

# Preparing for the application process for GRADUATE SCHOOL

HEGI FAMILY CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER

**Attending Graduate School** now or later can increase options in your current career or allow you to make a transition to another field. In any event, having a sense of focus and commitment toward your chosen direction can serve you best as you embark on graduate study.

**Applying to Graduate School** is a process which can take almost as much calendar time as some graduate program themselves. Fortunately, if you plan ahead, the discipline required to gain entrance into graduate school does not have to rival that of actually attending.

**Graduate School Applications** vary from program to program, but usually consist of five parts:

- The application itself
- Personal Statement
- Letters of Recommendation
- Transcripts (from all schools attended)
- Entrance test (i.e. GRE, LSAT, GMAT, MCAT)

## MAKING THE DECISION TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate school isn't always the right option for every person at every point in time. So think carefully about your reasons for applying to graduate school. This is the type of decision that should be made *after* you have defined your career goals, not as a way of figuring out those goals.

Some good reasons to apply to graduate school include:

- A graduate-level degree is required for entering the career field of your choice
- A graduate degree will help or is necessary for eventually advancing in your career
- You have an intellectual curiosity for a particular subject that you would like to explore further for personal satisfaction

The No. 1 reason to NOT apply to graduate school: Because you aren't sure what else to do after graduation. Graduate school is a large commitment in time, energy and money, so use your resources wisely. Don't be afraid to defer graduate school in order to work after graduation if you are not quite sure what your career goals are by the time that diploma is in your hand.

## TIMELINE FOR APPLICATION PROCESS

So you have decided that graduate school is the right option for you. Now what? The application process has many steps and is very deadline-driven, so plan to start *at least* a year in advance of the semester you would like to begin classes. A basic timeline might look like this:

### Summer Before Senior Year

- Select programs you wish to target for application. Potential factors include: programs offered, location, size, expense, and job placement of program graduates.
- Thoroughly examine and understand application deadlines for each program. Find a way to keep track of all of this information.

### August/September

- Contact professors to share plans for graduate school. Consult with them regarding types of programs and ask for letters of recommendation.
- Sign up for entrance exams, such as the GRE and GMAT. If you have taken them already, ensure that test scores are still valid (e.g., up to 5 years for GRE). Visit [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org) to learn more about signing up, test dates, preparation, etc.
- Request application materials from programs to which you plan to apply.
- Develop a draft of your statement of purpose/personal statement.

### October

- Take entrance exams.
- Solicit feedback on your personal statement and revise as necessary.
- Order undergraduate transcripts from all schools you attended. Determine how fall semester grades should be sent to meet application deadlines.
- Complete application forms. First, write out rough draft on photocopy of the form.
- Give those who will recommend you the necessary forms. Give explicit directions about where/when forms should be sent.

**November:** Finalize personal statement and collect all necessary application materials.

**December/January:** Mail applications. Even if deadlines are later, it is good to send applications as early as possible.

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE/PERSONAL STATEMENT

### *What is the Personal Statement?*

The personal statement is the clearest indication of who you are as a person and as a potential graduate student — WHY are you applying and WHY should you be admitted. Your personal statement may be the “swing vote” regarding your admission. Though some graduate programs use GPA and test scores as cut-offs to narrow the applicant pool, their final decision is often times based on the personal statement. Remember, while your undergraduate GPA and test scores are fixed, you have a great deal of control over your personal statement.

### *Writing the Statement*

In writing your statement, make sure to keep to the page limit specified in the application. Remember that a clear, concise, yet informative statement is preferable to a long-winded, unorganized statement. It often helps to outline your statement before writing it.

Keep in mind that the admissions committee wants to know five things:

- What do you want to study?
- Why do you want to study it?
- Why do you want to study it in *this* particular program?
- What experiences have you already had?
- What do you plan to do with your degree?

Some tips for answering these questions:

- Research each school’s particular program and tailor your essay as much as possible. Explore areas such as faculty’s research topics, student profiles, and what graduates of the program go on to do career-wise.
- Take this information and show committee members why you are a good fit for the program.
- Do not use the statement to explain away poor grades or test scores, but if there is a “dark area” on your transcript that merits an explanation, you can include that in your essay.
- Discuss what you will add to the student body and to the program.

### *Revising the Statement*

A successful statement likely will be the result of a number of revisions. When in doubt, REVISE, REVISE, REVISE! Enlist others to give feedback on the statement, such as former professors or those familiar with your field. Remember, the personal statement also serves as a sample of your writing skills, so make sure you are communicating clearly and effectively and NO TYPOS!

