APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate school provides an opportunity to specialize in an academic discipline of interest. It also provides education needed for many professions. The decision to attend graduate school should not be made in haste and needs to be made using accurate data. Give careful thought to your decision and obtain information by:

- Understanding the job market for your field of interest.
- Doing some “reality testing” to gain experience in your field
- Examining your motivations; are your reasons for wanting to attend graduate school sound ones?

**Right reasons for pursuing graduate school:**
- You are eager to study in the discipline;
- You have a specific career goal that requires this graduate degree.

**Wrong reasons:**
- You’re undecided about a career path and you believe graduate school will give you time to “find yourself.” Not all students complete their undergraduate degree with a clear career goal. A short term ‘gap year’ experience may be a much better way to clarify long term goals.
- You are getting pressure from friends, family, or professors. What matters most is your own motivation, not what others expect. After all, you’re the one who has to pass the courses and repay the debt.
- You think you have no choice because there are no jobs for someone with your undergraduate major. This is a very common myth, but we at CDC know for certain that it is not true. Employers seek students from a variety of majors and with a variety of skills. CDC counselors can help you identify entry level opportunities.
- You’re waiting for the job market to improve. There’s no guarantee that things will get better before you finish grad school and by then you’ll have even more debt to repay.
- You don’t feel ready for the working world. This is a common fear, but will you be any more ready in two years? If you’ve interned and gotten work experience, chances are you are ready.

What Should You Study?

As you focus your interests by reading and talking to professionals, mentors, and professors, it may become apparent that more than one graduate program could be appropriate for the career you hope to pursue. Ask professionals about their educational background, where they studied, and what academic programs may provide appropriate preparation.

**Your undergraduate major does not dictate which graduate programs are open to you.** For example, you do not need a bachelor’s degree in psychology to be accepted into a graduate counseling program. Admissions representatives may expect you to have completed certain undergraduate courses, but not necessarily a specific undergraduate major. If your academic preparation lacks certain prerequisites, it is often possible to complete them prior to applying or as a condition for admission.

Should You Take Time Off First or Go Directly to Graduate School?

Whether to go directly to graduate school from your undergraduate program or wait depends on many factors. If a graduate degree is mandatory in order to enter a particular profession, then continuing your education immediately may be advisable, as long as you feel confident that this career direction is right for you. However, many graduate programs (MBA for example) prefer or require 3-5 years of work experience to gain admission. Even if you identify a program that will admit you without work experience, it may not be a wise career move. Employers from a variety of fields indicate they are frequently not interested in hiring a candidate with an advanced degree who lacks the relevant work experience. Understanding expectations within your field of interest will help you determine the best route for you.

Identifying Programs

Once you have a clear idea of what you plan to study, identify where programs are offered. This is a research project, so plan to devote considerable time to this activity. Your research might include using the following:

**The Internet**

There are several searchable websites for identifying programs by subject as well as rankings. CDC’s Website (http://cdc.binghamton.edu) links to many useful sites.
CDC's Career Resource Area (CRA) contains many resources including:

- Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical Psychology
- Making It Into a Top Graduate School: Ten Essential Steps to Graduate School Admission
- Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice
- Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or a PhD

Faculty, Alumni and Other Professionals in Your Field

Identify faculty members and professionals whose interests match yours and ask for recommendations of programs. Alumni Association Professional Network: Through the Alumni Association Professional Network on LinkedIn, you can tap an expansive group of fellow alumni for networking. If you're looking to learn about career fields, graduate programs, expand your professional network, or improve your job search strategy, we encourage you to join the LinkedIn subgroup specifically for student-to-alumni professional networking.

Professional Associations

Information about graduate programs, financial aid, and career options is often available from professional associations free of charge. Identify associations for your field of interest through other professionals or the Internet. A great resource is the ASAE Gateway to Associations Directory http://www.asaecenter.org/Community/Directories/associationsearch.cfm.

How to Research Specific Programs

Initially you may have a long list of schools. To shorten it, identify what you need and what is important to you. Then gather as much information as you can about programs that meet your basic requirements.

