

Making a Grad School Plan: From Application to Orientation



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WHY GRADUATE SCHOOL?

If you enjoy problem-solving and exploring new ideas, you should consider going to graduate school. Graduate education gives you a chance to develop deep knowledge in a particular area and to develop your interests and skills into a rewarding career.

Practically speaking, graduate school can give you more career options. An advanced degree can increase your earning power and job satisfaction, level of job responsibility, independence in decision-making, and ability to change careers. With an advanced degree, you demonstrate the ability to master complex topics and carry out projects on your own initiative. These attributes will put you in a stronger position to earn a higher salary and enjoy other employment benefits. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that annual median salaries for those with a master's degree are more than \$10,000 per year higher than for those with a bachelor's degree, and those with doctoral and advanced professional degrees earn approximately \$30,000 more per year than those with a bachelor's degree.¹

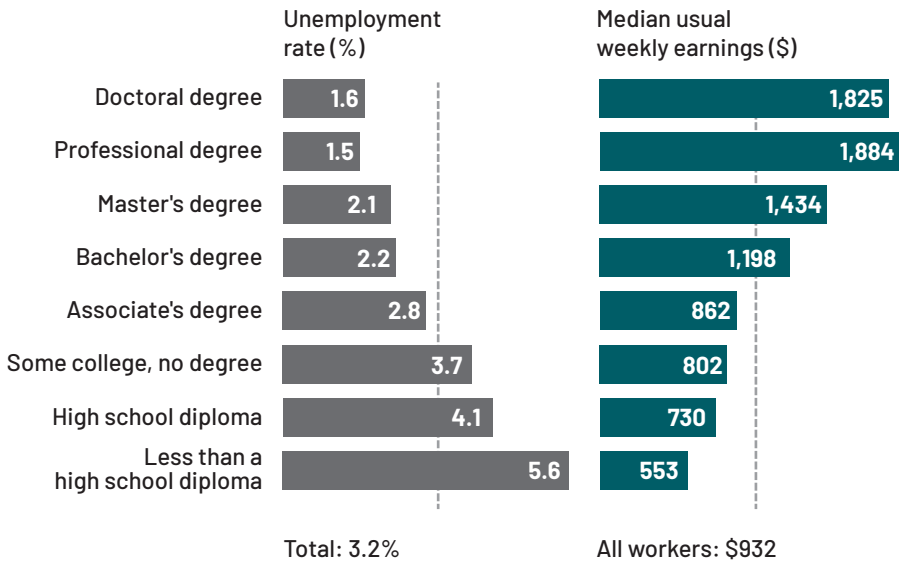
There is also strong evidence that employer demand for graduate degrees will continue to grow. Recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics project that jobs requiring at least a master's degree will increase 16.7% between 2016 and 2026, much greater than the 7.4% expected across all occupations.² This means that graduate degree holders will likely continue to have wider employment options than individuals with a bachelor's degree alone or no college degree.

Financial benefits aside, many people enroll in graduate school to acquire skills that will make a difference in their communities. Rebecca Long, a graduate student in computer science at Eastern Washington University, used her training to create an organization supporting women and non-binary individuals in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) fields.

1 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment (Last Modified on March 27, 2018). http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_001.html

2 Ibid.

Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment, 2019



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
 Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

Kristina Sabasteanski, an Army veteran and graduate student in occupational therapy at the University of Southern Maine, founded the Veterans Adaptive Sports & Training program “to promote the lifelong health and well-being of veterans with disabilities through regular participation in...a[n] array of physical activities and sports.” Aadeel Akhtar, who recently received his doctorate in neuroscience from the University of Illinois, co-founded a technology company that is developing affordable prosthetic devices for amputees. To learn more about Rebecca, Kristina, and Aadeel’s stories, as well as those of many other graduate students from across the country, visit the GradImpact page on the CGS website (<https://cgsnet.org/gradimpact-submissions/gallery>).

Of course, many individuals also choose to enroll in graduate school for its intellectual rewards. They love to learn, want to engage in innovative research, aim to become better informed about a specialized topic or field, or hope to become teachers or university professors.

Though there are many benefits to earning a graduate degree, it’s important to make an informed decision about whether to apply and which programs are the best fit. With thousands of programs nationwide, finding a graduate program that fits your interests and needs can be a challenge. The purpose of *Making a*



Grad School Plan is to simplify and clarify the process of applying to graduate school. This includes information to help you make a decision about pursuing a graduate degree, choose among the types of graduate degrees available, decide how to finance your degree, navigate the application process, accept an offer, and prepare for graduate school. Beyond information about how to apply to graduate school, this volume also encourages the reader to ask themselves *why* they are applying to graduate school and if the particular program(s) to which they are applying fit with their long-term goals.

EXPLORING THE OPTIONS AND MAKING A PLAN

While it may be tempting to begin applying to a particular graduate program because it appeals to you, it's important to do preliminary research into the types of degrees and programs you may be interested in pursuing. The goal of the exploration stage is to narrow your focus. Graduate programs are more specialized than an associate's or bachelor's degree and will likely ask you to explain your interests in the application process. Careful preliminary research can help clarify why you want to go to graduate school and what you hope to achieve there. It can also help you create a plan for applying to graduate school that will save you time and effort in the long run.

Before making the decision to apply, you should make an honest evaluation of your goals and interests. What do you want to do with your graduate degree? A master's degree requires a relatively short-term investment of time that may lead to increased salary, greater mobility, more responsibility, and greater job security. A certificate program, by contrast, requires a much shorter period of time, but is limited in its scope and generally directed toward specific employment requirements. A doctorate involves a significant commitment of time but may be the right fit for you depending on your career goals.

You should discuss your plans to go to graduate school with family and friends as well as current and former mentors and professors. If you're a current student or recent graduate, a university's career services office can be a valuable source of advice and materials to make an informed decision. If you are unable to consult a

DEAN'S WISDOM

Research graduate schools for fit with your goals, funding/costs, and job opportunities. Feedback from colleagues and graduate students I have collected over the years tells me that many students don't do enough research before beginning a graduate program. It is great to pursue graduate school because you love what you study and you want to acquire the knowledge and skills to make a positive difference in the world, but do your research so you can envision what earning a degree will mean to you long-term.



career services office, an independent career coach may be able to help you create an individual development plan that includes graduate school as part of a larger vision for career development. Though family and friends may not be able to help you assess specific programs, it's helpful to consult them if it impacts them. Faculty mentors and, in some cases, employers can help you assess whether specific programs of graduate study match your career and life goals.

TYPES OF GRADUATE STUDY

Graduate education, which includes master's, doctoral, and professional degrees, provides you with specialized knowledge and skills through concentrated study. In this respect, graduate education differs from undergraduate study, which introduces you to a wide range of subjects, even though you major in one or two. In your undergraduate program, you gained more general skills such as thinking critically and writing clearly. Graduate education allows you to build on this foundation through deeper specialization— even though that specialization may be interdisciplinary or span multiple fields— and to develop and sharpen your skills.

