

BOSTON  
UNIVERSITY

# Considering Graduate School



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# MAKING THE DECISION TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL

It is important to have a clear understanding of what you want to do with your career and how earning a graduate degree will help you reach that goal. At the graduate level, it is expected that you will have developed a specific focus in your area. If you have any doubt at all about your professional goals, consider putting off graduate school and, instead, spend some time working on self-assessment (identifying your skills, interests, values, and personality type) and career planning. If you go to graduate school without a clear goal, you will probably end up wasting both time and money!

While certain careers definitely require an advanced degree—doctors and lawyers, for example—many other careers offer job opportunities for job seekers with just an undergraduate degree. In fact, in some situations having an advanced degree can actually hurt you in a job search if you also have little or no job experience.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE MAKING THE DECISION

- What are my short-range and long-term career goals?
- Is graduate school a necessary prerequisite for achieving my goals?
- Do I have the interest, enthusiasm, motivation, abilities, and personal qualities to succeed in a graduate program?
- Am I prepared to meet the extensive research, course work, and writing demands of an academic program at the graduate level?
- Do I have the financial resources available at this time to cover the costs of graduate school?
- Will the time and money spent in a graduate program translate into greater career mobility and the financial rewards that I aspire to?
- Are there alternative educational programs that would assist me in attaining my goals; e.g., vocational/technical training, additional course work, professional seminars, and workshops?
- Am I motivated by my desire to postpone entrance into the job market?

## GOOD REASONS TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

- You've clarified your career goals and have determined that a graduate degree is necessary to achieve your goal.
- You are interested in pursuing further study in an academic area for the love of it, and you are in a position to do so without consideration of its connection to a career.

## NOT-SO-GOOD REASONS

- You are not clear about next steps after graduation and you see graduate school as a way to clarify your career goals.
- Your parents, professors, and others are pressuring you to go.
- You aren't ready to "face the real world" and you see graduate school as a way to delay entry into the world of work.

## SHOULD I GO NOW OR LATER?

### GOING NOW

- You are accustomed to being a student and remain energized for studying and learning.
- You may find it easier to finance now before assuming other commitments/responsibilities, e.g., family, a house, etc.
- Entrance into your desired profession will be sooner if the graduate degree is a necessity.

## **GOING LATER**

- You will have time to explore further whether this career path is the right fit for you.
- Gaining additional work experience may help you to clarify your goals.
- Work experience may enhance your chances of acceptance into a program of your choice.
- A future employer may be willing to finance your graduate education.
- You will have time to recharge your academic batteries after four years of undergraduate education.

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR WHEN TO APPLY**

- Does the program you are applying for desire work experience (many MBA programs do for example) or does it encourage entry directly from undergrad?
- Are there prerequisites that you would need to take to prepare for the program (for example if you are switching fields)?
- What are your current obligations? Does making a prolonged commitment to graduate school make sense at this time?

## **WHICH DEGREE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?**

The degree you choose to pursue corresponds to your goals. When considering your goals it is important to see how your degree will help you attain your goal and it is important to consider if there are multiple options for continuing your education. Talk to people who are doing what you want to do. What programs did they do? What programs do they suggest?

### **MASTER'S DEGREE (MA, MS, MPP, MFA, EDM, ETC.)**

- Usually take 1–3 years to complete
- Tend to focus on practical application of knowledge
- Some programs may prepare students to continue to doctoral programs
- Generally master's degrees are not funded; you are responsible for tuition

### **PROFESSIONAL DEGREE (LAW, BUSINESS, MEDICINE, VETERINARY, ETC.)**

- Generally focuses on training leading to a specific career
- Generally takes 2–4 years and may require professional practicums in addition to years spent in school
- Generally are terminal programs
- Generally are not funded; you are responsible for tuition

### **DOCTORAL DEGREE (PHD, DFA, ETC.)**

- Usually takes 4–7 years (or more) where students pursue original research
- Programs in competitive departments are often funded
- Are often full-time but some may allow part-time

# TIMELINE FOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

The timeline below is based on an applicant looking to start graduate school in the September following a May graduation. This timeline is meant to give an idea of the tasks that need to be accomplished. Don't panic if you haven't matched up with the times. Find out when your applications are due and work backwards to set your own schedule.