- Read Program Descriptions: Begin with the institution's and program's Website. As your interest in a particular program increases, call or email to request more information about the specific program and department.
- Campus Visits: If possible, visit schools that are high on your list. Request an appointment with an advisor, speak with current students, or sit in on a class to get a first-hand look.
- Graduate Fairs and Forums: These are opportunities to speak with admissions representatives. Each fall CDC sponsors the Graduate School Fair and Law Day.
- Conversations with Current Students or Alumni: Contact the department or career center at institutions on your list and inquire about the possibility of speaking with alumni or current students to ask about their experience with the program.
- Binghamton Faculty: Speak with faculty about your interests and priorities, and ask for advice on programs that seem compatible with your interests and academic background.
- Pre-Law Advisor and Pre-Health Advisor: If you plan to attend law school or pursue a medical or related degree, advisors located in Harpur Academic Advising (AB G18) can assist you in identifying appropriate programs. Their websites have useful information as well http://www2.binghamton.edu/pre-law/ and http://www2.binghamton.edu/pre-health/.

Comparing Programs: What to Investigate

Ratings and Selectivity: Many students begin the process of comparing programs by asking about ratings and selectivity, but establishing the objective quality of a program is rather difficult. Faculty and professionals in your intended field may be the best resource in assessing which are considered the better programs. A number of these people their opinion and see if there is consistency in responses. While some rankings such as U.S News and World Report exist, they should be used as guides rather than the definitive word.

To assess your chances for being admitted to particular programs, consult graduate admissions offices and graduate program directories. Some will provide details about previous entering classes (percentage of applicants selected, mean or median GPA, and test scores). Make a realistic assessment based on how your background compares. Decisions on where to apply should not be based on this information alone, but it can help you to determine whether you're the right 'fit'.

- Curriculum: Does it have the depth and breadth you want? Does the primary emphasis suit your career goals? Do the courses look interesting? Are specializations offered that interest you? Are there cooperative programs with other educational, cultural, and research institutions available?
- Internships or Practical/Clinical Experiences: Does the program include any practical experience in its requirements? Is there help in securing it? Is there adequate supervision and guidance?
- Faculty: What is the student/faculty ratio? Are there faculty members with specialties that interest you? Do faculty research interests match yours? Is the faculty diverse?
• **Facilities**: How extensive are their resources? Ex. library, labs and computer facilities? Are there specialized research facilities?

• **Students**: What are the demographics of the student body (geographical representation, ethnic diversity, average entering age, male/female ratio)? How many are in the entering class? What is the attrition rate?

• **Location**: Is the geographic location of the school consistent with the lifestyle you want for the next few years? What will housing cost and is there housing on campus? Don’t rule out an unfamiliar city or state prematurely; focus on where the programs are that best meet your needs.

• **Employment of Alumni**: What types of positions have recent graduates obtained? What types of services are available to assist graduate students with the job search?

### The Application Process

Assembling and completing materials to support your application takes time and planning. **Be organized! Pay close attention to deadlines!** Make requests to appropriate offices for transcripts, reference letters and test scores several weeks in advance of deadlines to avoid last minute panic.

#### Application Timeline

There are many common parts of the application process for different graduate programs and universities. Here are some suggestions for managing the application process along with your other commitments:

- Research your field(s) of interest, programs, schools (Allow 1-2 months, or more).
- Create/update your resume (Allow 1-2 weeks to create, have critiqued, and revise. Use CDC for help)
- Request letters of recommendation (Give recommender roughly ONE month)
- Develop your Personal Statement (Allow THREE weeks to ONE month)
- Standardized Test Preparation:
  - Study at least TWO months in advance and become familiar with test material
  - Schedule your test for at least THREE weeks before you plan to submit your application
  - Be sure to schedule your exact test date about THREE weeks before so that you are not closed out
- Request transcripts (Processing by the Office of Student Records takes up to ONE week)

#### Application Checklist

Completing the application process for each school typically includes:

- Taking **appropriate tests** and arranging to have scores sent to schools of interest
- Completing and submitting the **application form and essay**
- Arranging to have **official transcript(s)** sent
- Requesting and forwarding **reference letters**
- **Interviewing** (depending upon program)

### The Application Form

Read them thoroughly. Although similar, there are subtle differences among applications.

#### Self-Assembly of Application Materials

Many graduate schools require applicants to collect all of the necessary materials (application, transcripts, essay, and references) and submit them in a single envelope. There are online credentials services that can assist with this process. The CDC recommends Interfolio [http://www.interfolio.com/](http://www.interfolio.com/).