There are two broad levels of graduate degrees, master's and doctoral, and each type includes tremendous variety. Some degrees are focused primarily on the development of research skills while others may be designed to prepare you for research-informed professional practice and/or licensure exams. There are also graduate certificate programs that are short-term and highly specific or specialized in nature.

The table below describes the major categories of graduate degrees and provides examples of each. Note that degrees are on a spectrum between research training, designed to help you develop or contribute to new knowledge on a topic, and professional training, designed to help you apply your skills and knowledge in a professional setting. There will be varying degrees of research and professional practice within specific degree types and programs.

TABLE 1.0: TYPES OF GRADUATE DEGREES

Doctor's degree— professional practice	A doctor's degree that is conferred upon completion of a program providing the knowledge and skills for the recognition, credential, or license required for professional practice. The degree is awarded after a period of study such that the total time to the degree, including both pre-professional and professional preparation, equals at least five full-time equivalent academic years.	<i>Examples of professional doctorate degrees include:</i> Chiropractic (D.C. or D.C.M.); Dentistry (D.D.S. or D.M.D.); Law (J.D.); Medicine (M.D.); Nursing Practice (D.N.P.); Optometry (O.D.); Osteopathic Medicine (D.O); Pharmacy (Pharm.D.); Physical Therapy (D.P.T.); Podiatry (D.P.M., Pod.D., D.P.); or, Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.), and others, as designated by the awarding institution.
Doctor's degree— research/ scholarship	A Ph.D. or other doctor's degree that requires advanced work beyond the master's level, including the preparation and defense of a dissertation based on original research, or the planning and execution of an original project demonstrating substantial artistic or scholarly achievement.	<i>Examples of research doctorates include:</i> Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), Education (Ed.D.), Musical Arts (D.M.A.), Business Administration (D.B.A.), Science (D.Sc.), Art (D.A.), and Management (D.M.).



TABLE 1.0: TYPES OF GRADUATE DEGREES

Master's degree	An award that requires the successful completion of a program of study of at least the full-time equivalent of one year of work beyond the bachelor's degree. Some master's degrees, such as the Master's of Social Work (MSW,) prepare you for licensure exams that will enable you to practice a particular profession (licensed social worker).	<i>Examples include:</i> Accountancy (M.P.A.); Arts (M.A.); Business Administration (M.B.A.); Divinity (M.Div.); Library Science (M.L.S.); Public Policy (M.P.P.); Public Health (M.P.H.); Social Work (M.S.W.); and Teaching (M.Ed.).
Graduate certificate	A short course, workshop, or series of workshops completed for academic credit. Completing these programs may lead to licensure by an outside entity. These programs may be offered by a university or a private program. Often these programs require a baccalaureate degree for admission and some may require a master's degree. Not all certificate programs count for academic credit and some may not count toward additional degrees like a master's or doctorate.	Certificates granting academic credit are available in a wide range of fields. Visit https://credentialengine.org/ to see if there is a professional certificate for your field of interest.



Doctoral Degree Programs

At the doctoral level there are also professional degrees and research degrees. The most common professional degrees are the M.D. for medical practice and the J.D. for law. These degrees are designed to prepare you for licensure in a particular profession, and more detailed information about them can be obtained from the Association of American Medical Colleges (<http://www.aamc.org>) and the Association of American Law Schools (<http://www.aals.org>). There are also professionally-oriented doctoral degrees in fields of healthcare practice such as physical therapy, audiology, health care administration, and nursing practice.

A research doctoral degree typically involves both coursework and a major research project. Usually, four to seven years of full-time study is needed to complete a Ph.D. or other research doctorate, depending on the field of study. The first two or three years usually involve classes, seminars, and directed reading to give you more comprehensive knowledge of an academic field. In the sciences, you may also begin independent research as part of a laboratory group. This period of study is followed by a written and/or oral examination to test your knowledge and prepare you for your dissertation.

Successful completion of exams (sometimes called “comprehensives,” “comps,” or “qualifying exams”) and formulation of a research project (sometimes called a dissertation or research prospectus) lead you to the stage of candidacy.³ As a candidate for a doctoral degree, you will work on a project that involves completing original research and writing a dissertation. Depending on the field, this project usually takes one to four years of work to complete. In some fields, faculty members may guide students through the process of devising the research project and analyzing and evaluating the results. In other fields, students may be given more freedom to identify their own research problem and determine methods for addressing it. While some fields may define the dissertation as a single long research paper, others may define the dissertation as a series of shorter papers or a capstone project (an opportunity to apply what you have learned in a professional setting). Since work on a dissertation is intended to give you the necessary competencies and skills for a career in research, you are typically encouraged to be more independent in your thinking and research.

3 See the glossary at the end of this volume for definitions of key terms.



Master's Degree Programs

Master's degrees may focus on research, professional practice, or both. At the master's level, a professional degree gives you a specific set of skills needed to practice a particular profession. The professional master's degree often involves an internship, fieldwork, or a final project, while the research master's degree provides experience in research and scholarship and often requires a written thesis and may be either the "terminal" degree or a step toward completion of a doctoral program. The professional master's degree may be in science, education, business, engineering, the fine arts, nursing, social work, or some other area of professional activity. It will prepare you for a career in a particular area or will allow you to enhance your skills in your current career.

Some master's degrees may prepare you for a career that involves research. You may be required to write a thesis or take a comprehensive exam or do both. The degree involves less commitment of time than does a doctorate, but it can lead to a doctorate or to a career with greater responsibility. Research shows master's degrees are often prerequisites for research doctorates in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences; some doctoral programs require completion of a master's degree before applying. Even if you decide not to pursue a doctorate, a research master's degree in a field like Civil Engineering can help you progress in your career.

The Professional Science Master's (PSM) degree combines the scientific training necessary to advance and excel in science with courses in management, policy, or law. These degrees are designed to align academic training to workforce demand in science and mathematics fields. PSM programs emphasize the written and verbal communication, leadership, and team-building skills required in professional settings. Often these programs replace the written master's thesis with an experiential capstone such as an internship or apprenticeship. The aim is to help degree candidates gain technical skills needed in the scientific workforce and the professional skills to grow into leadership positions.⁴

A professional master's degree usually takes one or two years of full-time study, while a research master's degree typically takes at least two years and sometimes longer. Some students choose to study on a part-time basis because of work or family obligations. Depending on the number of credit hours taken and university policies on time limits to complete the degree, it may take two to five years to complete the professional master's degree.

4 For additional information on the professional science master's degree, including where to find programs in your area, visit <https://www.professionalsciencemasters.org/>.

Graduate Certificate Programs

Certificate programs are often designed to meet specific employment or career needs and generally require two to three semesters to complete. Some are designed to be taken after completing a bachelor's degree; others are taken concurrently with a graduate program or even after completing a graduate degree.

There are many types of graduate certificate programs and they serve a variety of functions. The most common is a graduate certificate program for academic credit. These programs usually have a short duration and result in academic course credit. Often, this coursework is a prerequisite for licensure or another professional credential. Less common is a graduate certificate for which the enrollee is not given academic credit. These programs may certify that graduates have acquired particular professional skills or knowledge important for career development.

