Applying to Graduate School

Tips, Timeline, and Tools of the Trade

This guidebook is provided by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), an academic consortium of 12 research universities founded in 1958. Among other activities, CIC universities collaborate to make graduate education more accessible for students from all backgrounds.

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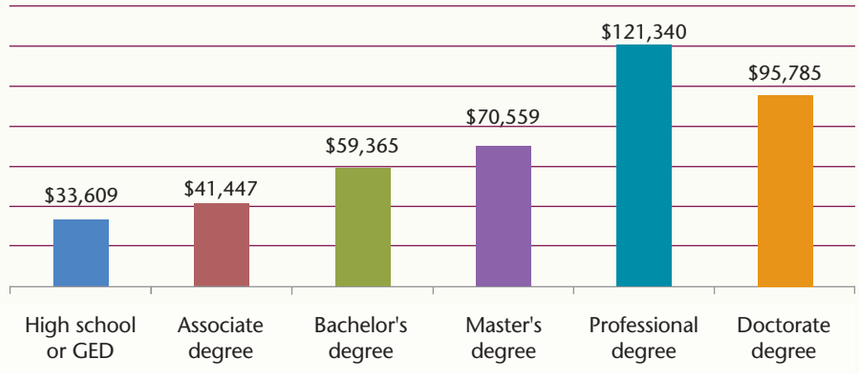
Introduction

Applying to graduate school can be a complicated and time-consuming process. Once you decide that a graduate degree is for you, you face numerous questions: What kind of degree do I want? Where should I apply? What tests do I need to take? This guidebook gives you a quick overview of the things you should know about applying to graduate school—from choosing the right program to putting together a strong application. Keep in mind that the typical graduate admissions process can take as long as six to nine months. To give you an idea of the typical admissions timeline of deadlines and requirements, see the suggested timetable for applications on pages 14-15.

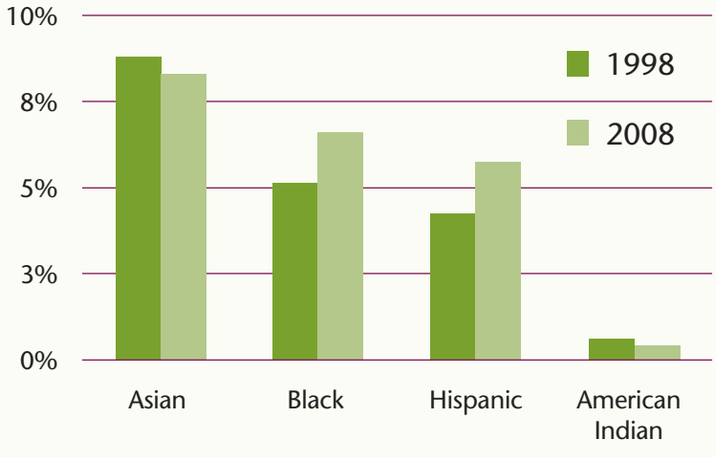
If you are considering graduate school, congratulations. With a graduate degree, you have the potential to apply greater depth of knowledge to your field and to create more options for career growth.

Average Earnings by Educational Attainment, 2007



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. All workers 25 years and older.

Percentage of doctorates earned by racial/ethnic minority U.S. citizens, 1998 and 2008



Source: Survey of Earned Doctorates, Summary Report 2007.

Think big

Does the prospect of discovery and innovation thrill you? Do you have a passion about your field of study? Do you have a desire to understand the world around you? Graduate education gives you the skills and expertise that can open doors to rich and satisfying career opportunities. A graduate education can also bring great personal fulfillment. Today, there are a variety of programs that make graduate school more accessible than ever. There are undergraduate research programs, fellowships, and training grants that are designed to help students from all backgrounds gain access to the very best graduate programs in virtually every field of study. As you consider your professional and academic goals, think big. A world of possibilities is open to you, and there are many programs and organizations ready to support your success.

A graduate degree also increases your opportunities for promotions and flexibility, and it can substantially increase your earnings potential. For example, the average lifetime earnings for a college graduate are estimated at $2.1 million while they are $3.4 million for an individual with a PhD. (*Occupational Outlook Quarterly*). A graduate degree is an investment that can pay off for the rest of your life.

