

Considering Graduate and Professional Schools



This document serves as a general outline for University of Virginia students who are considering pursuing one or more advanced degrees. Students are encouraged to seek career counseling, to consult with their academic advisors and professors, and to check application deadlines to determine the best time to apply.

Considering Graduate or Professional School - Is It Right For You?

Pursuing an advanced degree is an extensive commitment in terms of time (programs can take anywhere from one to seven or more years), money, and hard work. Graduate school in itself is not a plan. It's a step in the plan. Deciding on your plan means examining where you want to be in the long run, both professionally and personally. Don't pursue an advanced degree to avoid getting a job or simply because you "do school" well. Graduate school is not an extension of the undergraduate experience. It's more competitive and intensive. Also weigh your loss in earning potential (including retirement contributions) for the years you would devote to graduate study, and any debt you may incur, in assessing the value of graduate school in your long-range planning. If you determine that graduate school is right for you, UCS can help to guide you toward that goal.

Types of Advanced Degrees

Graduate school in arts and sciences (e.g. in one of the academic disciplines in arts and sciences, such as English or Biology) differs somewhat from advanced degree programs at professional schools. The goal of the former is the pursuit of academic knowledge, hence its highest degree: the Ph.D., or doctorate of philosophy—literally a doctorate in the "love of knowledge." Graduate

school in arts and sciences prepares students to become scholars, teachers at the university level, and researchers both in and outside academe. Some degree recipients opt to transfer their skills to non-academic sectors of the economy when they enter the workforce.

In contrast, advanced degree programs in professional schools prepare students to practice particular professions and thus commonly incorporate practical, experiential components into their curricula. Professional school fields include (among others):

Law	Architecture	Medicine	Nursing
Business	Engineering	Dentistry	Physical Therapy
Education	Journalism	Pharmacy	Social Work, etc.

In arts and sciences, graduate students may pursue the Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Science (M.S.), the Ph.D., or another field specific degree, such as the Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.). The list of professional advanced degrees is endless. The most popularly sought after include the Juris Doctor (J.D.), Doctorate of Medicine (M.D.), Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.), Master in Teaching (M.T.), Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.), Master of Social Work (M.S.W.), and so on.

Some schools also offer joint degree programs, such as the J.D./M.B.A. and M.D./Ph.D. programs. In arts and sciences, many graduate students can be accepted directly into a Master's/Ph.D. program, which can reduce the time required for a Ph.D., but not in all cases. Students who may want to explore graduate options or are unsure about the length of time required to complete the doctoral degree may choose to apply to a Master's program only. Most research-oriented Master's programs require research culminating in a thesis (Ph.D. research culminates in a dissertation). Other programs emphasizing practical applications may require a project. Be aware that some graduate programs do not accept candidates for the terminal Master's degree. Check the school's website for enrollment information concerning how many "Master's only" students are enrolled each year. Talking with professionals in the field, faculty, and current students enrolled in the program in which you are interested is the best way to learn about the different types of degrees offered and their advantage and disadvantages.

Professional School Advising in UCS

UCS offers counseling services for those preparing for careers in law, medicine, and other health professions (i.e. dentistry, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, physical therapy, etc.). A preprofessional advisor and preprofessional coordinator are available to help students through the application process. Scheduled advising appointments are available by calling UCS at (434) 924-8900. Fifteen minute walk-in appointments are also available on a first-come, first-served basis. Walk-in hours are listed on the UCS Web site:

www.career.virginia.edu/students/programs/counseling/

For more information, visit *Preprofessional Advising* under *Quick Links* on the UCS Web site at www.career.virginia.edu.

Exploring Graduate School Programs- Which Program Is Best For You?