Graduate certificates appeal to a diverse array of applicants, because they are often more accessible and require less time and resources than master's and doctoral programs. For prospective students who are place-bound, on a tight budget, or simply need to fit graduate school into a busy schedule, graduate certificate programs may be particularly attractive. Graduate certificates can also be valuable tools for those looking to reposition themselves in the workforce either by changing careers, moving into roles with greater responsibility, or reentering the workforce after an absence. In some cases, separate graduate credentials may be combined or "stacked" to create an additional certification or degree. These stackable credentials may allow a prospective student to acquire a needed short-term credential, while also building towards an additional long-term graduate degree.

Graduate certificates can also be valuable tools for those who already have other graduate degrees, but who are looking to further specialize or gain additional competencies in an emerging field. For example, a psychologist who received a master's or doctorate in the 1980s may want to become certified in treating patients on the autism spectrum. That psychologist may choose to enroll in an online graduate certificate program in autism spectrum disorder, continuing to work a full-time job while receiving additional training and certification in this area.



A Note on Online Programs

Online programs—or “hybrid” programs that involve both on-campus and online work—are most common at the master’s and graduate certificate levels. They are designed to provide degree-seekers greater flexibility. If you have responsibilities that make attending courses scheduled at a specific time difficult, prefer online instruction, or cannot travel to a campus, an online program may be right for you. You can pursue many types of degrees online, though the length of the doctorate usually requires some in-person work for completion.

The growth of online micro-credentials (badges, bootcamps, and other forms of credentialing requiring fewer credit hours than a master’s degree) means there are also short-term opportunities to pursue specialized courses online. The most well-known of these are massive open online courses (MOOC), which are courses without a registration limit offered online and designed to improve access to higher education. While these courses may be valuable either in offering on-time training or as steppingstones to other graduate degrees, these credentials may or may not be recognized by employers.⁵

Below are questions you should carefully consider when choosing an online program:

- 1) Does it include a face-to-face or synchronous component that allows students to spend time in direct interaction with professors and classmates? Hybrid programs can be particularly valuable for students taking an online course for the first time or those who prefer in-person instruction, but who cannot take an entire course in-person because of other personal or work commitments.
- 2) Does the program offer student support services to its online enrollees? Sometimes library services and career counselling do not extend those services to online enrollees, so make sure you understand all the resources the program has to offer.
- 3) What kind of jobs and careers do graduates of the programs find? This information will help you learn whether alumni of the online program are able to find the types of career opportunities you are seeking. Check the program’s website to see if they release data about student outcomes or offer opportunities to speak with current or past students. Proceed with caution if it is difficult to access information about student outcomes and experiences.

5 Visit Credential Engine at <https://credentialengine.org/> to learn more about microcredentials and efforts being made to ensure program quality.

NARROWING YOUR LIST OF PROGRAMS

The number and diversity of graduate schools can make it difficult to know where to apply. There are over 1,800 institutions in the United States that offer graduate degrees. Some are highly specialized and offer only one kind of degree. Some may offer one or two professional master's degrees, often in education or business administration. Some institutions offer master's degrees only, while others offer doctorates in selected fields. Major research universities offer master's degrees and doctorates in a wide range of fields.

You will probably have certain personal preferences regarding the kind of institution you would like to attend. Five important factors to consider are listed below.

Five Factors to Consider When Choosing a Program.

- 1. Program "Fit."** The most important factor should be how well the graduate program of an institution fits your particular interests, academic background, and goals. For example, although a university may offer a doctorate in your field, it may not have a program in the branch of that field that interests you. A master's program may be the right fit academically, but the cohort sizes are large and you may feel most comfortable in a small program. If you value a diverse program environment, for example, you may look into the program's student demographics to see if their students and faculty come from many different backgrounds. Many graduate schools now provide information about individual programs on their website, including data on admissions, faculty characteristics, average time to complete the program, and job placement. Spend time learning about the program and read student profiles if they are available on the website.
- 2. Financial Investment.** Graduate school is often a significant financial commitment. You should keep costs in mind when evaluating program fit. You may find a program that is a good academic fit, but it is too expensive for your budget or does not offer the financial support (in the form of health insurance, grants, or assistantship positions) you need. Some programs will be more transparent about costs as well as the employment outcomes of graduates, so be careful when determining whether a particular program is the right fit for you financially.



- 3. Student Support Services.** Student services and support can take many forms. They include academic services like libraries and technical support as well as career services. Though not as obvious as academic and career services, social support like childcare, access to mental health resources, and support groups may be important resources to assist you as you work toward your degree. Check the university website to see if each institution you are applying to offers the student services and support you want. If you can't find this information on the website, try to discuss these resources with faculty and current graduate students. Be sure to ask if these resources are available to graduate students. (On certain campuses, some student services may be only available to undergraduates.) In other cases, some forms of support, like childcare, may only be available to faculty and administrators.
- 4. Location.** A graduate school's location might be important to you for many reasons. If you can't or don't want to move for family or job reasons, you may decide to focus your search on local institutions or those with online degree programs. Your academic interests might also make location a significant factor. If you are interested in becoming an expert on the history of New York City, you may focus on programs in the Big Apple; if you want to pursue a graduate degree in oceanography, a program on the coast may be best; or if you want to become a mining engineer, choosing a program near an active mine may provide traineeships or other hands-on opportunities unavailable at more distant programs.
- 5. Professional Development and Career Support.** Professional development and career support are crucial tools in helping you enter a new career path or advance in your current one. Check to see if the graduate school or equivalent unit has a career center, and look into your department or program to see if they offer career development programs, such as internship opportunities or extracurricular courses on specific skills.

Finally, try to get an idea of a prospective program's alumni network before applying. Does the program have an active, engaged alumni base? More importantly, does the university have strong alumni relationships to employers in your preferred career pathway? An engaged alumni network is a strong sign that the university has supported successful transitions to post-degree careers.

FINANCING YOUR DEGREE PROGRAM

How to pay for graduate school is a question that nearly all students face. However, there are many sources of financial support to help you pay your way. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of all master's-level students and 86% of doctoral students received some type of funding.⁶ Types of funding fall into three broad categories: fellowships and traineeships, teaching and research assistantships, and personal resources (savings and loans). Although fellowships, traineeships, and teaching and research assistantships may be available for master's degree students, they are more limited at that level of study, so be sure to seek out information about the options

available in a particular degree program and institution. The Council of Graduate Schools maintains a database of federally-funded graduate and postdoctoral fellowships and assistantships, which is available to the public and can be accessed at <https://cgsnet.org/federally-funded-graduate-and-postdoc-fellowships-and-traineeships>.

Fellowships and Traineeships

Fellowships and traineeships for graduate study are generally awarded on the basis of academic merit. They are intended to attract a diverse pool of the most highly qualified students to graduate programs. They can be either “portable” (offered by an organization or agency for study at an institution of a student's

DEAN'S WISDOM

Make sure that a degree is worth your investment. If you need to borrow to finance your degree, how much? Will your likely future earnings put you in a position to pay down that debt in a reasonable amount of time? If you're clear on what your goals are, and how much of an investment it takes to achieve them, you're more likely to be happy with your decision down the road.