Myths about graduate school

Myth #1: "Some fields of study, like science and technical fields, aren't really for people like me."

Today, all fields of study are open to minority students, and due to the enormous need for a diverse, technical work force, there is great interest in attracting minority students in science, engineering, and technology fields. There are many opportunities to gain research experience and find support for graduate study in these fields.

Myth #2: "I am not sure I want a PhD, so I will just apply for a master's program now and decide about the PhD later."

In many fields of study, the entrance requirements for doctoral programs do not map well to degree requirements for terminal or professional master's programs (e.g., MFA, MBA, MSW). Thus, the master's degree is not an expeditious route to the PhD because many credits will not transfer to the PhD program. Generally speaking, more funding is available to support fellowships and assistantships for PhD students than for terminal or professional master's students. Whatever your educational goals, be aware of the differences between PhD and master's programs in your field.

Myth #3: "I need to start working now. I cannot afford to attend graduate school."

Most PhD students receive financial support that covers tuition and fees and pays a stipend for living expenses, so it is possible to end up with very little or no loan debt from graduate study. Considering the benefit of increased earnings and career options, it is usually worthwhile to earn a graduate degree.

Myth #4: "My undergraduate institution is a small school. A large institution will treat me like a number."

Graduate education is very different from the undergraduate experience. Graduate students work closely with other students and faculty in the program. Rather than being one person in a very large institution, graduate students in each field are part of a small community of scholars. The advantage of a larger institution is that a department is more likely to have faculty in the subfield that interests you and to provide support through assistantships.

Abraham Quintanar
PhD, Spanish, University of Wisconsin
Current position:
Associate Professor of Spanish
Dickinson College

Jobs are jobs. I've had all kinds of jobs, but I was not happy with them. I decided to go to graduate school so that I could pursue how I saw myself rather than being defined by whatever job I had. What I do for a living now can let me be who I am. I have choices about what I study, what to research. Graduate school allows you to choose what you want to do.

If I could, I'd like to go back and get a second PhD. Now that I'm doing research on emotion, I realize who is doing what research and where. I would like to do a PhD in the history of medicine. Medieval studies and philosophy, medicine being philosophy, are tied together. You begin to see some aspects of a complex way of thinking about self and universe, which raises the persistent question, what makes us human, personally, in terms of civilization?

My advice to students who are thinking about graduate school is not to let up on your academic work. Also, look at different kinds of programs. When you identify your top choices, don't look at the name, but look at the program. For example, what kind of research is being done in those programs. If you like something you've read, find out where the author is, what kind of research is being done in that department. Find out if that is a fit for you and the kinds of research you want to do.

In terms of preparing yourself, there is no way to know what to expect from graduate school. Everyone has a different experience. Go about doing your own work in your own way. Do what works for you. You will make mistakes. You may encounter obstacles that seem insurmountable. Don't get discouraged. That is part of the learning experience.

Learn how to navigate your department. It's not going to change just for you. Recruiters come to sell you something, they tell you all of the good things. When you arrive in the program you may feel left out or isolated. If you are unprepared, you are in for a big disappointment. Support doesn't only come through a socializing community in your department or campus. You may get support from people outside of the university; it may come from an unexpected sector at the university. You might feel that the academic culture asks you to give up what you are not willing to give up. The bottom line is this: Be thoughtful, have your own ideas, be productive. Don't let other pressures interfere with the person that you are.

Myth #5: "I attend a minority-serving institution in a place with a lot of diversity in the population. A different kind of place would make me feel uncomfortable."

Graduate school is an exciting opportunity to stretch your wings and discover new possibilities. Most doctoral and research universities offer great intellectual, cultural, and social diversity that mirrors the working world. You are likely to find a welcoming environment with many prospects for creating a very satisfying experience.

Myth #6: "There is no way that a single parent can go to graduate school."

More and more students who attend graduate school come from diverse economic and social backgrounds. Many are returning to school after some years in the work force, and others have families and other obligations. Graduate institutions offer programs and resources to help them be successful.

Myth #7: "I am only a sophomore; I still have several years before I need to think about graduate school."

