Is Postgraduate Study for You?

Graduate school requires energy, time, and finances. Before you apply, carefully consider whether you have the desire and discipline to carry you through an academically demanding program – and why you really want to go.

Good reasons to attend graduate or professional school:

- You wish to acquire in-depth knowledge about a particular field.
- You need a higher degree to enter a particular profession or maintain a competitive edge in the workforce.

Graduate school is not the answer to those seeking career direction.

Choosing a Graduate School

Students who do thorough research and carefully match what they want from their graduate education with what a particular program has to offer are generally more satisfied with their choice. Generate a list of schools using directories such as gradschools.com, Petersons.com, or PrincetonReview.com. Look at the typical course sequence for your program and the research interests of the faculty. Other important criteria to consider include:

- **Admission standards** – Does your profile match that of the typical admitted student? What is the deadline to apply? Do applicants that apply early have an edge? (Also keep in mind financial aid deadlines may be earlier!)

- **Program** – How structured is the program? What leeway do you have in selecting courses? If accreditation and reputation are important to licensure and employment, how do professionals in your field regard the program?

- **Time commitment** – How long will it take you to complete? (Most Master’s programs take two years. PhD programs take four to eight years.) Can you take courses part-time and/or work while pursuing the degree?

- **Faculty** – At the graduate level, it is especially important for students who want to specialize in a particular area to attend a program with a professor(s) with the same field of interest. Working closely with a professor who is highly regarded in the field is often more important than attending a prestigious university. It also provides more opportunities for relevant research.

- **Students** – What is the ratio of students entering the program directly from college vs. those with several years of work experience following their undergraduate degree? (Some programs require or recommend that candidates have full-time work experience before applying.) What is the ratio of full-time vs. part-time students? Are there relevant student organizations?
Financial aid – What funding is available through grants, fellowships, graduate or teaching assistantships, and other programs?

Applying to Graduate School

While having a good GPA is important, particularly within classes relevant to your chosen field, most graduate programs are interested in far more. These tips may enhance your chances for admission:

- **Standardized tests** – Take the appropriate standardized test (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT...) several months before you apply so you can project your chances for admission to particular schools. Early testing also allows you to retest if needed. Before you take the test, know what types of questions and format to expect. Practice tests or preparation books are a great way to prepare. Based on your practice test score, a preparation course may be helpful; however, these courses can be expensive and do not guarantee better performance.

- **Letters of recommendation** – Admissions committees look for letters of recommendation that say something unique about the candidate. So, choose individuals such as faculty members, employers, and campus administrators with whom you’ve worked closely and who can cite specific examples of your qualifications. Provide a resume so they will know more about you outside the context in which you’ve interacted. Ask recommenders well in advance of deadlines and provide information on how and when to submit each recommendation. Send thank you notes!

- **Essays** – Topics vary between programs, but most are open-ended enough that you can use the essay as your opportunity to address why you have decided to attend graduate school, how you are qualified, what you intend to do with the degree, and why you have chosen that particular school or program. Be sure to stay within length limitations and have your essay proofread.

- **Interviews** – In addition to giving you the chance to share information with the admissions committee not contained in your application, the interview allows you to learn more about the school firsthand. Prepare in advance by scheduling a mock interview with your career advisor and generating a list of questions for the committee (that cannot be answered from the program’s website).

- **Extracurricular activities** – Keep in mind what skills and qualities admissions committees are looking for when evaluating your experiences beyond the classroom. When describing your work, internships, volunteer experience, and campus activities, cite examples of leadership, creativity, and accomplishments above and beyond the job description.

Financial Aid

As with college, financial aid exists to help you meet the difference between education costs and what you can contribute. Talk to each of your prospective schools to learn about funding through research or teaching (Assistantships) and how to apply. Fellowships and scholarships through the graduate program, school, or other outside sources may also be an option. If you plan to work full-time, some employers have a tuition assistance/reimbursement program that will finance an employee’s graduate degree provided the employee agrees to continue working for the company over a period of time. Finally, working in certain industries or for certain employers after you complete your degree may qualify you for forgiveness of any educational loans.