⁶ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).



choice) or “institutional” (offered by a university or department for study at that specific institution or department).

In research PhD programs, fellowships and traineeships often provide tuition remission (where tuition is paid by the university) and a stipend for living expenses. Institutional fellowships are awarded either by departments or by a central fellowship office within an institution. Some are based on academic merit, although many doctoral programs provide financial support to all admitted students. There may be additional awards targeted to specific applicants, such as children of veterans or people in a certain field of study. Institutions actively recruit students from populations underrepresented in their student body and may have special fellowship programs to attract them. Some institutions provide feedback on fellowship and traineeship applications to their undergraduates. If you are enrolled as an undergraduate, check to see if your school provides that service to its students.

Teaching Assistantships (TA)

In PhD programs and some master’s programs, teaching assistantships may involve leading a discussion section, supervising a laboratory, grading papers, and/or meeting with students. The typical appointment involves responsibilities of 15–20 hours per week. A teaching assistant (TA) helps teach undergraduate students in return for a stipend (and sometimes a fee or tuition waiver or reduction) that helps support the TAs own graduate studies. Twenty-one percent of doctorate recipients in 2016 were primarily supported by a teaching assistantship.⁷ In addition to providing you with a source of funding, teaching can be intellectually rewarding and provide a benchmark to evaluate your growth during your graduate school career from student to expert.

Research Assistantships (RA)

Research assistantships are most common in PhD programs in science and engineering fields, but may be available in other fields and programs as well. Research assistants are often engaged in laboratories (but may support non-lab research as well) to assist faculty in research projects while also gaining essential research skills and experience. Like teaching assistants, research assistants receive a stipend and may receive a reduction or waiver of fees or tuition. Advanced students working on their theses or dissertations may be supported by stipends to do their own projects.

7 National Science Foundation, Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2016, Table 35. Doctorate Recipients’ Primary Source of Financial Support, by Broad Field of Study, Sex, Citizenship Status, Ethnicity, and Race: 2016. <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2018/nsf18304/data.cfm>.

Grants and Loans

Grants and loans are another important source of support for graduate students. This aid may come from the institution, the state, the federal government, and less often, an employer.

The federal government invests in a number of student aid programs. Since there is a limited amount of money available for each program, many federal student aid programs are need-based.

Need-based aid requires that applicants be certified by their academic institutions as having income and asset levels that fall within certain limitations. Current federal regulations consider virtually all graduate students independent of parental support unless they are claimed as dependents on their parents' federal income tax returns. For graduate students who are not claimed as dependents, parental income is not considered in determining need and eligibility for federal financial aid programs. For people who have been working, their salary in the year before they enter graduate school is the basis for determining need. A percentage of that salary is considered an asset available to the student to pay for graduate school expenses.

Visit the Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education website at www.ed.gov for descriptions of the types of programs offered for graduate and professional students.

A valuable resource about financial aid is the Department of Education publication, "Funding Education Beyond High School, which can be found at <http://studentaid.ed.gov/sites/default/files/funding-your-education.pdf>. It offers general information on student eligibility, financial need, dependency status, and how to apply. It also describes the following programs:

Federal Family Education Loans (FFEL) and Direct Loans

- **Stafford Loans**
- **FFEL Program**

Campus-Based Programs

- **Federal Work-Study**

Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN)

- **McNair Grants**



Employer Support

Some employers offer a tuition assistance plan. Often this involves a reimbursement of tuition, and sometimes books, based on successful completion of a course. According to the most recent data available, fifteen percent of master's students and 8% of all doctoral students received some financial support from their employers.⁸ If you are working, you should contact your Human Resources office to inquire about educational benefits.

Remember that the program and university you are considering are the best sources of information on financial support through the graduate school, the graduate program, or the financial aid office. The process of collecting information and applying for various types of aid is often time-consuming, but persistence may pay off in the form of financial support. Taking the time to pursue every available financial aid opportunity can save you thousands of dollars.

8 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Once you have made the decision to go to graduate school, the next step is to apply. For graduate study, you apply to a specific program or department, even though you may send your materials to a central office. Your application may be evaluated at the program or department level as well as at the institutional level.

Many students choose to apply to several institutions that have programs that match their interests. Don't be afraid to set your goals high if you believe you have the ability to succeed in a highly selective program, but remember, be honest when evaluating your credentials and experience when applying to highly selective programs. There are several strategies for applying to multiple graduate programs. Some students choose to apply only to programs at similar institutions with about the same selectivity. Others choose a range of programs of different types and levels of selectivity to improve their chances of being accepted at a program. If you are offered admission at more than one institution, you will have a choice of which offer to accept.

Application Fees

Application fees range from \$25 to over \$100, so take fees into consideration in deciding how many applications to complete. Many graduate programs recognize that application costs can make it difficult for low-income students and others who have overcome adversity to apply. If you have significant financial constraints,

DEAN'S WISDOM

In completing your application, seek out help. Your current or former university probably hosts workshops on how to apply to graduate school. Ask people writing your letters of recommendation if they might be willing to give you some advice or feedback. And by the way, when you ask for reference letters, don't hesitate to offer some bullet points of what might go into those letters. Faculty members have had lots of students, and they will appreciate the reminder about the research paper or project that you undertook.



you may be eligible for application fee waivers. Graduate school bulletins, catalogs, and websites generally contain this information. Many institutions provide application fee waivers to applicants who have participated in pre-graduate programs targeted specifically to first-generation, underrepresented, or low-income students (e.g., McNair Scholars).

Typical Parts to an Application

Application requirements vary by university and program, but typically include some combination of the following:

1. **The application itself**, which asks for personal data (name, address, etc.);
2. **A statement of purpose and/or a personal statement**—a statement about why you are applying to a particular program and how this program would help you achieve your career and personal goals;
3. **Letters of recommendation or recommendation forms**. Depending on the university to which you're applying, these may be paper-based or may be written via access to a secure website. Some institutions use a "common application" shared with other institutions to streamline students' applications to multiple institutions. Common applications are used by some professions (such as law) to make it easier for recommenders who are asked by a student to provide letters to more than one institution;
4. **Official transcripts** of college-level academic work sent by each institution where credit was earned. Some universities may ask you to submit all transcripts for all college credit ever earned;
5. **An official or unofficial report** of any standardized test scores (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, Miller Analogies, etc.) required by the program to which you are applying. To reduce costs to students, some programs may allow you to report unofficial records upon applying and then provide official scores (which require a processing fee) if you are accepted and plan to attend.

The Application Form

Whether online or on paper, there is always a form that asks for the essential information that the institution will use to file and keep track of your application. As soon as you have identified the school(s) to which you will apply, you should check each institution's website; you probably can download the application or submit one electronically. It should be filled out completely. Be consistent in spelling out your full, legal name on all forms.