It is not too soon to begin preparing if you think you might want to earn a graduate degree. Now is the time to explore your interests and career options. Take advantage of undergraduate research opportunities to learn more about your field. Talk to your professors about their career and graduate experiences. Find out what kinds of courses will best prepare you for graduate programs in your field. Your plans may change over time, but by starting now you will discover more about yourself, refine your personal goals, and will be better prepared to achieve your goals.

Try it before you buy it

If you are unsure of whether graduate school is right for you, or if you want to get a preview of the life of a graduate student, consider an undergraduate research experience. See more about the Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP) on the inside back cover.

What will I gain from an undergraduate research experience?

- Get an inside look at what an academic or research career can offer.
- Learn about cutting-edge discoveries being made in your field.
- Acquire lab and research skills, hone critical thinking and writing skills.
- Meet others who share your interests/goals and who have valuable experience to share.
- Establish relationships with faculty who can write strong letters of recommendation.

Kauline Cipriani Davis
PhD, Purdue University, Food Sciences
Current position:
Director of Diversity, School of Veterinary Medicine
Purdue University

My advice to students who are thinking about graduate school is to do your homework. Once you have identified schools that you are planning to visit, be prepared to say what you are looking for, know who you want to talk to, come prepared to ask questions. Treat the visit as a job interview, put your best foot forward. You cannot take a laissez faire attitude. The more informed you are about a place, the more fruitful will be your communications.

I did an undergraduate research experience at Purdue University. If you can do a research experience at a place where you would like to go to graduate school, it is the number one thing you can do to prepare. You get to experience the life of a graduate student in that program, you get to check out the department, meet their graduate students, get a snapshot of what life is like. And if you can get a letter of recommendation from a faculty member in that department who has supervised your research, it carries a lot of weight. It means more than a recommendation from a faculty member who is unknown to the department.

When I was an undergraduate, most of my peers were headed to medical school. I didn't want that, but I wanted to be in a science field. I was looking at alternatives and attended a graduate school fair. There was a representative there from Purdue, so I signed up.

When I started graduate school, I liked academia and could see myself as a professor. I spent a long time in graduate school, and I liked being on campus, around students. Now with my job on campus, I get the best of all possible worlds. I have a good schedule and deal with professors all the time. As a graduate student, I learned the way things work at a university. I also developed critical thinking skills, complex problem-solving skills. Even though I am not in the lab anymore, I use these skills every day.

For those who are thinking about graduate school, learn to reach out. If you have questions, find someone who can answer them. If they don't answer your question, find someone else. But don't take all your information from a single source. Keep asking questions until you get the answers that you need. This attitude will serve you in any kind of job.

Finding the right match

The key to having a rewarding graduate education is selecting the graduate program that best matches your research interests and career goals.

Discover yourself

The first step in deciding whether or not to attend graduate school is learning about yourself and defining your personal goals. What do you find exciting? Where do your passions lie? There are many individuals and services available to you as an undergraduate student to help you learn about yourself.

Your sophomore year is a great time to visit your campus career center. A counselor can help you identify your strengths and preferences and relate them to various careers and fields of study. Your career center can also give you strategies and tools for exploring career choices and the degree requirements associated with those choices.

You can learn a lot about your interests and strengths by getting involved on your campus. Student organizations, volunteer and internship programs, and other extracurricular activities can help you learn about your interests and strengths and learn about research and career opportunities.

Talk to your professors and graduate students about their experiences. They can describe the life of a researcher, why they chose their particular professions, and the steps needed to get where they are.

Questions to ask:

- What is a typical day like? What are your functions and responsibilities? What percentage of your time is spent doing what?
- What do you personally find most satisfying about being a scientist, scholar, or graduate student? What challenges do you face?
- How did you become interested in your field of study? What sorts of changes are occurring in the field? Where is the research heading and where are the new opportunities for research?
- How did you get to your position? What is a typical career path in this field? What are the skills that are most important for a position in this field?
- What advice can you offer a student who is considering this field of study? What courses should I take? What kinds of experiences should I seek?

Choosing a master's or PhD?

The PhD, or doctor of philosophy degree, prepares you for a career in research and teaching, in business, in government, or the nonprofit sector. By talking to professors in your chosen field and consulting career resources, you can gain a better understanding of the career possibilities open to you.

Master's degree programs provide specialized preparation in a field of study. Some master's degrees are designed as an intermediate step toward the PhD. In many fields, however, students enter the PhD program directly after completing a bachelor's degree.

