

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Tips & Strategies



CAREER AND
PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT CENTER

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 searching for an alum who has taken a similar path through the [Messiah University Professional Network](#) on LinkedIn. You can also search the [career/grad school resources by major](#) to see what graduate programs alumni from your major have attended. Also, make an appointment with a Career Coach in the [Career and Professional Development Center](#) 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 criteria when selecting a program:



- **Admissions Requirements:** Do your qualifications (i.e., GPA, co-curricular experiences, coursework, test scores) meet the minimum requirements? What is the acceptance ratio of the institution?
- **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 there 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. How many schools you choose to apply to is a decision based on various factors such as

personal finances, competitiveness of the programs, and timelines for the schools. Below are some of the common requirements, depending on the type of program:

- **Official Transcript:** This can be obtained through the Registrar's Office.
- **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 and Professional Development Center.
- **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. 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. We recommend scheduling a **mock interview** with the Career and Professional Development Center.

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 University. How did it prepare you for grad school?
2. What was your involvement like outside of the classroom?
3. Tell me about a time when you worked on a team project. What was your role? 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*

(*Please keep in mind that this is an ideal timeline – individual timelines vary by person and by program.)

| YEAR | TASKS |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Sophomore Year | <p>Discuss your interest in grad/professional school with faculty members, your advisor, and a career coach.</p> <p>Explore grad school resources in the Career and Professional Development Center. Become involved in co-curricular activities, and work to develop leadership skills. Consider attending the Grad School Fair on campus to explore various graduate program options.</p> |
| Junior Year (fall) | <p>Meet with a career coach to discuss programs you might like to pursue, along with questions you have about the application process. Attend the annual grad school fair and luncheon in the fall if you haven't already. Take note of admissions requirements on websites of programs that appeal to you. Study the practice questions that are available at www.kaptest.com. Attend the Grad School Fair on campus to talk with grad school representatives.</p> |
| Junior Year (spring) | <p>Register and prepare for the appropriate graduate school admissions test (i.e., GRE, LSAT, etc.). If necessary, sign up for free online practice tests through www.kaptest.com. Request catalogs and materials for schools you plan to pursue.</p> |
| Junior/Senior (summer) | <p>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.</p> |
| Senior Year (fall) | <p>Attend the Grad School Fair on campus to talk with grad school representatives. Several schools offer admissions fee waivers! 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. Submit completed application package well in advance of the deadline date.</p> |
| Senior Year (spring) | <p>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.</p> |
| Summer after graduation | <p>Take time to relax! Consider taking one grad class to get your feet wet. Send thank you notes to all those who supported you in the process.</p> |

WRITING EFFECTIVE ESSAYS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

I. BASIC STRUCTURE

Introduction

- Consider how you will “hook” the reader(s).
- Set the framework for the body of your essay.
- Keep it simple, straightforward, and intriguing. Avoid complexity and wordiness.

Body

- Articulately and concisely address your main points which flow from your introduction.
- Each paragraph should have a targeted point or objective.
- Create flow with transitional words in and between paragraphs.
- Offer specific examples from experience to back up your claims.

Conclusion

- Provide a sense of closure without restating/summarizing what you’ve already said.
- Bring your theme full circle.
- Tie your conclusion back to your introduction.



II. FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

What has shaped your reasons for wanting to attend graduate school in the area you’ve chosen?

- Significant experiences/exposure to the field
- Relevance to long-term goals
- Convey motivation, drive, and enthusiasm through language and content used

How do your qualifications meet admissions criteria?

- Demonstrate that you’ve done your research about the school/program and communicate what features most interest you.
- Identify specific factors that make you an ideal “fit” and contributor to the educational experience (skills, competencies, characteristics, relevant experiences, etc.) and that would eventually set you up for success in your field.
- Provide details and specifics that aren’t found elsewhere on your application.
- Draw from diverse experiences to emphasize transferable skill sets – research, internships/practicums, work experience, study abroad, co-curricular activities, service and volunteer work, etc.
- Consider offering a valid and thoughtful explanation for any significant weaknesses in your academic record (an exceptionally low GPA one semester, poor test scores, etc.). Depending on the circumstance, this may be most suitable in an appendix to your essay.

What makes you an exceptional, impressive, unique candidate?

- Admissions committees value diversity of backgrounds and experiences.
- Consider your background and unique life experiences – what have you been exposed to or learned about that could be contributed in the classroom?
- What unique challenges or obstacles (economic, familial, physical) have you overcome?

III. ESSAY DO'S & DON'TS

DO:

- Stick to answering the questions that are being asked of you.
- Invest time in creating a compelling opening paragraph to entice the reader to continue reading.
- Consider using story-telling, themes, anecdotes, or analogies to illustrate influences to your decision-making.
- Don't just tell; show through examples.
- Relay detailed, concrete examples rather than generalities.
- Use strong, yet relevant, action verbs.
- Use "buzz words" commonly used in your field of interest to relate your knowledge base.
- Focus on depth rather than breadth.
- *Evaluate* and *reflect* on experience as opposed to taking a great deal of space to describe it.
- Focus on the positive.
- Customize your essays by school/program.
- Know that many admissions committees will determine potential for success based on how you write about past experiences.
- Have several individuals proofread your essays. Content, mechanics, and grammar matter!

DON'T:

- Mention potentially controversial topics unless appropriate (politics, religion, etc.).
- Include high school information. Generally, you should keep to the last 4 years.
- Use extreme, unrealistic language such as, "I am the perfect candidate for your program..."
- Use clichés – "I want to change the world." "I chose this field because I want to help people."
- Regurgitate your résumé.
- Go off on tangents that are irrelevant to the essay questions.
- Try to be someone you're not. Admissions committees can pick up on this pretty quickly.

Graduate School Exploration Exercise

ASSESSING INTERESTS

What career areas are you most interested in exploring/pursuing?

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

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

Sample Resources

[Grad Schools.com](http://gradschools.com)

[Occupational Outlook Handbook](#)

[O*NET](#)

SELECTING A PROGRAM: YOUR CRITERIA

Before selecting graduate programs, it's important to know your priorities. Rank in 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

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 ([MU Professional Network](#) on LinkedIn)
- Professional Associations within your field of interest
- Free graduate school practice exams (GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT) are offered online at www.kaptest.com
- Library resources in the Career and Professional Development Center and your academic department
- Web Resources:
 - Career and Professional Development Center [website](#)
 - 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/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

What is the acceptance rate? _____

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

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student loans | <input type="checkbox"/> Research assistantships |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate assistantships | <input type="checkbox"/> 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:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Significant course projects• Research• Internships• Part-time or full-time work• Volunteer experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• International experiences (study abroad, service work, cross-cultural, etc.)• 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.

NEXT STEPS

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 and Professional Development 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!)
- Portfolio reviews
- Graduate admissions exams and practice tests
- Practice interviews
- Graduate school fairs and events