## SUMMER BEFORE YOUR SENIOR YEAR

- Research graduate programs; become familiar with faculty research interests, entrance requirements, entrance tests, and application deadlines
- Contact graduate programs of interest and request admissions information and financial aid applications
- Take a practice entrance exams (GRE, GMAT, MCAT, etc.)
- Review for and take necessary entrance exams (the GRE general test and/or other required tests)
- Begin to draft a personal statement of your academic and professional goals

## SEPTEMBER, SENIOR YEAR

- Register for the GRE subject test, if required
- Narrow down your list of prospective schools
- Identify and contact individuals to request letters of recommendation (agree on a deadline!)
- Obtain feedback on and continue to refine your personal statement
- Continue research on financial aid options, including grants, scholarships, fellowships, assistantships, and educational and personal loans

## OCTOBER

- Retake the GRE, if necessary
- Order official transcripts
- Begin to tailor your personal statement to the graduate programs to which you are applying
- Make contact with students, professors, administrators, and/or alumni at your prospective schools

## NOVEMBER

- Follow up on letters of recommendation to make sure they are completed
- Secure official transcripts
- Finalize your personal statements; have them reviewed by appropriate faculty, staff, and professionals in the field
- Complete application and begin sending out packets
- Begin preparing financial aid applications

## DECEMBER

- Finish sending out all applications, keeping copies for your records
- Check with each school to ensure that all materials have been received, including transcripts, letters of recommendations, and test scores

## **JANUARY**

- Focus on financial aid: complete the FAFSA online and apply for private and educational loans, grants, fellowships, and assistantships
- Prepare for any interviews that you may have; utilize InterviewStream (an online tool for 24/7 interview practice, access available through BU CareerLink) and/or schedule a mock interview at the CCD

## **FEBRUARY/MARCH**

- Continue to make contact with program representatives to check on the status of your application
- See a career counselor to talk about a contingency plan in the event that you are not accepted or choose not to go to graduate school
- Relax and wait to see if you are selected as a potential candidate; this will probably be the most relaxing time you'll have for the next several years, so enjoy it!
- Arrange to visit programs that you are selected for; many departments hold admitted students days in March and early April

## **APRIL/MAY**

- Figure out your financial situation. This will help you decide where to attend
- Accept and decline offers in writing and/or by phone as soon as you have made a decision
- Contact your recommenders to let them know where you will be next year and thank them again for writing a recommendation

# EVALUATING PROGRAMS

When evaluating various programs, keep in mind your personal and academic goals and needs. Below are a number of aspects to consider; decide which are important to you and then evaluate the programs based on your criteria.

## ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

- How competitive is the program/department?
- What are the GPA requirements? Are you within the range?
- Are there certain prerequisites required from undergrad? Do you have them or will you have to take them?
- Are there graduate school exam scores required? Which ones and what are the average scores?

## CURRICULUM & ACADEMIC FOCUS

- What is the curriculum orientation: theoretical/research or practical? Does it match your goals?
- Is there a thesis or final exam required in order to complete the degree?
- Will you be required to complete an internship as part of the program? Will the department provide assistance in getting an internship if it is required?
- What is the number of credits required to complete the degree?
- What is the length of the program? Are there part-time options if you need them?

## REPUTATION & QUALITY

- What is the rank or reputation of the school and the department?
- Is the school and program accredited? By whom?

## GRADUATION & CAREER ASSISTANCE

- What percentage of students complete the program?
- For students who complete the program, what is the number of students employed at, or three months after, graduation? In what type of positions? What are their salaries?
- What types of assistance is given to students and alumni in finding careers?
- What is the alumni base like? Network of alumni?

## FACULTY

- What is the faculty/student ratio?
- How accessible are faculty to their students?
- What is the focus of the faculty you will be working with; teaching or research?
- What is the school and department philosophy?
- Who are the faculty? What are their reputations in the field?
- What are the faculty publications/research interests? Do they align with your research interests?
- Is there a diversity of interests/research happening?

## **LOCATION & SIZE**

- Is the campus urban, suburban, or rural?
- What is the surrounding community like? Where will you be living? How will you get around?

## **COST & FINANCIAL AID**

- What will it cost: tuition, room and board, fees?
- Are there forms of financial aid available? What forms? How do you apply?

## **MULTICULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES**

- What is the campus diversity: faculty, students?
- Is it reflected in the curriculum or in activities on campus?

## **FACILITIES**

- What are the libraries like? Are there collections in your field?
- What are the study facilities, classrooms, social areas, labs/studios like?
- What type of technology support is available?

# TESTING INFORMATION

When preparing to take any standardized test, you may want to consider either preparing on your own with testing guides written to give you sample test questions or you can sign up for a commercial test preparation course which gives you strategies on how to approach a standardized test.

The first step is to research which test or tests will be required for admission into your chosen program of study. Depending on the program, there may be more than one testing option to choose from.

Below is information for the various testing sites.