The Statement of Purpose and/or Personal Statement

The statement of purpose and/or personal statement give the faculty assessing your application their most complete impression of you as an individual. Faculty members and administrators are trying to assess your interests, goals, and character from these documents. What do you hope to learn during your graduate studies? Do your interests fit those of the department, school, or program? Can you communicate your ideas effectively? Are there special things about you that set you apart from other applicants that would contribute to your program environment?

You should consider writing your statement of purpose early in the application process since it can help clarify why you want to attend graduate school and what you hope to learn there. While instructions for personal statements may be broad, ("In 500 words or less, please explain why you wish to pursue a master's degree in X program" for example), different institutions may have specific length and content requirements, so be sure to follow instructions. Often you can tailor it to fit specific programs to which you are applying or faculty members you hope to work with by talking about reasons you chose the program – how it fits your academic and research background and interests. Try to be as specific as possible. It's a good idea to share your draft statement of purpose with someone you trust and integrate their feedback. Good sources of feedback may be current or former professors and friends or work colleagues who have successfully applied to graduate school. When listening to advice, be sure that you always keep the application instructions and program in mind.

A personal statement may be required in addition to an academic statement of purpose. While a statement of purpose should focus on your intellectual development and professional goals, it can also describe how cultural, financial, educational, or other life experiences and challenges influenced your decision to pursue a graduate degree in your chosen field. Faculty and administrators want to know how you became the person you are, and the personal statement is an opportunity to describe your growth.



Increasingly, graduate programs are requiring a diversity statement as part of their application. A diversity statement typically asks the applicant how they would contribute to or promote campus diversity either through their personal background, research interests, or career goals. Like the personal statement, the diversity statement provides the applicant an opportunity to highlight their potential contributions to an institution or program's mission that may not be reflected in their transcript or statement of purpose. Be sure to read the prompt carefully before writing your diversity statement, since there is considerable variation between institutions.

ACTION ITEM: ELEVATOR PITCH. Write a one or two sentence statement about what you want to study in graduate school and why you should be accepted to study it. Be direct and concise. This statement should be the foundation of your statement of purpose.

Letters of Recommendation

While some programs may encourage you to submit letters from community leaders, employers, or others who have known you for a long period of time or in a professional capacity, many want to hear from faculty. Letters from faculty members are important because they are typically in the best position to assess your ability to do advanced academic work. In general, you should approach faculty members in whose classes you have performed well, but you should also consider how well a professor knows you. Building relationships with faculty while still a student is a good idea, but if time has passed since graduation, you can still reach out to professors to help them understand your journey and goals.

Keep in mind that faculty members receive many requests for letters of recommendation and the more advance notice you can give them, the better. Ideally, you should make an appointment with a current or former faculty member to discuss your educational and career goals. This is also a good opportunity to share a draft of your personal statement and ask for feedback. You will gain valuable feedback on your statement, and you will demonstrate that you have already given time and thought to the decision to apply to graduate school. Note that how you ask for a letter of recommendation may impact the quality of a recommender's assessment. If you start late in the process, don't provide enough information about your goals, and fail to thank the faculty member for the time it takes to complete this work, your recommender may not see you as having the maturity and responsibility needed for graduate study.

If you have been out of school for a while, reach out to faculty members by phone, email, or, if possible, in person to remind them of who you are and to discuss your

plans. Be prepared for these discussions. Share a copy of your resume or draft statement of purpose in advance.

Make the application process as easy for recommenders as possible. Be sure you complete any portion(s) of recommendation forms you are responsible for. Alert recommenders to application deadlines. Provide the recommender with a copy of your resume. If you're submitting paper copies of recommendations, supply a stamped envelope to use to mail in the completed form.

ACTION ITEM: CONTACT RECOMMENDERS. Create a list of possible faculty recommenders and contact them via phone or email. Do this at least two months before your first application is due. You want to give your recommenders plenty of time to write their recommendation and submit it before the application deadline.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provides graduate school applicants with certain safeguards concerning access to their admissions information. In applying this legislation, an institution is legally bound to indicate whether or not you wish to have access to letters of recommendation should you matriculate. This option is usually displayed on the form that the recommender fills out on your behalf. For a particular institution, you may waive your right to view your recommendations or you may choose not to waive your right to read your recommendations. In most cases, a student will choose to waive their right to read a recommendation. This is a sign of trust from the student to the recommender and may allow the recommender to write more candidly about the student. Whichever option you choose, it should have no effect on your admission chances.

Standardized Test Scores

Many graduate programs require prospective students to take a standardized test such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), LSAT, MCAT, or GMAT. Not all programs require these standardized test scores. For the GRE, it is important to note whether a specific Subject test is required in addition to the General Test. For international students, an additional test of English language fluency such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Duolingo, or IELTS English Language Test may be required.

Some students feel intimidated by standardized testing, but, remember, it is only part of your application. Programs are often looking for characteristics in an



applicant that are not measured by standardized testing such as resilience and creativity. Furthermore, it is possible to prepare for the test by practicing test-taking skills and developing familiarity with the kinds of questions that will be asked. You will not be able to see the exact version of the test you will be taking, but working through practice questions shows you how problems are organized and allows you to develop time management strategies for each section of the test. When practicing, try to simulate test conditions as closely as possible by timing yourself and only working with materials that will be available to you when taking the actual test. Remember, if you do poorly on a test, you can retake the test and only submit your highest test score to programs to which you are applying.

In the United States, Canada, and many other countries, you take the GRE General Test on a computer either at home or in a test center. Computer-based testing is not available in all areas of the world, however, so consult the GRE website at <http://www.ets.org/gre> to determine if the online test is available in your area.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) makes test preparation materials available free of charge to those who register for a GRE test at http://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare?WT.ac=grehome_testprep_a_121008. There are also for-profit businesses that offer additional preparation materials and courses. Your college or university may offer test-taking workshops, so check with your career center or testing center. Your local library may also offer books and materials for test preparation.

ACTION ITEM: SCHEDULE THE TEST. Once you determine which standardized test you need to take for your application(s) (if you need to take a standardized test at all), you should find the nearest testing center and schedule your test. Testing schedules vary by location and by test, and the closer you get to dates when applications are due, the busier testing centers will be and the earlier testing slots will have filled up. Make sure you schedule your test early so you don't miss out on your preferred test dates or locations.

Transcripts and Grades

Graduate programs often require official transcripts of all college work that you have undertaken. An official transcript is printed on special paper and usually includes the school's seal and the registrar's signature. Even one or two courses taken at another institution should be reported via a transcript. Order transcripts from all of your postsecondary institutions more than a month before application deadlines to ensure they arrive before any applications are due.

Institutions often set a minimum for undergraduate grade point average for admission to graduate school. They will look closely at the grades you earned in your major, particularly at upper division courses in that subject. Some graduate schools may choose to admit students whose grades fall below that average as an exception (a practice known as “conditional admission”). Students whose undergraduate institutions chose a “pass/no pass” grading system during the COVID-19 pandemic should not be adversely affected in applying to graduate school, though you may want to contact the graduate office of schools you’re applying to if you’re concerned about meeting program admissions requirements. Admissions officers may also consider the rigor and quality of your undergraduate institution or personal circumstances, such as challenges or hardships you may have faced as an undergraduate, when evaluating your transcripts.