### *Material for Graduate School Handout Adapted From:*

Council of Graduate Schools: [www.cgsnet.org](http://www.cgsnet.org)

Texas State University Career Center

University of Pittsburgh Career Services: Graduate School Guide

GradSource Magazine

## RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Here are answers to some commonly asked questions regarding graduate school recommendations:

### ***How many do you need?***

The school will let you know the number of letters of recommendation they require, but they typically ask for two to three.

### ***Who should recommend?***

The nature of the program will dictate whether the recommendations should be professional or academic. For example, most doctoral programs and law schools prefer academic recommendations, whereas most business schools prefer professional recommendations. Regardless of the type of recommendation, the person who recommends should be someone familiar with your work and can speak to why you would make a successful graduate student.

### ***What should you do if you are worried that your potential recommendation choice may not remember you well (for example, if you were in a large class or have been out of school for awhile)?***

Always try to make the ask in person to refresh the professor's memory of who you are. Also, try to bring along copies of papers, tests, and other coursework from the class. Your resume and/or a list of accomplishments will also be beneficial in helping the recommender craft your letter.

### ***What should you do to ensure that recommendations are written on time?***

Give those who recommend you ample time to write the recommendation. For example, if your application is due at the end of December, consider contacting people for recommendations in the beginning of the fall and no later than four weeks before you would like them to send it in. In addition to specifying where and by what date the recommendations should be mailed, you may wish to send reminders out as the due date approaches. Also be sure to provide all of the necessary materials — stamped and addressed envelopes — to your recommenders.

### ***How should you thank those who recommend you?***

Use whatever personal style is most comfortable for you. Some people may prefer to send a thank you e-mail, while others prefer to send written thank-you notes. After the application process is over and you have selected a graduate school to attend, you may wish to inform those who recommended you of your choice and to reiterate your appreciation.

### ***Graduate School Online Resources***

- GradSource: [www.gradsource.com](http://www.gradsource.com)
- ETS (to learn more about and register for graduate school entrance exams): [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)
- Graduate School Directory: [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)
- U.S. News and World Report: <http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/grad>
- Law School Admissions Council: [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)
- Graduate School Guide: [www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)
- SMU Career Center Online Resources: [www.smu.edu/career/students](http://www.smu.edu/career/students)

## FINANCING A GRADUATE EDUCATION

A number of options exist for financing your graduate education. The four primary types of financial support in graduate school are:

### **1. *Fellowships or Traineeships***

These grants are usually awarded on the basis of academic merit. Some may be based on other criteria, such as cultural background, financial need, or career plans. They are usually awarded by academic department, the university, or a non-profit organization. Fellowships that are most competitive offer generous support (i.e. tuition remission and a sizeable stipend for a number of years), with minimal obligations.

### **2. *Teaching/Graduate and Research Assistantships (TAs, GAs, and RAs)***

Teaching/Graduate Assistantships are career-related positions that typically entail leading a discussion or lab section, grading papers, and being available to help students. Appointments usually range from 10 to 20 hours per week. These assistantships provide a monthly stipend and sometimes tuition remission.

Research assistantships usually are connected to specific faculty projects in the science and engineering fields, as well as the social sciences and humanities. Specific duties may include conducting research, overseeing the day-to-day functioning of a laboratory (i.e. running experiments) and working on articles for scholarly journals. Appointments typically range from 10 to 20 hours per week.

### **3. *Other On-Campus Positions***

Positions such as Residence Hall Counselor or Resident Advisor often carry with them free or reduced room and board and a small stipend. While some graduate students prefer to live off-campus, others find that these positions connect them to the university community and give them valuable skills.

### **4. *Loans***

Loans may come from a number of sources, including the university, the government, or an employer. Loans differ from fellowships in that you are expected to repay the financial aid in the years following graduate school. Current federal regulations deem that nearly all graduate students who are independent of parental financial support (i.e. not claimed as dependents on their parents' federal tax return) are "Independents," making them eligible for federal financial aid regardless of their parents' income level.

### ***Financial Aid Online Resources***

- Free Application for Federal Student Aid: [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov)
- SMU Office of National Fellowships and Awards: <http://smu.edu/nationalfellowships/>
- Financial Aid Information Page: [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org)
- Scholarship Database: [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com)
- Rhodes Scholarships: [www.rhodesscholar.org](http://www.rhodesscholar.org)
- Fulbright Grants: [www.iie.org/fulbright](http://www.iie.org/fulbright)
- Federal Student Aid: [www.studentaid.ed.gov](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov)