



Center for  
Professional Pathways

# GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

How CPP can help:

- Identify graduate school and career goals
- Research graduate programs
- Prepare application materials, such as personal statements and CV/Resume
- Prepare for the interview

For further questions contact us at 503-838-8432

Make an Appointment with the Center for Professional Pathways on  
WolfLink/Handshake



## Why Attend Graduate or Professional School

The decision to attend graduate school often depends on either a prerequisite to enter a chosen career field or a long-term interest in a particular field. Many students contemplate attending graduate school because they are unsure about their career path and their future role.

If you are considering graduate or professional school ask yourself the following questions to gain some clarification about continuing education:

- What are your career goals? Would they change if you became employed immediately after graduating with a bachelor's degree?
- In your field, is it easier to attend graduate or professional school right after graduating?
- What is the cost of graduate or professional school – direct (tuition) and indirect (loss of possible earnings)?
- Will your job and salary prospects be enhanced by graduate studies?
- Are there employers who would assist in paying for graduate or professional school?

As you investigate your choices for graduate or professional school, it is important to clarify your ultimate professional and personal goals. Consider all your options and gain input from others. Be aware that relevant work experience can be helpful in clarifying your goals.

## How to Start

If you pursue post-baccalaureate studies, you are faced with the decision of what degree or orientation to follow. There are two main branches of degree: Academic and Professional. An Academic degree emphasizes original research while a Professional degree emphasizes practical application and knowledge. Know what degree you need to earn and how much specialization is needed to meet your professional goals.

Some helpful resources to begin your search are listed below:

1. Gradschools.com
2. Edition XII *Guide to Postgraduate Studies*



3. *Peterson's Annual Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs*

4. *The Directory of MBAs*

Consult with a career counselor to generate more ideas and resources. See page 6 for additional resources.

### **Selecting a School and a Graduate Program that Meets Your Needs**

Selecting a Graduate or Professional School is a personal and intricate process. It is the initial step in your commitment to pursue post-baccalaureate studies. Gaining acceptance into the graduate program of your choice is the first, and often the most important step to meeting your personal and professional goals. There are four main steps that make the application process smoother and generate the most success: school and program selection, the application process, the interview process, and the matching process.

Students generally pursue graduate studies in fields that are consistent with their undergraduate majors, and other times they may choose a different area of interest. Whatever approach you take, there are three primary factors to consider when researching a program: the faculty, program curriculum, and the resources.

### **The Faculty and Their Research Interests**

Students are encouraged to select programs where their interests are consistent with the faculty in order to gain the best results from the program. Many students are attracted to top-rated schools; however, sometimes these schools do not offer the best atmosphere for graduate and professional students. As a graduate/professional student, it is important to have accessible faculty to facilitate your professional development. When selecting a program, look at the faculty's academic training, accessibility to students for research and advising/mentoring, and their research activities. Take these things into consideration to answer whether their interests match your own and if they are a staff you will want to work with.

Also consider reviewing the research/peer reviewed journals in your field of interest to see with which institutions the authors are affiliated. You might also want to read the articles and connect with the authors. Let them know about your interest in their research and ask them about their programs.



## The Program Curriculum

Realize that many graduate courses are similar across the nation. Choose a program that offers courses in the area where you want more knowledge and expertise. When evaluating a program, consider its history, coursework, degree requirements, and job placement for graduates.

## Available Resources and Personal Needs

When you consider resources, it is important to consider what the program and the surrounding community are offering. For example, are there laboratory facilities, and how accessible are they to graduate and professional students? You may also need to consider the quality of the practicum available in the area. For students who decide to attend graduate schools different\ from their undergraduate schools, it is also important to learn about the surrounding community and environment of the campus. For example, you might want to know what the climate of the area is like, what the recreational activities are, and what resources are available for students with family. Consider visiting the campus, which may also allow you to personally meet with faculty.

## The Application Process

The application forms should be treated with great care and with emphasis and attention to detail.

Your application is the picture of yourself that you want to present to the selection committee; therefore, it's to your benefit to keep some suggestions in mind as you complete the process:

- Read and follow the instructions carefully.
- Pay attention to all deadlines.
- Be open and honest about information you report.
- Have at least two persons proofread your information.

In order to complete strong applications, keep the number of schools you apply to between 2 and 6. Customize your application for each program.

## An Autobiographical Essay and Career/Graduate Study Goals

The autobiographical essay, often called "Personal Statement" is often the most important item in the application packet. This is where you show your "fit" for this particular program. You tell the committee about yourself, including the attributes that



make you a unique individual. Share your hopes and career aspirations and how the program will help you meet your goals. Include how you intend to develop these areas or interests.

Here are a few suggestions when preparing your essay/statement:

- Be concise, and be sure to stick to the information requested.
- Avoid using slang.
- Tailor your response to the program's philosophy, and describe aspects of the program that appeal to you above all other programs.

Consider including an updated cover letter and resume.

### **Letters of Recommendation**

Strong letters of recommendation are an essential element of your application. Ask professors and employers who know you and your work to write these letters. Sometimes it is helpful to give them a copy of your autobiographical and career objective statement.

### **Graduate Entrance Examinations**

Almost all graduate schools require an entrance exam such as the GRE, MCAT, and LSAT.

Generally, these exams are used as part of the screening process, so students are encouraged to do well. For more information, go to the Hammersley Library.

### **Official Transcripts**

Each school requires official transcripts but not student copies. Make sure to send the transcript in the manner the school requested it. See the Registrar's Office for more information and cost.

### **Financial Aid Application**

These may include the Federal and School's FSA Forms. It is common to receive graduate assistantship even if you were unqualified as an undergraduate.

### **The Interview Process**

Many graduate and professional schools require a selection interview. The interview is your opportunity to learn more about the program. Also, the committee will learn more about you during this process. Remember to emphasize your unique attributes, and



show the committee that you are knowledgeable in your field. You can learn more about the program by reading the faculty's research and becoming aware of the program's philosophy and training objectives. It may be helpful to practice before the interview. Practice keeps the things you want to highlight about your personal and professional goals fresh in your mind.

It is appropriate to discuss stipends and financial support during the interview. For more information on interviewing, see the Interview Packet here in Career Services.

## The Decision: Accepting or Rejecting a Program

You may be notified in writing or by telephone that you were accepted for admission into a program or that you are on the waiting list.

After notification, ask for up to a week to make your decision, and then consider the following:

- What first attracted you to this program? How many of your personal criteria (such as the location, research, and stipend) does the school meet? Does the program itself meet your criteria?
- Decide which program meets your needs, especially those you consider essential.
- Politely refuse the offer of the unacceptable school. Keep comparing schools until you hear from your ideal program(s).
- When you receive a satisfactory offer from your most preferred school, accept; and then notify the other schools. Do not take this decision lightly because withdrawing your acceptance will diminish your credibility.



## Helpful Resources

### General Information

Grad Schools – Search & Information <http://www.gradschools.com/>

The Peterson Guide – Test Prep <http://www.petersons.com/>

The Princeton Review – Search & Prep <http://www.princetonreview.com/>

### Personal Statements

#### General Statement

- <https://gradschool.cdc.indiana.edu/prepare-for-graduate-school/personal-statement.html>
- [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job\\_search\\_writing/preparing\\_an\\_application/writing\\_the\\_personal\\_statement/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html)
- <https://www.chapman.edu/campus-services/career-professional-development/resources/personal-statements.aspx>

[Law School – Personal Statement Dos & Don'ts](#)

[Medical School – 15 Tips for Your Personal Statement](#)

[Mistakes to Avoid – General Grad School Personal Statements](#)

Search the web for information about your school/program of choice and other helpful hints.

### WOU Campus Resources

Center for Professional Pathways - <http://www.wou.edu/professional-pathways/>

Writing Center <http://wou.edu/writingctr/>

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## Graduate School Glossary

Important terms used in discussion of graduate education

**Assistantship:** A form of financial aid in which the graduate student is paid for work performance. This work is often related to the student's studies or area of specialization. A research assistantship or "RA" pays a student to assist a professor on an experiment or research project; a teaching assistantship or "TA" pays a student to teach sections or classes of undergraduate courses, or to help grade papers and examinations.

**Committee:** This may refer to one of several types of important committees:

1. Admissions Committee: This committee considers applications for graduate school. Decisions are made by a committee of faculty members within an academic department. For example, students applying to an engineering department will be admitted or denied by the admission committee composed of faculty members in engineering rather than by a central admissions director within the university's administration.

2. Thesis/Dissertation or Examination Committee: A committee of faculty members usually chosen by the graduate student from his or her department or from closely related departments. This committee helps the student plan the thesis/dissertation or determines the general content of the qualifying examination for the final thesis/dissertation defense. These committees usually serve both as advisors to the student and as examiners on the material studied or research performed.

**Committee Chair:** The chairperson of the thesis/dissertation is a faculty member in the department the student is studying in. Choice of a chairperson is made by the student according to his/her proposed area of research. The chairperson acts as the academic advisor, as well as assuming primary responsibility for guiding the student throughout the thesis/dissertation research project and completion of the thesis/dissertation. The chair is responsible for the integrity and scholarly intent by insuring the thesis/dissertation is consistent with the standards of research in the discipline.