## GRADUATE SCHOOL TESTING OPTIONS

### GRE (Graduate Record Examination)

This test includes a quantitative section, a verbal section, and an analytical section. Tests are offered year round; computer-based testing is available at test centers worldwide. 866-473-4373, [www.takethegre.com](http://www.takethegre.com), [www.ets.org/gre/subject/about](http://www.ets.org/gre/subject/about) (GRE subject tests)

### GMAT (Graduate Management Admissions Test)

For applying to management programs, this test is offered online throughout the year and around the world. Visit their website and find a test center closest to you. 800-717-4628, [www.mba.com/mba/thegmat](http://www.mba.com/mba/thegmat)

### MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test)

For applying to medical school, this test is offered multiple times from January through September at hundreds of test site locations around the world. 202-828-0690, [www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/](http://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/)

### LSAT (Law School Admissions Test)

For applying to law school, this test is offered worldwide with registration information available on their website. 215-968-1001, [www.lsatsat.org/](http://www.lsatsat.org/)

### MAT (Miller Analogies Test)

A standardized test of verbal abilities can be submitted in place of the GRE for certain schools. Dates are available by calling or visiting: 800-622-3231, [www.milleranalogies.com](http://www.milleranalogies.com),

### DAT (Dental Admissions Test)

[www.ada.org/dat.aspx](http://www.ada.org/dat.aspx)

### OAT (Optometry Admissions Test)

[www.ada.org/oat/index.html](http://www.ada.org/oat/index.html)

### TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)

[www.ets.org/toefl/](http://www.ets.org/toefl/)

# PREPARATION OPTIONS

If you determine that an entrance exam is required, it is recommended that you take a practice test to determine the level of preparation you may need. If you will take a computer-based test, it is also recommended that you take at least one practice computer based exam so that you get a feel taking the exam on a computer.

## SELF-PREPARATION

Choosing to practice for a standardized test through self-preparation is a good choice if you are self-motivated and disciplined in your study habits.

Purchase a printed book with many practice questions. Several include a CD-ROM to practice computer-based testing.

Be sure to visit the test website to take practice tests online and get more detailed information on strategies for approaching the test.

## COMMERCIAL TEST PREPARATION

(Disclaimer: The following list does not constitute an endorsement of these programs.)

There are several programs that offer test review courses. Some of them include:

- BC Continuing Education      617-552-4256  
[www.bc.edu/schools/son/ce/testprep.html](http://www.bc.edu/schools/son/ce/testprep.html)
- The Olin Center                      617-247-3033  
[www.olincenter.com/gre](http://www.olincenter.com/gre)
- The Princeton Review              1-800-2Review  
[www.testprep.princetonreview.com](http://www.testprep.princetonreview.com)
- Kaplan                                      1-800-Kap-Test  
[www.kaptest/gre](http://www.kaptest/gre)

These programs teach you a more structured and systematic approach to answering the questions; they are supportive and help identify weaknesses in your study methods. They cost much more than the self-study method, but may be worth it for those who benefit from structure and a systematic approach.

Some questions to consider in choosing a test preparation course are:

- How thorough are they in teaching you strategies to use when taking the test?
- What is the reputation of the test preparation course?
- Who will be instructing the course? Do they have recommendations or their own scores available?
- What is the cost? Do they offer any discounts?
- Will they let you retake the course if you are not satisfied?

You might also consider hiring a private tutor to help you individually with your test preparation.

# APPLICATION PACKAGE

## INCLUDED IN YOUR PACKET

- Application form
- Personal essay
- Non-refundable fee
- Financial aid application
- Official transcripts/samples
  - Transcripts should include:
    - Registrar's signature and seal
    - all grades
    - Credit hours
    - Course titles
  - Can send mid-year transcripts; follow with final
  - Submit transcripts with application, if possible; if not, have school send them directly
- Sample projects/research papers assist admissions

## TEST SCORES

- Stay on track with required dates for submitting test scores for each school's application
- Check the "Listing of Graduate School Testing Options" (available on page 6) for the particular website address you need to see how long tests take to be scored and information posted
- Note: You can retake the GRE, and the results are recorded and are valid for five years. If you decide to take the GRE more than once, your most recent three scores will be sent to the schools to which you apply.

## LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

See below for tips on how to ask for a letter.

- Forms are included in the application package
- 3–5 letters of recommendation are customary
- Consider asking faculty and/or employers
- Request letters early
- Assist your references by providing them with a packet of information (see below for suggestions)
- Agree on a deadline and follow up

### Asking for Letters of Recommendation

When selecting who to ask for a letter of recommendation consider the following:

- The program requirements
  - How many letters does the application require?
  - Do the letters have to all come from professors?
  - Do they want letters from professors in specific subject areas?
- Who can best speak to your abilities?
  - It is important the writer knows you well. If you want someone who does not know you well to write a letter, take steps to get to know them (e.g., speak in class, go to their office hours).

- Always ask the person if they can write you a *strong* letter of recommendation.