A "terminal" master's degree is the highest professional degree awarded in some fields—for example, the Master of Business Administration, Master of Architecture, or Master of Fine Arts. Some professions require a master's degree in order to work in that field. Master's students can usually expect to pay at least a part of their graduate education expenses.

Once you have an idea about what area of study and what kind of degree you want to pursue, you can begin exploring graduate programs. You might discover new options when you learn about graduate programs and the degrees they offer.

Learning about graduate programs

Your professors can give you an insider's perspective on programs: Which programs are on the cutting edge in your chosen field? Where are the best research facilities in your chosen field? From which programs are the most promising young scholars in your field graduating?

There are also many web sites that can help you identify prospective programs in your chosen field. National rankings can offer some information about prestige and recognition, but be cautious when using this information. The prestige of a particular university may not be a good indicator of the quality of your chosen graduate program or specialization. National professional organizations in your discipline (e.g., the American Psychological Association or the American Chemical Society) may offer helpful hints in identifying programs and learning about the graduate admissions process in your field.

General program locators and rankings

- **BrainTrack: College and University Directory**
  braintrack.com/us-colleges-by-state

This web site lists all U.S. universities organized by state. It includes basic information and links to each institution.

- **PhDs.org**
  phds.org/rankings

The ranking system at PhDs.org allows the user to run customized rankings based on the 1995 survey data collected by the National Research Council. This site allows the user to indicate the importance of a variety of factors and rank programs according to those criteria. The site includes articles about applying to graduate school. (Be aware that the survey data is now some 15 years old and a new survey is presently under way.)

- **GradSchools.com**
  gradschools.com

GradSchools.com offers many articles about graduate education and tips about the graduate admissions process. The site includes a search function for identifying graduate programs by discipline.

- **GradPortal.org**
  gradportal.org

GradPortal.org provides application and funding information for prospective graduate students. It includes a program search feature that allows the user to identify programs by field of study and geographic location.

- **Diverse Issues in Higher Education**
  diverseeducation.com/top100/top100listing.html

Diverse Issues in Higher Education ranks graduate programs in each discipline by minority student participation.

Choosing a graduate program

When identifying prospective graduate programs, bear in mind that where you earn your degree can have a great impact on the direction of your future career. Aim high—do not underestimate your competitiveness. Applying can be expensive, so become familiar with the entrance requirements such as minimum test scores, GPA, and curricular requirements of your prospective programs to make sure that your choices are ambitious, but also realistic.

It is important to align your interests with faculty interests when making graduate school choices. Review the research areas of the faculty. Are there professors who are doing research in areas that interest you? Do the courses and specializations offered fit with your interests and career goals? You increase the likelihood of being offered a research or teaching assistantship if your interests match those of professors and/or courses in the graduate program.

Harwood McClerking
PhD, Political Science, University of Michigan
Current position:
Assistant Professor of Political Science
The Ohio State University

I was a police officer in Mississippi. Work was hard. Doing this instead of going straight through to graduate school gave me a sense of comparison. It may be helpful to do something for at least a year between the baccalaureate and the PhD program.

I worked for 10 years, and then stagnated in my job as a police officer. I needed to get another job for mobility, but I needed a bachelor's degree to do that. Before, school was a bother. At 33, school was a blessing.

One of my professors took an interest in me and asked if I would consider graduate school. He spent a year prepping me for graduate school. He read my personal statement, multiple drafts of my statement. I advise students who want to go to graduate school to read *Getting What You Came For*;* it has advice for getting into graduate school and covers the entire graduate school experience.

Graduate school is both a lonely, solitary experience and a social one. There is no way around the hours and hours you will spend reading the books and articles. Interaction with others is also important. Someone has to mentor you about the written and unwritten rules; and often, the most important rules are the unwritten ones—like which courses you take. Reach out, create mentorship opportunities. Engage your professors, push the boundaries, learn even more.

It is important to know that as a student, you are always "on." In your classroom dynamics, the papers you write, throughout your experience, you can earn or lose points. Think of it as a five-to-six year job interview. Put your best foot forward at all times.