Remember, like standardized test scores, grades are only one part of your application. If you received low grades because of an unusual circumstance, you may want to explain that in your personal statement. If your grades improved dramatically over time, also be sure to highlight the improvement in your personal statement and explain why you improved. Though you can use other application documents or an interview to explain weak grades, always be truthful. Dishonesty on issues of academic merit are taken very seriously by faculty and university administrators and committing academic dishonesty could result in having an acceptance rescinded or even removal from a program you’re already enrolled in.

ACTION ITEM: ORDER YOUR OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPTS. It takes colleges and universities time to process a transcript request whether it be in a physical or digital format (it may also require a small processing fee). Be sure to order transcripts ahead of your first application deadline. Contact the registrar’s office from your undergraduate institution to order your official transcripts. Check to see if any programs to which you are applying require physical transcripts, since those often take more time to process and may require additional coordination with the registrar’s office at your undergraduate institution.

Applying for Financial Assistance

An application for financial aid will be available from campus financial aid offices. You may need to apply separately for fellowships, for assistantships, and for loans. Some institutions have their own forms that you submit to them directly; others may have forms that go to a central processing agency. Make sure you read all financial aid materials carefully to make sure you meet deadlines and provide all relevant information.



You should find out as much as you can from the department to which you are applying about how their graduate students are funded. In general, professional degree programs are less likely to provide scholarships and other forms of aid. For Ph.D. programs, there is generally a much stronger commitment to funding students through institutional resources. You should apply for all departmental and institutional resources that are available to you.

ACTION ITEM: RESEARCH FINANCIAL AID. Visit the campus financial aid website for the school(s) to which you are applying and check what financial aid resources are available to you. If financial assistance is available, mark down any deadlines. Most institutions will notify you if you qualify for any financial support during the application process, but spending time looking for additional financial aid may uncover other forms of support beyond what is being offered by the institution(s) to which you're applying. For CGS's database of federally-funded fellowships and traineeships visit <https://cgsnet.org/federally-funded-graduate-and-postdoc-fellowships-and-traineeships>.

The Outcome

Since most applications are now digital, it is easy to keep track of the status of your application, financial aid materials, and recommendations. Successful applicants maintain detailed records of the progress of each application. Many institutions have online portals that will allow you to check to see that your application materials have been received, but you should also maintain your own records in case there is an error processing the application.

For many, waiting to hear back from graduate programs is the most stressful part of the application process. But, if you have chosen your programs carefully, have a strong record of achievement, and faculty recommenders who attest to your intellectual strengths, motivation, and self-discipline, then letters of acceptance will likely be forthcoming. Good luck!

YOU GOT IN! NOW WHAT?: PREPARING FOR THE TRANSITION TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Getting into graduate school is a major accomplishment and you should be very proud. Still, there are more decisions that must be made to get from acceptance to enrollment. This is particularly true if you're weighing admissions offers from multiple schools. All graduate programs have a deadline by which you must accept or decline your acceptance offer. Traditionally these deadlines are in April or May, though many graduate programs now offer rolling and flexible admissions that run throughout the year. Make sure you read any acceptance materials carefully to avoid missing important acceptance deadlines.

Making room in your life for graduate study can be anxiety-inducing. Navigating a new environment, meeting new people, balancing coursework with other commitments, and learning program expectations are only a few of the stressors incoming graduate students may confront. With the proper preparation, however, these worries can be managed. The following section is designed to provide strategies to help you finalize your commitment and transition into graduate school.

CHOOSING A PROGRAM

Campus Visits and Informational Interviews

The first, and most fundamental, part of preparing for graduate school is choosing a program to enroll in. If you gained admission to multiple schools, this may mean that you have several viable options. If you only were admitted to a

DEAN'S WISDOM

Your graduate program should be an opportunity to focus as much as possible on the learning and experiences that your program can offer. It makes sense to avoid distractions as much as possible, but it's also important that your family (however you define that) and friends represent a critical resource for your success. Be sure to lean on them when you can, and help them to understand both the requirements and potential rewards of completing your program.



single program, there are still important steps to be taken before you decide to enroll.

If you're able, visiting the campus of each program you're considering is the best way to decide whether a program is a good fit. Campus visits may be arranged on an individual basis or, in some cases, programs will designate a particular day to host all accepted students. In either case, campus visits generally involve a campus tour, meeting with a faculty member or program officer, and meeting with currently enrolled graduate students. The campus visit provides opportunities to ask questions to administrators, faculty members, and graduate students about the program, location, institution, or other concerns you may have. Be aware that not all faculty members may be made available during a campus visit, so be sure to coordinate with the program ahead of time if you want to talk to a specific faculty member.

Even if you're unable to visit campus, you should reach out to program faculty and graduate students by phone or email before choosing a program. Not only will you be able to ask questions during these conversations; they can give you a sense of the program culture and help you decide whether you would feel welcome and supported in the program community.

Accepting Offers of Financial Support

If you have more than one offer of admission with financial support, you should weigh your options carefully. There are many factors to consider when making your decision beyond the amount of support you receive, such as the cost of living where the program is located. To ensure that applicants have the time to make their decisions, a large number of the Council of Graduate Schools' member institutions have established a rule: students have until April 15 to accept an offer of admission that comes with financial support (see full resolution in box). This rule is designed to give students adequate time to make a decision, and with the fullest information possible. It is also designed to prevent students feeling compelled to accept one school's offer before they know whether they have been accepted and/or received financial aid offers from other programs to which they have applied.

Some 326 member schools of CGS have signed this resolution. For an up-to-date listing, please visit the CGS website at www.cgsnet.org/april-15-resolution. Make sure that the program to which you have applied has not been granted an exception to the rule.

April 15 Resolution: What is it and why does it matter to you?

Acceptance of an offer of financial support* (such as a graduate scholarship, fellowship, traineeship, or assistantship) for the next academic year by a prospective or enrolled graduate student completes an agreement that both student and graduate school expect to honor. In that context, the conditions affecting such offers and their acceptance must be defined carefully and understood by all parties.

Students are under no obligation to respond to offers of financial support prior to April 15; earlier deadlines for acceptance of such offers violate the intent of this Resolution. In those instances in which a student accepts an offer before April 15, and subsequently desires to withdraw that acceptance, the student may submit in writing a resignation of the appointment at any time through April 15. However, an acceptance given or left in force after April 15 commits the student to first inform the program that they are withdrawing or resigning from the offer of financial support that they previously had accepted. Starting in Fall 2020, applicants are no longer required to obtain a formal release from the program whose offer they accepted, either before or after the April 15 deadline. It is further agreed by the institutions and organizations subscribing to the above Resolution that a copy of this Resolution or a link to the URL should accompany every scholarship, fellowship, traineeship, and assistantship offer.

For the full April 15 statement, please visit <https://cgsnet.org/april-15-resolution>.

