete the application forms exactly as instructed. Each item is included for a reason, and referring the recipient to your resume or vitae is not normally appreciated.
3. Submit the application form and all other materials by the deadline and to the proper office. Ensure the application fee is correct in amount and form.

## Admissions Examinations

Most graduate programs require examinations as part of the admission process.

1. What test should you take?

This depends on the field you plan to enter.  
Tests include:

### DAT (Dental Admissions Test)

Most dental schools

<http://www.ada.org/dat.aspx>

### GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)

Most graduate programs in business

[www.mba.com](http://www.mba.com)

### GRE (Graduate Record Examination)

Most other programs

[www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)

### LSAT (Law School Admission Test)

Law schools

[www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)

### MAT (Miller Analogies Test)

Used by some graduate schools

[www.milleranalogies.com](http://www.milleranalogies.com)

### MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)

Most medical schools

[www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat](http://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat)

2. When should you take them?

The answer is early. Programs require test scores to consider your application. Scores are "current" for about five years. Some tests can be taken multiple times, and the scores may be averaged.

## What Should My Personal Statement Include?

A personal statement may be requested to assess your interest and motivation in the program or field and also to assess your ability to write clearly and correctly. (See the *Personal Statement Guide* for additional information at [www.career.fsu.edu](http://www.career.fsu.edu).)

Often personal statements include:

- What is special about you?
- When/how you became interested in the field.
- What have you learned from experiences related to the field (employment, volunteer activities, research)?
- Your career goals?
- Explanations of gaps/oddities in your academic record.
- If you have overcome any unusual obstacles.
- What personal characteristics (integrity, persistence) or special skills (leadership, writing) do you have that would enhance your prospects for success in this program or field?
- Why are you interested in that particular program?
- Anything else that makes you a strong applicant.

## Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate and professional programs require you to obtain letters of recommendation from people in a position to speak to your qualifications. They may specify the types of recommendations that must be submitted (academic, personal, employment). Some programs will ask that detailed forms be submitted, while others will ask for individualized letters.

In general you should:

1. Check the program's requirements for recommendations before asking anyone. Know the type of recommendations requested and the format they must follow (form or letter).
2. Ask permission before listing someone as a reference.
3. Send a written request for the recommendation to each person being asked. At least two weeks before the due date, provide each with: A copy of your resume/curriculum vitae and any other information you feel is relevant, the form or guidelines that outline exactly what is expected in the recommendation, the deadline by which the recommendation must be received, and a correctly addressed, stamped envelope.
4. Send a thank you note to each person writing a letter.

## How Can I Finance My Degree?

Ideally, you should begin researching sources of financial support early in the application process. This is because many funding organizations have applications due in the fall for the following year.

Types of awards/assistance available:

- **Fellowships:** Prestigious awards, often quite substantial. They are competitive, based on academic achievement, and do not usually require work. For more information, see FSU's Office of National Fellowships, [onf.fsu.edu](http://onf.fsu.edu).
- **Assistantships:** Paid, part-time employment that may include a full or partial tuition waiver (often of the out-of-state portion of tuition). Those with this type of award often teach, conduct research, or work in student affairs. These are often available via your academic department.
- **Loans:** Low interest loans are available to most graduate students. Contact the institution's office of financial aid for more information.
- **Grants and Scholarships:** These are gifts of money. They may be "free scholarship money" with no obligation for work or repayment, or they may be for a specific purpose. Science organizations, for instance, may award a grant for completion of a student research project.

### **For more information:**

Call the Federal Student Aid Information Center at 1-800-433-3243.

Check the financial aid section of Career Key in the FSU Career Center Library.

The Graduate School at FSU:

[www.gradschool.fsu.edu](http://www.gradschool.fsu.edu)

Peterson's Graduate School Guide

[www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)

### **Some financial aid websites include:**

FSU Financial Aid

[www.financialaid.fsu.edu](http://www.financialaid.fsu.edu)

FinAid

[www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org)

Federal Student Aid

[www.studentaid.ed.gov](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov)

## **Career Center Resources:**

Ask a career advisor for these helpful resources.

Peterson's: An Overview of Graduate and Professional Programs.....IIC2 P413

Sample Personal Statements Notebook.....IIC2 C3

Writing Effective Letters.....Mobile

Peterson's Guide to MBA Programs.....IIC2 P4

Getting in: A Step-by-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology.....IIC2 A56

Getting into Law School.....IIC2 L33

