
Grad School

Tips, Techniques
& Timelines

CAREER CENTER
for VOCATION & DEVELOPMENT



Is Graduate School for Me?

It's important to evaluate your reasons for wanting to go to graduate school. Unlike most undergraduate experiences, graduate programs require that you have clear direction toward a certain career path. Ask yourself the following questions: Do my career goals require an advanced degree? Am I looking for a specialized degree only obtainable through graduate school? Do I have the motivation and desire to commit myself to the time and effort demanded by graduate school programs? Is it better for me to go part-time or get some work experience first?



To assist you in your decision-making, it may be beneficial to seek out a professional in the field you are considering and ask them to do an informational interview. How did they decide to go to graduate school? How did they select a program? What was it like? Consider taking advantage of our Alumni Career Network to speak with an alum who has taken a similar path. Also, make an appointment with a Career Development Coach to discuss your questions and formulate an action plan.

How do I choose a graduate program?

Finding a program that fits your goals and professional interests is essential to a successful graduate school experience. Keep in mind that just because a program is in the top rankings by *U.S. News & World Report* doesn't mean it's a guaranteed best fit for you. Consider the following criterion when selecting a program:

- **Admissions Requirements:** Do your qualifications (i.e. GPA, co-curricular experiences, coursework, test scores) meet the minimum requirements?
- **Program Characteristics:** What is the faculty to student ratio? How long does it take to complete the curriculum? What is the reputation of the program, and how does it measure with comparable programs? Does the philosophy/emphasis of the program fit with my interests and values? What are the facilities like? Will I be required to do research, internships, or a thesis?
- **Faculty:** What are faculty specialty areas or research interests? What kind of involvement have they had in their respective fields? Are they well known in their areas of expertise? Have they been active in research or publishing (tip: read some of their publications!)? What are their distinguished achievements?
- **Alumni:** What are graduates of the program currently doing? What was their experience like in the program? What are the statistics on finding employment after graduation?
- **Financial Aid:** What kind of financial aid is available? How many students secure graduate, research, or teaching assistantships? What percentage of the tuition is covered through these opportunities? Are their scholarships available?

What do I need to apply?

Different programs have different admissions requirements. It's important to keep track of what each program requires as well as the deadline dates for each. You may want to keep a spreadsheet for each school you are researching. Below are some of the common requirements, depending on the type of program:

- **Official Transcript:** This can be obtained through the Registrar's Office in Old Main.
- **Exam Scores:** Check to see what, if any, tests scores are required (i.e. GRE, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT).
- **Portfolio:** Some programs, such as those in the arts, require a portfolio which showcases your work.
- **Essays & Personal Statements:** These writing samples should be taken very seriously. Your essays should be tailored to the specific schools to which you're applying. For advice on writing your essays

or to have them critiqued, contact the Career Center. Check out resources for writing effective essays on the Career Center website: www.messiah.edu/offices/career/grad/index/html (books on grad school essays are also available in the Career Center library for check out).

- **References:** Choose individuals (i.e. professors, advisors, internship supervisors) who have seen your best work and recognize your potential. Talk with them about your goals, and ask if they would be comfortable serving as a reference for you. Provide them with a résumé, unofficial transcript, and work sample so they can see the extent of your achievements. Be sure to give them plenty of time (at least 1 month) to complete their references for you, and provide reasonable deadlines. Also, include stamped, addressed envelopes for them to mail their recommendation forms. Remember to send your references a thank you note!
- **Interview:** Some programs require an in-person interview before they make their final decision. It's critical that you take time to practice! Take advantage of a practice interview session available through the Career Center.

GRADUATE SCHOOL SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

BACKGROUND

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why do you want to pursue graduate school for _____?
3. What impacted your decision to go to graduate school?
4. Why did you select this program/school?
5. What do you hope to do with a graduate degree in this field? What are your future goals?

EDUCATION

1. Tell me about your undergraduate experience at Messiah College. How did it prepare you for this next step?
2. What was your involvement like outside of the classroom?
3. Tell me about a time when you worked on a project as part of team. What role did you play? What were the outcomes?
4. How would your faculty describe you?
5. What would you contribute to our program?

EXPERIENCE

1. What related experience have you had? What did you learn from these experiences?
2. Tell me about a particular experience which has helped you recognize your interests and strengths.

PERSONAL

1. What motivates you to do your best work?
2. What do you see as the biggest challenges you will face in graduate school?
3. What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
4. How do you handle stress?
5. What is your favorite book?
6. What is your proudest accomplishment?
7. What do you like to do in your spare time?