MAKING ROOM IN YOUR LIFE FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

Beginning graduate study is a significant commitment of time. Even if you are enrolled part-time or in an online program, you will need to carve out space in your life to complete the necessary course work and capstone for your degree.

For some graduate students, their first concern will be where to live. If you're moving for graduate school, check to see the availability and cost of housing in the area. Some universities either provide housing for some graduate students or organize events where students can meet roommates and look for housing together. University support in looking for housing is particularly important if you're planning to go to graduate school in an expensive or remote area where inexpensive housing is not readily available. Contact your graduate office or program to learn about any housing opportunities they offer.



For students who will be staying in the same place, other responsibilities may need to be adjusted to create space for graduate study. If you're another person's primary caregiver, you may need to arrange additional support through either a daycare service or through friends and relatives. If you are working while in school, you may need to talk with your supervisor about flexible scheduling or working from home. Each case will be unique, but it's important, in all cases, to try to make any necessary accommodations early to avoid situations that may disrupt your graduate education.

Build Your Network

As much as learning the subject material, navigating graduate school is about creating a support team to help you achieve your goals. Start by helping your family, friends, and employer (if you are working) develop some expectations about graduate school and how it will shape your other responsibilities.

You can also start looking for support in your department or program. Before enrolling, you may have reached out to graduate students and faculty in your department to decide whether you were a good fit for the program. If you made those connections during the application process, reach out to them again with questions about how to best prepare for your first semester. If you didn't make those connections, consider reaching out to current graduate students and campus organizations either through email or program administrators. Questions you may want to ask more advanced graduate students include: which strategies did they find most successful for managing course work? What are common difficulties first-year students experience in the program? Which faculty and staff did they find particularly helpful? You may want to ask student organizations if they have activities designed for graduate students and if graduate students are active in the organization. As always, be sure to do your research before contacting faculty members or administrators with concerns.

Orientation events are another opportunity to learn about university procedures and department expectations. There are often two types of orientations held before the beginning of the academic year. The first are held by the graduate program or unit and address issues such as Title IX, international student visas, and academic integrity relevant to incoming students across disciplines. The second type are department-level orientations that may explain program requirements, provide teacher assistance (TA) training, give students opportunities to network with faculty, and preview course offerings for the coming year. Both types of orientations are valuable for accumulating knowledge about program expectations and procedures as well as networking with other graduate students.

There are resources outside the department that may also be helpful to you as you begin your graduate school journey. If your university has a centralized office of graduate studies, staff there may be able to orient you to materials or handbooks outlining degree requirements. They may also organize professional development workshops and social outings outside your department. If your racial, ethnic, or gender identity is underrepresented in your discipline, student and disciplinary associations can provide valuable information about any special opportunities available as well as social support.

If you require special accommodations like wheelchair accessible rooms or extra time on tests, talk to your graduate program to see who you need to contact on campus to guarantee your accommodation. If you require any academic accommodations such as if you are diagnosed with a learning disability including (but not limited to) attention deficit

disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or dyslexia, you will need to provide documentation from a health provider to the campus Office for Students with Disabilities or ADA Compliance Office before classes begin to ensure your accommodation will be met. On some campuses, not all classrooms, laboratories, and library spaces may be wheelchair accessible, so if you require access be sure your program administrators know.

If you are struggling with your mental health or want to maintain your well-being, counseling services and other support services are available at most universities. These services are valuable for helping you manage the new experiences and challenges you may face as a graduate student. They may also be valuable if you have struggled with your mental health or other health-related issues like substance abuse in the past. The demands of graduate school can be overwhelming, but you should never be afraid to seek help.

Remember, your program and your university are invested in your success. Finding resources early can make the transition into graduate school easier and give you a support system when you hit the inevitable bumps on your journey.

DEAN'S WISDOM

As a graduate student, it's important to maintain your personal health and wellness. A sense of isolation, stress, and perhaps feelings of unworthiness ("imposter syndrome") are potential mental barriers to your progress through your graduate program. To overcome these negative emotions and perceptions, keep work and life in harmony. Take time away from your work for a mental break. Exercise. Make time for sleep. Join group and community activities to provide balance in your life. Taking these steps can help you maintain your perspective and equilibrium during your progression through graduate training and into your career.



Make a Plan

Since graduate programs typically involve more independent work than undergraduate programs, they require you to manage your schedule and time to an even higher degree. To avoid losing time in graduate school, lay out what you want to achieve in your first year. It is a good idea to make an appointment with your advisor early in the semester to discuss their expectations and plan accordingly. Tell your advisor, and any other mentors you may have, what your goals are and your plan to achieve those goals. Everyone's goals and plans are different in graduate school, but these five tips can help you put a plan in place that will help you get a head start.

5 TIPS FOR CREATING A FIRST-YEAR PLAN

1. **Have realistic goals.** It is easy to come into graduate school with unrealistic expectations for your growth and performance. Avoid holding yourself to the same academic standards you had as an undergraduate. Be intentional about what you want to achieve while in graduate school, but recognize that there is often a learning curve at the beginning of graduate school and that not all the progress you make in a program will be linear.
2. **Have a specific plan for how to achieve your goals.** Be as specific as you can when writing out your plan. If you can, break down your larger goals into more manageable weekly or monthly goals. For example, if you want to complete a draft of your master's thesis by the end of your first year, break that goal down into weekly segments of research and writing. Larger goals can be so daunting that it can be difficult to know where to start. Having smaller, more manageable goals will give you a sense of accomplishment that will encourage you to keep working the entire year toward your larger milestones.
3. **Share your plan and get feedback from others.** As a new student, it can be tempting to set goals that are too ambitious. Once you have drafted your plan, share it with your advisor and/or senior graduate students in your program. They will have the experience to assess the feasibility of your plan. They may suggest alternate timelines for specific projects (like your thesis or capstone assignment) or alert you to parts of the semester where you may expect more challenging coursework. Soliciting feedback from others will make you better able to fit your goals into the structure and timeline of the program in which you are enrolling.

5 TIPS FOR CREATING A FIRST-YEAR PLAN, CONT.

- 4. Include non-academic responsibilities and hobbies in your plan.** When beginning a graduate program, it is tempting to organize your life around your studies. Your studies will be important, but, when creating your plan, make sure to budget time and effort for your other responsibilities and passions. While it may seem obvious to account for family and work responsibilities (if you're concurrently working full or part-time), sometimes other responsibilities (to friends, for example) and passions are neglected. Budget time in your plan to have dinner with friends, go on a weekend hike, or have a family movie night. You should also communicate with important people in your life that graduate school will take time and encourage them to support you as you pursue an advanced degree. Not only will this make you happier in the long-run, but taking time away from your studies to clear your mind may improve the quality of your graduate work.
- 5. Remember that plans change.** Even the most painstakingly constructed plans for first-year graduate study face unforeseen challenges. You catch the flu. You get a lower than anticipated grade on an important assignment. You have a death in the family. All of these issues—and countless others—can derail your study plan. However, working with your advisor and other academic support can get you back on track. Overcoming adversity is also a valuable skill and one that will make you more successful no matter your career path.