Minority students should be aware that you start every class with a notch against you. At Michigan, some students came in with an aura of star quality because of their test scores, the school they came from, their letters of recommendation. This tends not to be the case with minority students. As my mentor at Mississippi State told me, I was a very good student by Mississippi State standards. My mentor told me that if I display the same kind of work ethic, try hard, ask questions, go the extra mile, the gap will close after one or two years. It is important not to lose faith in yourself.

* Peters, R.L. *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or a Ph.D.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.

You might also consider the status of the professors. It is advisable to choose programs that have associate and full professors in your area of interest. If the only professors in your area are assistant professors or professors emerita (retired), they may not remain for the duration of your program. You need professors in your specialized area of study to supervise your research and thesis, and their research will influence the direction and development of your own scholarship. Senior professors are likely to have more resources such as laboratories and grants to support their students. In addition, your professors will serve an important role as you make the transition to your career.

How many graduate applications should I submit?

There is no optimal number of programs to which you should apply. Many students apply to between five and eight programs. The number of applications you prepare depends on how many programs you are willing to consider, and in part how much it will cost you to apply. It is best to have a "dream" category—absolutely the best programs for you—as well as a set of "strong" programs to which you stand a fairly good chance of being admitted. Finally, you might include a "safe bet"—a program that is likely to admit you and you would be happy to attend if you are not admitted to your top choices.

If you have a list of 10 or more institutions, a little more research about the programs and reflection on your research interests might help you narrow your choices. Not only is it costly to apply, but if you do not have clear reasons for your graduate program choices, this is likely to come through in your application and can lower your chances of being admitted. The application expenses worksheet on page 13 can help you anticipate how much it will cost you to apply.

Apply to graduate school—for free!

The Committee on Institutional Cooperation is offering a FreeApp program for prospective graduate students applying to CIC institutions (see full list on page 28). By using the CIC FreeApp, you can request an application fee waiver (an average of $55 per application) and apply to any of our participating colleges at no cost.

For more information, visit:
cic.net/FreeApp.

If you want to go to graduate school, it is possible. It took me a while to figure it out. I tried junior college twice before it worked. My high school counselor told me that I should work in the factory like my father, who immigrated here from Mexico. I re-took all my high school courses and transferred to junior college. While an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, I did research through the SROP program. It made a great difference in my preparation for graduate study.

To prepare for graduate school, you have to learn good study habits. Get good mentors early on. I was blessed with a fantastic mentor who taught me not just the discipline, but how to get through the program, how to get published, how to present. I stress to my students that they should think carefully about who they want to work with, ask about research and teaching opportunities. What opportunities are there for students to coauthor with faculty, what are the possibilities?

My advice: Do your homework about the program that you want to attend. Don't just pick a name or a department. Get to know the faculty before you apply. Look at their publications, read their works. By the end of your junior or beginning of your senior year, attend a national meeting. There you can meet faculty from many institutions for a low, single price of one trip.

As an undergraduate, make yourself stand a notch above the rest of the pool. Try to set yourself apart early on. Don't be afraid to stretch yourself. Do a senior honors thesis, get involved in the honors college, not just your department. Do whatever you can to set yourself apart. Do things like the Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP), present your research.

Learn to ask for help. Do not be afraid to make mistakes. Have people review your work. Do not be afraid to receive critical feedback.

Ventura Perez
PhD, Anthropology, University of Massachusetts
Current position:
Assistant Professor of Anthropology
University of Massachusetts

Application expenses worksheet

Description	University 1	University 2	University 3
Application fee	$	$	$
GRE general exam fee*	$	$	$
GRE subject exam fee**	$	$	$
Additional GRE scores, if applicable	$	$	$
Transcript fees	$	$	$
Postage fees	$	$	$
Other	$	$	$
Total expenses	$	$	$

* Includes scores for four recipients

** Includes scores for four recipients

Suggested timetable for applications

It is important to have a plan for completing the application requirements. Prepare a timetable with specific deadlines. The graduate admissions or funding deadlines may differ from the graduate program deadline. Be sure that you apply in time to receive full consideration for funding packages.

Summer before your senior year

- ○ Begin to draft a personal statement of your academic and professional goals.
- ○ Explore graduate programs. Become familiar with faculty interests, entrance requirements, and deadlines.
- ○ Contact graduate programs that interest you and request information.
- ○ Review for the GRE. Download FREE GRE PowerPrep software from the GRE web site, gre.org.