#### Cost of Applying

It can be expensive to apply to graduate school! Official transcripts, entrance exams, and application fees can add up quickly! To assist you with the cost of furthering your education, the CDC, in conjunction with the May Company, has established the **Career Advancement Program (CAP)**. This short-term loan program allows current matriculated students to borrow up to $300 interest-free for six months to cover the cost of career-related activities, such as visiting graduate schools and submitting applications. More information and application form is available on CDC’s website at [http://www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/quick-reference-guides/cap-loan-app.pdf](http://www2.binghamton.edu/career-development-center/quick-reference-guides/cap-loan-app.pdf)

### Writing the Essay/Personal Statement

Typically, an essay is part of the application process. Sometimes there will be specific questions to answer; in other cases candidates may write about a topic of their choice. In any event, the essay will be an important part of the application. It is a writing sample that is your chance to present yourself as an individual and should be something only **you** could have written.
Getting Started
It is important to start early and plan to spend time developing and rewriting your essay. Before you begin to write, make a list of points you would like to cover in the essay. Considering your educational and career goals, select items from your list that reflect experience, skills and interests that relate. Outline the main points you want to make and in what order. Have a beginning, middle, and end to your essay. If you have questions or problems with structuring your writing, BU’s Writing Center, located in LN 2412 is a great resource. They will not proof your essay, but will help you to create a well-written document and will teach you how to identify and correct your own errors.

Content
Your first draft will not be your final copy; you will edit and rewrite several times. Strive for a thoughtful, honest essay that will give the reader a sense of who you are and why you want to pursue this particular program at this particular institution. Remember, the reader doesn’t know you. When preparing your final draft, proofread carefully! Be sure there are no errors in spelling or grammar. Don’t rely on spell-check alone!

- Address the questions/assignment given;
- Develop a main point or thesis when writing an extended essay;
- Develop paragraphs purposefully; be specific and make every word count;
- Use action verbs and numbers to indicate the scope of your responsibility;
- Be succinct;
- Back up claims with facts/evidence;
- If discussing a problem or deficit, don’t apologize or sound defensive; state the facts, but don’t whine; then move on to positive statements about what you learned and how you grew from that experience;
- Use simple sentences; don’t try to write “fancy” or the way you think grad students should write;
- Let your personality come through;
- Demonstrate your commitment to the field and to graduate study;
- Why them?

Additional Resources in CDC
For further assistance with writing essays (including samples), CDC has titles such as:
Perfect Personal Statements
How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School
The Quick Reference Guide, Writing a Personal Statement will also be helpful.

Financing Graduate School
It is likely that a major consideration will be costs and financial aid. Begin your research by identifying what institutions offer the program you seek rather than on perceived affordability. Don’t automatically reject a program from consideration based on cost. If the nature and selectivity of the program fit, apply and make your final decision about attending when you know what financial assistance you’ll be offered.

Investigate all financial aid possibilities in and outside of the particular school or program, but start early! Don’t miss an opportunity because of timing. Pay attention to deadlines. Financial aid deadlines are not always the same, and usually earlier than application deadlines.

Types of Assistance Available
A variety of financial assistance is available for graduate study including graduate assistantships, fellowships, work-study, grants, traineeships, or scholarships offered directly by the university, foundations or other organizations. Financial aid can be obtained through the department of study (graduate assistantships), through the university, or from outside sources such as federal government loans, professional associations, community organizations or businesses. Some aid is need-based and some merit-based.

When completing graduate school application forms, there may be a section to indicate type(s) of financial assistance for which you would like to be considered. Check them all! Research outside sources early in your application process and apply for as many as you can.

Graduate Assistantships
Graduate assistantships are an opportunity to work for your graduate institution. In exchange, you will most likely receive a tuition waiver and a stipend, although compensation varies by school. In this capacity you may work as a teaching assistant, a research assistant, or in an office on campus. Besides being a fantastic way to finance your education, your assistantship can provide excellent experience. Each school’s application process will be different and the availability of graduate assistantships will vary by academic program, so be sure to inquire about them early. Don’t be afraid to explore assistantship opportunities outside of your academic area either! If the university will fund your education in exchange for you working part-time in an unrelated office on campus, go for it!
Resources for Identifying Scholarships
Most students finance their graduate education by drawing from different sources rather than from a single source. Seek as many potential sources as possible and apply.

- **CDC’s Career Resource Area**: contains several directories and binders with announcements of scholarships, fellowships and other programs.
- **Faculty/Academic Departments**: often receive financial aid announcements. Speak with faculty about funding resources for your field.
- **Bartle Library**: contains many directories in the reference section.
- **Internet**: CDC’s website ([http://tinyurl.com/FinanceGradSchool](http://tinyurl.com/FinanceGradSchool)) links to many helpful sites.

Reference Letters
Give serious thought about who you will ask to write reference letters.