Get Your Materials

Whether you're enrolling in a literature master's program, a chemistry doctoral program, or a professional master's program in speech pathology, you must acquire the books and other equipment necessary to engage in required coursework. These materials can often be purchased at a campus bookstore or through your program. This can be expensive, however, and prospective graduate students should always factor the cost of books and equipment into the overall cost of graduate school. Check with program staff and instructors to see if you can get an advanced copy of course syllabi, so you can begin acquiring required resources before the semester begins.

If you're prepared, you can sometimes find less expensive alternatives to purchasing books and equipment through your university bookstore. Many departments put their required course books on reserve at the university library. Universities will often have discounted software licenses available for graduate



students, and some universities have computer labs with specialized software that graduate students can use for no additional cost. E-books are another option for some courses and may be available through the university website or a secondary online retailer. Used books can be purchased through online retailers or at local bookstores. Advanced graduate students may be willing to sell or loan equipment they no longer need to first-year students. Some departments will also sell or rent used books and equipment to incoming students. Often this is a first come, first served proposition, so be on the lookout for program and university notifications.

If you're an international student, you will need to get a student visa to begin study at any American institution. There are rules about receiving financial aid and working while on a student visa, so be sure to contact your school's international student office to make sure you can afford your program.

Remember that You Belong

One of the most common worries graduate students have is that they don't belong. They believe they are less qualified than their peers, lack the drive to succeed, or are simply not smart enough. This insecurity is called "imposter syndrome," and it is something nearly all graduate students struggle with at some point in their careers. If you feel this way, remember that program and admini-

stration staff saw your potential in your application and believe you can succeed.

Sometimes students need additional support to overcome imposter syndrome. Many programs have graduate student groups that provide an additional social network and support system. Disciplinary societies may also have resources for managing the specific challenges that come from doing graduate work in a particular field.

Don't Neglect Your Other Passions

For some students, the pressures of graduate school can become all-consuming. They do not maintain their relationships with family and friends; they lose interest in activities that once brought them joy; and they do not take care of themselves physically or mentally. While this single-mindedness can produce short-term results, it is unsustainable. Graduate students without other interests or lives outside school often "burn out" and struggle to maintain success.

Budget time for activities other than studying. Go to a movie with friends, enjoy a family picnic, or even spend an afternoon reading a novel or book unrelated to your academic work. These breaks will refresh you and help you maintain your mental health and focus over the course of your graduate program. Graduate

school is a process of self-discovery as well as a vehicle to learn new skills and ideas, so remember to contextualize your graduate education within your larger personal goals to keep your interest in graduate education in perspective.

We hope this guide has helped make the process of succeeding in graduate school more transparent and attainable. The information provided in this guide can aid you as you begin your graduate school journey, but ultimately it is you—your passion for learning, your willingness to confront new challenges, and your persistence—that will lead to success.



GLOSSARY

ABD (All But Dissertation): A term used to describe a doctoral student who has completed all graduation requirements except for their dissertation defense.

Academic Year: The academic year usually consists of either two semesters or four quarters beginning in August or September and ending in May or June with a winter break lasting from mid-December to mid-January. Supplementary courses or trainings are sometimes offered outside the academic year during either winter or summer break. Some programs (particularly online programs) may run year-round.

Advisor(s): A professor or group of professors who serve as the primary point of contact and evaluators on a graduate student's capstone project. They may serve as the only evaluator of a capstone project (as is the case with some master's theses), or they may head a committee of faculty evaluators (as is required for most doctoral dissertations).

Capstone: A capstone is a final culminating paper, project, course, or experience graduate students complete in the final years of their program. Most often this is used to describe master's and certificate projects, though it is sometimes used interchangeably with dissertation or thesis if used to describe a culminating doctoral project.

Comprehensive Examination(s) ("Comps"): A test or group of tests that a graduate student is required to complete, usually in their second or third year, to determine their eligibility for further study. These examinations may be written, oral, or a combination of both. In doctoral programs, "comps" are usually administered after the completion of required coursework and before beginning the dissertation. They are also sometimes called preliminary examinations (prelims), qualifying examinations (quals), general examinations (generals), or major field examinations.

Curriculum Vitae (CV): A type of resume used by the academic community to show earned degrees, teaching and research experience, publications,

presentations, grants received, and other academic credentials. CVs tend to be longer than a standard resume and are intended to give the reader a comprehensive picture of an individual's scholarly achievements.

Defense: The final examination on a graduate student's dissertation or thesis whereby a student answers questions about their research project from a faculty committee chaired by that student's advisor. Sometimes called a D2 (Dissertation Defense) or T2 (Thesis Defense), the defense is often the final graduation requirement.

Discipline: A broad field of study such as biology, history, or economics. University departments will often be organized by discipline.

Dissertation: A dissertation is the culminating paper or project doctoral students must complete to graduate. This project usually takes between one and four years to complete and is overseen and evaluated by a faculty advisor or advisory committee.

Financial Aid Package: A financial aid package is any combination of grants, loans, scholarships, and work funds that a student uses to help pay for their graduate education.

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): The needs analysis application for federal student aid programs. Each student receiving or looking to receive federal student aid must complete the FAFSA around March for the following academic year.

Full-Time Enrollment: Though there is some variation, most students must be enrolled in a minimum of twelve graduate level credits to be considered full-time. The average load for a graduate student is 9-12 credit hours per semester.

Graduate Seminar: A course offered either solely or primarily to graduate students. Often these courses will have a small enrollment and have more interactive training methods (either class discussion or hands-on training).

Minimum Enrollment: The fewest number of credits that a university requires a student to be enrolled in to maintain active status. This number may vary depending on if a student is serving as a teaching or research assistant or is receiving a grant or stipend. (See Full-Time Enrollment)

Part-time Enrollment: A student enrolled below the program's stated full-time credit hour minimum. This is usually nine graduate level credits per semester, but check with your supervisor or the registrar's office to get the exact number for your program.



Ph.D. Candidate: A Ph.D. candidate is a doctoral student who has passed their comprehensive examinations.

Proposal: After passing comprehensive examinations and before beginning dissertation research, most students are required to present a short paper outlining their capstone project. This proposal (or “prospectus”) may include an abstract, literature review, statement of the problem, methods, references, and/or research plan. The student will usually create their proposal with the assistance of their advisor or advisory committee.

Proposal Defense: Once the proposal has been created, the student will present it to a faculty committee for approval (other graduate students may also be invited to participate). The presentation and defense are usually oral, though a written component may be required by some programs. Successfully defending the proposal is required before dissertation research can begin.

Stipend: A grant of money provided to a student to cover expenses beyond tuition and fees.

Thesis: The capstone paper for a master’s or certificate program. This paper is a product of original research that contributes to the scholarly knowledge of a discipline or disciplines. There is significant diversity when it comes to the content and format of a thesis, so consult with your academic advisor or program director about any requirements.

Writing Center: An office that provides students with support and advice to help them improve their writing. The Writing Center may work in conjunction with an academic program or be an “as needed” resource for students requiring writing instruction beyond their normal course load.



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