  Hint: Even if your prospective program does not require the GRE, national fellowships and other funding sources may request GRE scores.

September

- ○ Share your personal statement with professors you know. Ask their advice about which graduate programs you might consider.
- ○ Consult your campus writing center to review your statements.
- ○ Narrow your graduate program choices.
- ○ Register to take the GRE.

October

- ○ Take the GRE.
- ○ Revise your personal statement, tailoring it to your chosen graduate programs.
- ○ Order transcripts.

November

- ○ Download application forms and complete a draft. Review and edit your drafts.
- ○ Submit completed application forms.
- ○ Ask faculty for recommendations. Give them specific information about deadlines and follow up to ensure that they meet the deadline.

December

- ○ Submit your applications.

  Note: Letters of admission are sent on a rolling basis beginning in February.

January

- ○ Follow up to ensure that supporting documents were received.

February

- ○ Visit your prospective programs, if possible.

March

- ○ Submit a FAFSA. Even if you expect to receive funding, it is good to have other options—just in case.

April 1

- ○ You should receive admissions letters by this date.

April 15

- ○ You must accept or decline offers of admission.

When evaluating a student's application, we look at the overall quality and strength of the application. Does the applicant know what she wants to do? Does she make it clear why she wants to attend our particular graduate program?

Having a good fit is the most important predictor of whether or not a student will thrive in our program. Did this student apply because he feels that it is the best place for him? Will our program serve his intellectual needs and goals? What I mean by that is not that the applicant tells us that this is a fabulous program, but rather do we have the faculty, the courses, and the research here to support the applicant's goals. Do we have strengths in the particular areas that the applicant desires?

An applicant might have a stunning academic record, but if we do not have strengths that match her interests we won't serve her well. She won't be able to get what she needs in order to thrive. There must be a good fit.

Elaine May
Professor of American Studies
University of Minnesota

It is up to the student to learn about what we do here in order to prepare a strong application. How much does he know about our program and the specific fields we offer? It will be obvious if the student just lists areas from our web site. Prospective applicants should look at the web site, but shouldn't stop there. They should find out which faculty do what kinds of work. A strong personal statement might include sentences like, "The work of Professor So-and-So really inspired me" or "I would like to work with this professor because I have read her work and used it in a research paper." They might, for example, comment on the professor's approach in their research. A strong application will demonstrate that the student has been in touch with faculty in the department and that the applicant knows something about the field.

Students should choose their undergraduate courses carefully so that they can get a sense for what they want academically and begin to focus their interests. In addition to course work, they should attend departmental seminars; work with research projects if they can; read books by scholars in their field. Whose work do they find exciting? Where are those scholars located?

We like hearing from students early on. The sophomore and junior year is not too early. We want to see applications from students who can show that our program is a place where they feel they can thrive, a place where we can help them thrive. To prepare such an application, students must do their homework. They should look at our web site, but that is just a start. Go to the library, get books by our faculty, see what they are doing, and contact us.

Creating a strong application

Now that you have identified some potential graduate programs, it is time to begin completing the applications. Admissions committees use your application to determine how well your experience and goals match the offerings and requirements of the program. This overview is intended to help you become familiar with the typical components of a graduate application so that you have the information you need to prepare first-rate applications.

Things to remember

- **Plan ahead.** Allow yourself plenty of time to gather the information you need and to review, revise, and edit.
- **Seek help.** Get feedback from your professors or others in your field of study. Your campus writing center can help you to craft a strong personal essay. The web sites noted on pages 8-9 offer tips and advice on preparing graduate applications.
- **Follow up.** Make sure that you submit materials on time and follow up to verify that all supporting materials are received on time.

Biographical form

Graduate applications typically include a general form requesting standard biographical and academic information, including GPA and test scores. If the scores you report do not match the scores reported by the testing agency or transcript, be sure to give a clear explanation of the discrepancy.

Helpful hint

When you provide your contact information, be sure that it is current and that you monitor your messages. The recorded messages on your voice mail should be professional and should reinforce the image that you want to present to the review committee. Avoid e-mail addresses and recorded messages that are offensive, "cute," or otherwise unprofessional.