We strongly recommend that you use a variety of resources to evaluate graduate programs. At the graduate level, especially in arts and sciences, the reputation of the program/department is far more important than the overall reputation of the school. Don't be blinded by the school's name alone. The #30 ranked public university in the country may have the best graduate program in Native American Studies, for example. Faculty in your proposed area of study are one of your most valuable resources in this regard. Talk to them. Remember that graduate study involves close work with one or two faculty members. Research faculty who specialize in your area of interest and read their published work. Many departmental websites provide contact information for their current graduate students. Contact several at various stages of the program and ask if they would be willing to answer a few questions from a prospective applicant. Most will be eager to share their insights with you. Finally, consult professionals in the field. You can begin with those in the U.Va. alumni database UCAN (University Career Assistance Network) by creating a free account at www.hoosonline.virginia.edu

Following are excellent supplemental online resources:

- ❖ www.petersons.com (click on "Grad School")
- ❖ www.princetonreview.com (click on "Graduate School")
- ❖ <http://www.usnews.com> (click on "Rankings & Guides")
- ❖ www.gradschools.com
- ❖ www.graduateguide.com

The UCS Career Resource Library also has a number of print resources to aid in your evaluation process. We also recommend that you attend the Professional and Graduate School Fair (see "Career Fairs & Events" on our website) as a way of meeting graduate and professional school representatives and collecting admissions information.

Again, talking with faculty and current graduate students is one of your best methods of acquiring first-hand information. Below are some questions to keep in mind as you gather information:

- ❖ Does the faculty member of interest have a good reputation as a mentor? How many graduate students does s/he supervise?
- ❖ How accessible are faculty in general? What is the graduate student/faculty ratio?
- ❖ What kind of placement assistance does the program/department offer? Does the department keep placement records on where their students wind up both in academe AND outside academe? Are these records posted publicly? If not, may I obtain a copy?
- ❖ What kinds of funding are available and when (including teaching and research assistantships)? Is funding available for dissertators?

- ❖ What is the average time-to-degree? (Students taking longer than average may be a red flag, signaling such weaknesses as inadequate funding, poor mentorship, exploitation of graduate students as low-cost labor, etc.)
- ❖ Does the program/department have a good track record of students obtaining internal and external fellowships and grants?
- ❖ Does the program/department assist students in integrating themselves into the wider professional community (e.g. by funding conference participation)?
- ❖ Is there good and affordable health insurance for graduate students?
- ❖ Is the program's graduate culture friendly and inviting?
- ❖ What teaching opportunities are available to graduate students and when? What is the average teaching load? Are there teaching workshops?
- ❖ As you narrow your selection, it's a good idea to visit the campus. Many schools have a procedure set up for visitation. You will need to make an appointment and arrange your own transportation in most cases.

Most graduate and professional school websites include a summary statement along with admissions information. The summary should provide a demographic profile of accepted candidates from the previous year to include GPA, GRE scores, age, gender, race/ethnicity and undergraduate institution. If the information is not included on the admissions website, you may request it from the admissions office.

Additional sources of information on the status of U.S. colleges and universities include *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (available in the University Career Resource Library) and field-specific journals. Such publications usually keep pace with trends in higher education, whether it is discussion of joint degree programs or new research. This information will make you a more informed consumer.

Applying to Graduate or Professional School

The procedure for applying to graduate or professional school is similar to the procedure that candidates use for undergraduate education. The primary difference is the emphasis on strong recommendations and a sense of direction on the part of the applicant. The difficulty and type of undergraduate program, grade-point average, and test scores are also important. A faculty review committee wants to ensure that the candidate is committed to research and study in the field. A candidate who has studied all areas of the discipline or achieved mastery in prerequisite study areas, engaged in a challenging interchange of ideas, and performed above average by all academic measures has an excellent chance of being admitted for graduate study.

Recommendations

A problem frequently experienced by students at this point is whom to ask for recommendations. You will need to consider the type of graduate program to which you are applying. Keep in mind that most graduate programs seek assurance of your strong academic dedication and performance. For this reason, it is important to get at least one recommendation from a major professor in your field, preferably more than one. If you are applying to law school, the “Dean’s Letter” or “Dean’s Certification Form” is very important. Generally, you should look for someone who has a high opinion of you and knows your work well enough to vouch for it, someone who can report on your ability as compared with that of your peers. The recommender should be a respected peer of the faculty review committee members, someone in a position to evaluate your performance in the same way and in the same language as the Admissions Committee members. Finding suitable recommenders may be one of your most difficult tasks. Get to know faculty in your proposed field. Work or volunteer in the department, assisting with research or other department activities. Take advantage of opportunities to meet with faculty formally or informally.