Who and How to Ask
Faculty and/or supervisors of internships/jobs (preferably in related fields) are the most appropriate. While it may be tempting to ask an individual of high status or influence to author a letter on your behalf, if that person does not know you well enough to comment on your abilities, the reference may not be as impressive or powerful as one written by someone who is familiar with you and your talents. Graduate schools request 2-5 letters. It is recommended that at least two references be from faculty, preferably from fields related to your field of study. Admissions committees will be looking for people who can judge your past performance and assist them in predicting your future academic and professional potential.

When asking someone to write a reference letter, it is in your best interest to meet with that individual in person or speak with him or her by telephone. Discuss your plans; share a draft of your application, essay and/or resume, and a list of topics you would like addressed in the letter. Ask if she or he would be willing to write a letter in support of your application to graduate school. You may get a variety of responses including an enthusiastic “yes.” If the person is cautious and expresses hesitation about providing a useful reference, don’t push it. Identify an alternative person to approach.

Managing Your Reference Letters
The CDC is now suggesting Interfolio, a convenient and efficient resource to manage references online 24/7. Students and alumni may create an account at any time with Interfolio [www.Interfolio.com](http://www.Interfolio.com).

Graduate School Recommendation Forms
Many graduate schools provide their own recommendation forms that have specific questions. Schools may instruct you to either have each author mail the forms directly or collect letters from all authors and mail them together in one envelope.

Tests
Which Tests?
There are several examinations used in graduate/professional school admissions. The most common are the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), and the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). Research each of the programs to which you plan on applying to determine which, if any, tests are required.

The GRE General test is offered as a computer-based test (CBT) year-round by appointment. Schedule your exam online through the ETS website [http://www.ets.org/gre/general/about](http://www.ets.org/gre/general/about). Be sure to check the score report mailing date when selecting a test date. Some graduate programs will require the Subject Test in a specific discipline in addition to the general GRE, if prior knowledge of the field is essential to graduate study. The Subject Tests are given at paper-based test centers worldwide three times a year in October, November and April. More information is available online at [http://www.ets.org/gre/subject/about](http://www.ets.org/gre/subject/about).

The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) is a computer adaptive examination administered year-round at test centers throughout the world. GMAT scores are used by approximately 4,700 graduate management programs at more than 1,900 schools.

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is required for admission to law school. The LSAT is offered four times each year, in June, October, December and February. It is recommended by Binghamton’s Pre-Law Advising Office to take the February or June before the fall in which you plan to apply.

The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a standardized, multiple-choice examination and a prerequisite to the study of medicine. Medical colleges consider MCAT exam scores as part of their admission process. Almost all U.S. medical schools require applicants to submit MCAT exam scores.
When to Take Required Tests
Admission deadlines for graduate and professional schools vary. Check with the schools to which you are applying, and plan to take the test early enough to allow your scores to be reported before application deadlines. It can take up to 20 days for you and any schools you designate to receive your Official Score Report. Graduate schools generally accept scores from tests taken within the past three to five years.

Test Preparation
Getting ready to take a test primarily involves becoming familiar with typical directions and types of questions. This means practicing! Preparing for a test might include:
- Reviewing the sample questions in the test registration bulletin;
- Visiting the test website for free and/or low-cost practice materials, including practice exams;
- Taking a review course.

How Admission Decisions Are Made
There is no standard formula that graduate admissions committees follow in making admissions decisions; however, the following factors influence decisions most heavily.
- **Academic Record**: Your GPA, as well as the depth and breadth of undergraduate course work completed, will be viewed as indicators of potential performance.
- **Tests**: While important, scores are a beginning point in evaluating a candidate but are not used alone.
- **Reference Letters**: The most helpful letters are those that show the person knows you, how you work and what you can improve on. If the rest of an applicant’s application materials are mediocre, outstanding recommendations may be important in the decision-making process.
- **Statement**: This is a writing sample and provides insight into how well ideas are articulated and developed, how well directions are followed and goals clearly communicated. A well-written essay is interesting, thoughtful, and reveals dimensions of you not available from other sources.

Assessing Graduate Schools That Meet Your Personal Criteria
**Personal Criteria may include**: Assistantship, Research Possibilities, Location, etc.
In the columns below, list your top 10 criteria – what are you looking for in a graduate school?
- Depending on whether or not a particular school meets your criteria:
  - put a + in the column if yes
  - put - in the column if no
  - put ? in the column if uncertain/need more information
- Count the number of + - ?
- Give each school a final ranking based on which has the most + and the fewest -

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*From Washington State University’s “Selecting a Graduate or Professional School.”*

*Updated 8/12*