CONCLUSION

1. Why should you be accepted into this program?
2. What questions do you have for us?

Graduate School Timeline*

YEAR	TASKS
Sophomore Year	Discuss your interest in grad/professional school with faculty members, your advisor, and a career coach. Become familiar with grad school resources in the Career Center. Become involved in co-curricular activities, and work to develop leadership skills.
Junior Year (fall)	Meet with a career coach to discuss programs you might like to pursue, along with questions you have about the application process. Take note of admissions requirements on websites of programs that appeal to you. Sign up for the practice grad school test drive through the Career Center.
Junior Year (spring)	Register and prepare for the appropriate graduate school admissions test (i.e., GRE, LSAT, etc.). Sign up for the practice test drive through the Career Center if you haven't already done so. Request catalogs and materials for schools you plan to pursue.
Junior/Senior (summer)	Study and sign up for the grad school admissions exam. Visit schools and request application materials. Begin working on the required essays. Set deadlines for yourself for each step of the application.
Senior Year (fall)	Request and collect recommendation letters as well as copies of your official transcript. Take grad school admissions exam. Have essays reviewed by a career coach and at the Writing Center. Mail completed application package well in advance of the deadline date.
Senior Year (spring)	Follow up with schools to ensure your file is complete. Send fall transcripts if necessary. Visit schools you've been granted acceptance to and evaluate offers. Apply for assistantship positions. Notify all accepted schools and references of your decision.
Summer after graduation	Take time to relax! Consider taking one grad class to get your feet wet. Thank all those who supported you in the process.

**Please keep in mind that this is an "ideal" timeline. Individual timelines vary by person and program.*

Graduate School Exploration Exercise

ASSESSING INTERESTS

What career areas are you most interested in exploring/pursuing - general or specific?

Examples: clinical psychology, children, law, art, forensics, business, etc.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

SELECTING A PROGRAM: YOUR CRITERIA

Before selecting graduate programs, it's important to know your priorities. Rank order the following factors for selecting a program, according to your values:

- ___ Geographic location
- ___ Cost/affordability
- ___ Financial aid availability
- ___ Student-Faculty ratio
- ___ Type of institution (public, private, research-based, faith-based)
- ___ Reputation (international, national or regional)
- ___ Success of graduates
- ___ Quality of program/school (faculty backgrounds, distinguished achievements, etc.)
- ___ Experiential opportunities (internships, fieldwork, research, etc.)
- ___ Facilities/technology

Sample Resources

Occupational Outlook Handbook -

www.bls.gov/oco/

O*NET -

<http://online.onetcenter.org/find/>

America's Career InfoNet -

www.acinet.org/acinet/default.asp

VAULT – through Career Center's website:

www.messiah.edu/offices/career

CHECKLIST OF RESOURCES

There are many useful resources and sources of support as you consider and make decisions about graduate school. It's up to you to take advantage of them as early and often as possible!

- Mentors with experience in your field of interest
- Faculty in your department and academic advisors
- Alumni who have taken a similar path (Alumni Career Network)
- Professional Associations within your field of interest (ex. American Counseling Association, American Psychological Association, National Association for Child Development)
- Free graduate school practice exams offered through the Career Center (GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT – typically offered once per semester)
- Library resources in the Career Center and your academic department
- Web Resources:
 - Career Center website: www.messiah.edu/offices/career/students
 - Gradschools.com
 - Petersons.com
 - Graduateguide.com
 - Specific school websites

RESEARCHING GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Using a few of the resources mentioned above, practice researching programs of interest. Select one program/school to investigate. Try to gather as much of the following information as possible. Depending on the extensiveness of the program's website, you may need to contact the school/department directly in order to obtain some of this information.

Name of school:

Name of program:

Description of geographic area:

Type of program: Master's level Doctoral Seminary Other: _____

Type of school (✓ all that apply): Public Private Research-based Faith-based

Is the program accredited by reputable accrediting bodies? Yes No

Number of credits needed to graduate: _____

Approximate time to complete the program: Full-time: _____ Part-time: _____

Other requirements: Thesis Research Project Dissertation Field Experience
 Other: _____

Admissions Requirements:

- Specific prerequisites (undergraduate major, classes, etc.) _____
- Formal application
- Grades/official transcript (minimum GPA? _____)
- Admissions test scores – if so, what test? _____ minimum score? _____
- Essay/personal statement (Question asked: _____)
- Recommendations (# _____)
- Work samples (specific? _____)
- Interview
- Other: _____

Types of experiences sought in applicants:

- Related coursework/major
- Career-related experience (example: internship, work experience, etc.)
- Research
- Other: _____

Coursework

Read through the courses that are required to complete the program. Do they sound appealing? Do they seem to fit with your interests and abilities?