Pose your request 1–2 months in advance:

- In-person requests are best; they allow you to answer questions and connect with the recommender
- Let them know why you have selected them as the recommender and provide them with a packet of information. Consider including in this packet:
  - A letter thanking them for writing, restating the deadline agreed on, instructions, etc.
  - Method for submitting the letter (online, mailed to address, or given to you signed and sealed to include in application materials)
  - Description of the program
  - Your personal statement
  - Your resume
  - Your transcript
  - A sample of your work (what you did in their class)

## **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE/PERSONAL ESSAY**

Think of your essay statement as a concise summary of your career goals and a way to communicate your enthusiasm to a prospective admissions office. It is a chance to market yourself and make a strong connection between your focus and the program's goals. There are 2 different types of personal essay statements:

- A general essay statement
- A specific essay with responses to actual questions

### **Consider the following when responding:**

- When did you become interested in this field and what has it taught you about yourself?
- What people or experiences have influenced your career goals and choices?
- Describe an accomplishment that you are proud of.
- List one experience where you were working under stress or taught a specific lesson.
- Describe an experience that demonstrates your commitment to a cause; what have been your unique contributions?
- What makes you unique? Include influences from books, film, or other media that relate to your career goals. What are some of the issues pertaining to your chosen field? Do they influence your goals?

### **Admission committees are looking at the following:**

- What is your overall writing ability?
- What are your goals relating to your career?
- Why did you choose this program or field?
- What is your level of academic knowledge and maturity?
- How well do you know yourself in relation to the program you have chosen and is it a compelling story?
- Specific examples that back up your statements and show your relevant experience.

### **Two final tips:**

- Don't list any potentially controversial subjects such as religion or politics.
- Have your statement reviewed before sending out!

# GRADUATE SCHOOL INTERVIEW

For many schools interviews will not be required. But if you have the opportunity, the interview allows you to go beyond your personal statement in making an impression on admissions.

## QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO ASK

- How many people complete the program?
- How do faculty make themselves available to students?
- How many years does it take to complete the program, on average?
- Where are former students now? What percentage of graduates are in academic jobs?
- Do people get teaching assistantships?
- What is the culture of the graduate school community? Social? Isolationist?
- Where do people live? Do graduate students tend to live together or by themselves?
- Is there public transportation available?

## QUESTIONS ADMISSION OFFICERS MAY ASK

- Please tell me about yourself.
- What are your career goals?
- Why do you want a degree in \_\_\_\_\_?
- Why would you be an asset to our department?
- What appeals to you about our program?
- Why do you want to be in the profession?
- In what kind of setting would you like to practice, work, or teach?
- How do you plan to finance your education?
- How would you be described by family, friends, and teachers?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in your profession?

# FINANCING GRADUATE SCHOOL

## FINANCIAL AID KEY POINTS

- Visit the institution's website for financial aid information.
- Inquire and apply early for financial aid, meeting all priority dates and deadlines.
- Application procedures and available aid programs vary from school to school. Ask about the financial aid opportunities and application requirements at the school/s to which you are applying.
- Investigate external funding opportunities and carefully complete scholarship applications.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK ADMISSION OFFICERS REGARDING FINANCIAL AID

- What proportion of students receive funding and how are they funded?
- What are the stipend levels and benefits provided by departmental assistantships?
- Is tuition waived with an assistantship or is the student responsible for some portion of the tuition costs?
- How long does the average student take to complete the degree?

## TYPES OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR GRADUATE STUDY

### Assistantships

- Generally provide monthly stipend, plus tuition and health care
- Have a service requirement: teaching, research, resident assistant, or administrative duties
- Have a time commitment; typically 20-hours/week for full tuition
- Provide training, experience, and networking opportunities

### Grants, fellowships, scholarships

- Generally based on academic achievement
- Generally provide monthly stipend, plus tuition and health care
- Generally do not have a service requirement
- May come from the academic department, the graduate school/university, or external sources, e.g., government agencies, professional organizations, private foundations

### Specialized funding

- Through service programs, e.g., AmeriCorps
- Military branches (often geared toward health professions)
- Loan repayment in exchange for work in a particular field, location, with a specific population, or in a particular field upon degree completion

### Federal loans

- Stafford (subsidized and unsubsidized)
- Perkins (availability depends on graduate program)
- PLUS loan

### Private loans

- Non-need-based; unsubsidized
- Credit history is considered; may require co-signer
- Employer-financed or partially funded tuition

## **TERMS TO CONSIDER REGARDING LOANS**

- Cost of the guarantee fee (insurance against your default)
- Cost of the origination fee (“administrative fee”)
- Rate/time frame for loan capitalization
- Fixed vs. variable interest rates
- Time frame for first payment/guidelines
- Possible interest rate deduction if set up for direct payment?

See “Graduate School: How Do I Pay for All of This?” section on our website ([bu.edu/careers](http://bu.edu/careers)) for additional resources.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL**

See the “Graduate School” section of our website ([bu.edu/careers](http://bu.edu/careers)) for further information and additional resources.