In addition to your major professors, you may consider other professors who know you well and are willing to give you a strong, positive recommendation. They may be advisors for student organizations or clubs, or a professor for whom you have been a teaching assistant or grader. If you have developed a strong relationship with your faculty advisor, your dean or other administrators, you should consider approaching them for recommendations. You may also ask employers from jobs where you have had significant responsibility. Stay focused, though, on what perspectives the Admissions Committee will value.

When considering how to ask for a recommendation, remember that yours may be only one of many requests. Do not wait until the last moment to ask. It helps to plan ahead. Make an appointment to see the person from whom you are seeking a recommendation and take with you a brief description of your plans and the degree programs to which you’re applying, as well as copies of your resume and academic transcripts. If you are requesting a recommendation from a professor, also take with you any papers written for that professor on which you received an excellent grade. You will have more success asking for the recommendation in person and providing information that will aid the recommender in remembering you and your abilities.

Also provide the recommender with the proper forms and a posted, addressed envelope. Most applications require a recommendation cover sheet, and most cover sheets ask if you agree to waive your rights to view the letter. You should always agree; not doing so may raise suspicion. It is also generally acceptable for the recommenders to write their letters on their own letterhead, if they prefer. Your recommenders will appreciate thank-you notes.

Creating an Electronic Portfolio/Recommendations File

UCS has partnered with a Web- based business, Interfolio.com, to provide you with control over your recommendations file, a wider variety of payment options, and improved turn-around time on delivery requests.

To create a new file, go directly to Interfolio.com at www.interfolio.com. There is a one-time fee for creating an electronic portfolio, as well as fees for separate mailings.

Application Essay Questions and Personal Statements

Almost all graduate and professional school applications will require you to write a personal statement. There is no formula for the perfect essay, but the most successful ones have sincerity as their central characteristic. This is commonly the only section of the application where the applicant has freedom of expression. For more detailed advice concerning personal statements, consult *How To Write A Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School* by Richard J. Stelzer, 2002 (available at the UCS Library).

Perhaps the most difficult of all application essays to write is the statement of purpose. Most graduate schools will ask you to explain to them why you seek acceptance to their program. A statement of purpose should not be confused with the personal statement, nor is it a prose version of your transcript. Your statement of purpose should prove to the admissions committee your interest in and dedication to the subject of study. If your commitment to the content area is sincere and you have given great thought to your motivation in applying to graduate school, your statement of purpose should reflect this. Do not be discouraged if the thought of elaborating your reasons for applying to a specific program intimidates you. Admissions committees realize the statement of purpose is a difficult writing assignment. They want to see how you manage such a challenge.

Most applicants do not have a well-formed purpose in mind. Do not try to gloss over reality. Sincerity is discernible and insincerity is unmistakable. Since a graduate program means extensive work with one or two faculty members, you would be wise to research the faculty in your area of interest. Know who they are, research what they have written, read what they have written. In your statement of purpose, if you can say you are interested in studying a specific area, explain why and then go on to elaborate your familiarity with the work done by faculty member X in this area, committee members will see that you have done your homework. Don't try to "play the game" by doing as little as possible to write your statement of purpose. You do yourself a disservice, even if you do gain admission to the program, when you exaggerate your own interest and falsify your research. If you find yourself having to "stretch the truth" in order to feign excitement about a field of study, you need to reexamine why you are applying in the first place.

We strongly encourage you to have your essays and personal statements professionally critiqued. The Writing Center in 314 Bryan Hall provides this service (phone: 924-6678).

Writing Sample

Some graduate programs will request a sample of your critical or academic writing along with your application. Such a sample will most likely come from your undergraduate coursework in the field of study. To show your comfort with sophisticated concepts, choose a piece with a strong theoretical or methodological component as opposed to a narrative paper. Naturally, the paper

should contain no typographical errors. If the paper received comments from your professor, incorporate those comments into a rewrite.

Graduate Admissions Tests

Most graduate and professional schools require that you take one of the standardized graduate admissions tests as a prerequisite for acceptance into the program. Most often required are the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) or the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). For academic graduate study, the examination usually required is the GRE.