Significant accomplishments of the program/school/faculty:

Typical career paths of graduates of the program:

Financial aid options

- Student loans
- Graduate assistantships
- Research assistantships
- Teaching assistantships

On-campus housing available? Yes No (*Note that this is rare for graduate programs)

Deadline(s) for application: _____ Is there rolling admissions? _____

YOUR QUALIFICATIONS

Now that you have an idea of what is generally desired in graduate school applicants (at least for one school/program), it's time to evaluate what you have to offer. Remember, your qualifications will determine the pool of schools/programs to which you apply. This part of the exercise may also reveal some gaps that you may need to address in order to strengthen your chances of acceptance into your top choice programs.

COMMON ADMISSIONS FACTORS

1) Academics

Cumulative GPA: _____ / 4.0 Major GPA: _____ / 4.0

Required Prerequisite Courses for Graduate Program of Interest (if any):

Entrance Exam Score (GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT, or other): _____ out of a possible _____

2) Experience

Hopefully by now you have documented your significant experiences on a résumé. Relevant experience is a critical factor looked for in applicants for both employment and graduate school. In fact, some schools strongly require a certain amount of experience before you can be considered for admission.

Relevant experience can include the following:

- Significant course projects
- Research
- Internships
- Part-time or full-time work
- Volunteer or service experience
- Co-curricular involvement
- Leadership experience

Use the following space to jot down notes of some of your potentially relevant experiences. Never underestimate the value of transferable skills that you may have gained from a seemingly non-relevant experience. Examples of transferable skills include: communication skills, ability to function as an effective team member, critical thinking, problem solving, flexibility, self-directedness, etc.

Experience: _____
Brief Description: _____

Skills developed: _____

Experience: _____
Brief Description: _____

Skills developed: _____

Experience: _____
Brief Description: _____

Skills developed: _____

3) Personal Characteristics

What makes you unique? What would you bring to the program in terms of your personality, background, experience? What makes you a good fit for the field you are pursuing? What makes you a good fit for the program/school? This information should shine through in your personal statement, which is a writing sample typically asking you to articulately summarize a bit about yourself, your interests, and your goals. How would you begin to answer some of these questions? Write down some initial thoughts.

4) References

For graduate school applications, references are typically faculty members who are able to speak confidently about your past accomplishments and your potential for success. In some instances, you may also ask a supervisor who worked closely with you within your field of interest.

Who are three individuals you would consider asking to serve as references?

1) _____ 2) _____ 3) _____

Note: If you're having trouble identifying individuals who know you well, now is the time to invest in these relationships! Take a faculty member to lunch or coffee; discuss your goals with them. Allow them to ask you questions.

MOVING FORWARD

Hopefully this exercise provided some insight into what graduate schools typically look for in applicants as well as some areas of your application that may need some attention. Remember to consult as many of the resources available to you as possible. Specifically, the Career Center is here to assist you with the following:

- Decision-making: general questions and concerns
- Resources for selecting a program
- The application process
- Essays and personal statements (remember the Writing Center, too!)
- Selecting and approaching individuals to serve as references
- Portfolio reviews
- Graduate admissions exams and practice tests
- Practice interviews
- Graduate school fairs and events
- Financial aid for graduate school

Recommended Resources

General Websites on Grad School

- www.gradschools.com
- www.petersons.com
- www.usnews.com (U.S. News)
- <http://international.gradschools.com> (International Programs)
- <http://messiah.myplan.com> (My Plan)
(*must create a free account)
- www.graduateguide.com
- www.messiah.edu/offices/career/index/grad/html
- <http://international.gradschools.com>

Law School

- www.lsac.org

Medical School

- www.aamc.org
- www.messiah.edu/departments/premedhealth/
(Pre-Health Advising @ Messiah)

Essays & Personal Statements

- www.essayedge.com
- www.admissionsessays.com ("Writing Tips" section)
- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_perstate.html (Purdue University Writing Lab)

Testing

- www.gre.org (GRE)
- www.lsac.org (LSAT)
- www.aamc.org (MCAT)
- www.gmac.com (GMAT)
- www.ada.org (DAT)
- www.milleranalogies.com (MAT)

Financial Aid

- www.finaid.com
- www.fastweb.com
- www.gradview.com/finaid/paying.html
- www.graduateguide.com
- www.gradschools.com/info/financial.html
- www.gradloans.com
- www.princetonreview.com/grad/finance/