**Comprehensive Exam:** Exams usually taken in the final year of the graduate program. The type of exam varies on the program and degree earned, but is usually a minimum of 8 hours in length. Exam questions are open ended to allow the student to demonstrate their comprehensive knowledge of the discipline. Usually, exam answers are evaluated

by the committee of faculty who wrote the questions. Each question must pass by a majority vote for the student to pass the exam and be allowed to graduate.



**Defense:** This is the final examination on a graduate student's thesis/dissertation, and the final requirement for the Master's or Ph.D. The defense may take one of several forms, such as a lecture on the thesis/dissertation topic, or a formal oral examination. The graduate student explains and defends the accuracy and significance of the research and arguments in his or her thesis.

**Director of Graduate Study:** Also called a Graduate Advisor. The faculty member in a department of who is responsible for disseminating information about the graduate program, answering questions from the applicants, and advising graduate students who have not yet selected a thesis/dissertation topic. The Director of Graduate Study usually sits on or chairs the department admissions and is the best source of information for the potential applicant.

**Discipline:** A broad field of study such as psychology, physics, English, or computer science.

**Dissertation:** The independent project conducted by a graduate student after completing coursework and general examinations. The dissertation will vary in form and length depending on the discipline and nature of the research project; it usually requires one to three years to complete. The dissertation is supposed to show mastery of knowledge and research tools, and should contribute something new to the discipline in which it is written.

**Doctorate:** Another word for the Ph.D. or Doctor of Philosophy degree. Those who earn the Ph.D. are entitled to use the title "Doctor."

**(GAPSFAS):** The Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service. The GAPSFAS form is a standardized, detailed financial aid form many graduate schools ask applicants to complete if they apply for financial aid. GAPSFAS is a department of Educational Testing Service.

**(GRE):** The Graduate Record Examination is for graduate school applicants what the SAT is for college applicants. It is a standardized test designed by the Educational Testing Service to measure knowledge and skills; it is scored on a 200-800 scale. The GRE Aptitude Test has three sections: verbal, quantitative, and analytical. There are also GRE Advanced tests in specific disciplines such as French, mathematics,



philosophy, engineering, and so on. GRE scores are often an admissions application requirement.

**General Examination:** This is also called the preliminary or qualifying examination. The general exam tests the depth and the breadth of a graduate student's knowledge in his or her discipline. It may be written or oral, is often divided into sections corresponding to the specific fields within the discipline, and is usually taken after the completion of coursework. The student prepares for it independently. After passing "generals" or "qualifiers" the student begins work on the dissertation.

**Master's Degree:** The degree of professional certification in the field, following the Bachelor's. A master's curriculum usually rests on one to three years of course work and may involve a thesis, a limited research project or a comprehensive exam as the final requirement. The master's is not often a prerequisite for admission to a Ph.D. program.

**Outside Fellowship:** A fellowship awarded by a source outside the student's university or graduate department such as a corporation, government program, or foundation.

**Ph.D.:** The Doctor of Philosophy degree, a research degree which usually involves coursework, special and general examinations, a major research project leading to the writing of a dissertation, and defense of the dissertation. The Ph.D. can require anywhere between three to seven years to complete depending on the discipline, institutional policies, and the student's preparedness.

**Postdoctoral "Postdoc" Position:** A position which allows individuals who have completed a Ph.D. to gain additional experience in their chosen field.

**Proposal:** Also called a prospectus. A statement or paper in which the graduate student proposes to his or her department committee a thesis/dissertation topic with details on what the thesis/dissertation will accomplish, and how the research will be conducted. The proposal must be approved before work on the thesis/dissertation begins.

**Reader:** A professional responsible for advising, reading, and approving a graduate student's thesis/dissertation. A student usually has two or three readers (the "first" reader being the main adviser), all of whom have some special interest or expertise in the student's field, and are thus in a good position to help supervise the research and writing of the thesis/dissertation.



**Research** A degree, like the Ph.D., which prepares the student for a career in research,

**Degree:** scholarship, and college or university teaching. The program of study requires substantial independent research and presentation of the results in a dissertation.

**Stipend:** A grant of money to a graduate student for expenses beyond tuition and fees. Graduate fellowships sometimes pay both tuition and a stipend, which can be applied toward living expenses.

**Thesis:** A research paper presented as a major, and usually the final, requirement of a degree program. The thesis is sometimes used interchangeably with “dissertation,” in Ph.D. research. More often it refers to a project more limited in scope completed as a Master’s requirement.