It is wise to read the test information thoroughly. You will find explanations of the question types and in some cases a complete practice test. This information is preferable to some of the commercial test preparation materials. The University Career Resource Library does, however, have several preparation books available (for reference use only). You may also check local bookstores and libraries. We recommend that you obtain practice tests directly from the Educational Testing Service (www.ets.org). If you have high-test anxiety or feel that you lack the motivation to prepare for these tests on your own, you may wish to enroll in a test preparation course.

Financing Your Graduate Education

Often it is necessary to find supplemental income to finance your graduate study. Because funding is available from so many varied sources outside of your graduate school/department, the key to finding additional financial support is research. It is strongly recommended that you search and apply for funding beyond that which is offered to you by your school or department.

Funding can be broken down into three broad categories: need-based, merit-based, and targeted aid. Upon acceptance to a particular school or department, you may be offered a “package” which could entail funding from each of these categories. A breakdown of the package can consist of a combination of loans, grants, scholarships, paid internships, work-study, tuition reduction/remission, fellowships, or stipends (which may or may not have a service-related component such as being a teaching or research assistant).

Listed below are some good places to start your research:

Resources

University Career Resource Library Materials in Print

- ❖ *Financing Graduate School; Free Money for Graduate School; Grants for Graduate Students; The Financial Aid Book; The Scholarship Book; Higher Education Money Book for Minorities and Women;* several other resources target specific disciplines.

UCS Online Resources:

- ❖ Access a variety of financial aid resources at:
www.career.virginia.edu/students/resources/grad.php.

U.Va. Online Resources:

- ❖ The UVa Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies website provides links to additional online resources: <http://www.virginia.edu/vprgs/externalfund.html>
- ❖ Also visit the scholarship page of the UVa Center for Undergraduate Excellence: <http://www.virginia.edu/cue/scholarships.php?year=grad>

Taking Time Off Before Graduate School

The average age of students entering most graduate programs is 27-30. Obviously, many graduate students do not enroll directly after their undergraduate study. There may be many good reasons for taking time off: to clarify goals, to take a break from school, to earn money for graduate school, to gain related experience and enhance one's qualifications for admission, to establish residency in a state in order to be eligible for in-state tuition rates, to travel, to take prerequisite classes, etc.

If you are planning to take time off before graduate school, you may still benefit by taking several steps before graduation:

- ❖ Ask for letters of recommendation and start a credentials file. Your letters will remain on file for five years. Generally, professors will be able to write a more effective letter for you while you are still fresh in their minds than if they are trying to remember you several years after you have graduated.
- ❖ Take required admissions tests. Usually, candidates achieve higher test scores while still in – or close to – academic work, rather than after being away from the student role for an extended period. Schools will accept test scores up to three years later, sometimes even longer.
- ❖ Gather information. You have easiest access to information about graduate school while you are still a student. Take advantage of the resources at UCS. Talk to faculty for their suggestions about strong programs in your field of interest. Attend the annual Professional and Graduate School Fair.

Sample Timetable

Third Year

Spring

- ❖ Preliminary research of fields.
- ❖ Talk to alumni and other professionals in these fields.

- ❖ Consult faculty and other resources listed to identify programs.
- ❖ Obtain information on admission testing.

Summer

- ❖ Study sample test questions. Purchase test prep guide and/or enroll in test prep course if needed.
- ❖ Obtain/download applications.
- ❖ Take graduate admissions tests now or in the fall.
- ❖ Begin writing application essays.

Fourth Year

Fall

- ❖ Meet with graduate school reps.
- ❖ Have application essays critiqued.
- ❖ Identify recommenders and request letters of recommendation. Open a credentials file.
- ❖ Submit materials for early decision, if necessary.
- ❖ Research prestigious awards.

Nov/Dec

- ❖ Complete financial aid applications and forms.
- ❖ Submit completed applications.
- ❖ Have recommendations and transcripts forwarded to schools.

Spring

- ❖ Ensure that your file is complete prior to deadlines.
- ❖ Keep track of acceptances and rejections.
- ❖ Visit schools if possible.

April

- ❖ Most deadlines for making a commitment to a school occur this month.
- ❖ Be sure to notify the schools you have declined so that they can go to their wait list.

This timetable provides a sample timing of events for applying to graduate or professional school. Many applicants do not fit this pattern of applying during their undergraduate study. Please consult a counselor if you have questions.