The personal statement

The personal statement presents the core of your application. This is where you set yourself apart from other applicants and convince the committee that your experience and interests are a good fit for your prospective program. The graduate admissions committee also uses your personal statement to make funding decisions. If your areas of interest match up with funded research projects in the department, you are more likely to receive an assistantship offer.

Letters of recommendation

You will be asked to provide letters of recommendation. Ask the faculty who know you best and who can comment positively on the quality of your work. Do not feel that you need to lighten the burden on faculty by spreading your requests to multiple faculty members. The reverse is true. They can easily modify a core letter for a number of schools.

Letters from senior faculty in your prospective discipline carry more weight than those from faculty outside of your field or from faculty who are newer in their careers. It is helpful to meet with the faculty who are writing letters for you, so that they can get a clear understanding of your interests and your qualifications. You might provide them with a resume or outline of the courses you've taken; any research experience; or related activities, projects, or term papers you completed in their class. These items will give them something concrete to use in their letters.

Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

The Graduate Record Examination General Test is an assessment of general skills and is used by many programs as part of their basic admissions requirements. Some programs also require that you take the GRE subject test in your discipline. The GRE web site (gre.org) provides an overview of the test and free, downloadable software that can help you review. The web site also provides information for students seeking a waiver of the GRE test fee. It is important that you understand the format of the test and that you practice taking it so that you have a sense for the areas in which you may need to refresh your skills. GRE practice books are also available in your library and local bookstores.

Hint: You may find that the graduate programs you have identified do not require GRE test scores for admission. Some university and national fellowship programs, however, do use the GRE, so it may be in your interest to take the test anyway. It is a good idea to find out whether funding opportunities in your field require GRE test scores.

Writing the personal statement

A graduate admissions committee looks for students who are well-matched to the areas emphasized in the program. The personal statement is your opportunity to demonstrate how your goals and interests align with the courses, faculty, and research areas offered by your prospective program.

A strong statement will:

- show the admissions committee that you have an idea about what you want to study and why you believe it is important;
- demonstrate that you are familiar with the program and that you have sound reasons for applying;
- reflect your intellectual curiosity, motivation, and persistence, or the earnestness of your academic pursuits;
- assure the committee that you will be successful in the program.

An effective personal statement is persuasive; it is intended to convince the admissions committee that you are the right choice for their program. Yet, it is important that you remain true to yourself when preparing your essay. Matching up well with a program does not just mean you are "measuring up" to admission standards; it also means deciding that the program meets your needs and interests. It is a two-way street. That is why it is so important that your statement reflects not only your best writing but your true intellectual interests.

Consider your motivations for pursuing a graduate education:

- What are the experiences that have brought you to this point in your life?
- Why are you thinking about graduate school?
- What do you hope to contribute as a student or as a graduate in your field?

In order to demonstrate why you are a good match, you need to have an understanding about your prospective program. You might consider the following questions:

- Which faculty are conducting research in areas related to your interests?
- What is it about their work that is meaningful, interesting, or appealing to you?
- Does the program offer specialized training or course sequences that fit with your goals?
- Are there specialized research centers or facilities that support the areas of investigation you wish to pursue?

Additional questions you might ask yourself:

- What is special, distinctive, or impressive about you or your life experiences? What sets you apart from the crowd?
- What have you learned about your field that sparked your interest and convinced you that you are well suited to contribute to this field?
- Were you inspired by any classes, readings, seminars, research, or internship experiences related to your field? Have you had conversations with people already in the field that helped shape your interest?
- Do you possess special skills or work experience that enhance your likelihood of success?
- Are there any gaps in your academic record that you should explain?

Crafting the essay

The opening paragraph

Your lead paragraph is generally the most important. It introduces your main ideas and sets a framework for the rest of your essay. Often it is easiest to write this paragraph last, when you have worked out what you want to say.

Tell a story

Your statement should tell a story with concrete details about your life. Describe the events that led you to your professional or educational aspirations. Which experiences helped shape your values?

Be clear

Your essay should provide specific details instead of relying on broad generalizations. For example, rather than stating "my research internship provided valuable experience," a more interesting and persuasive statement would describe the specific skills and insights you acquired: "By transcribing interview protocols and coding the data, I gained a deeper understanding of how teenaged mothers make attributions."

Helpful hints

- Visit your campus writing center for help. They can assist you with brainstorming your ideas, proofreading, style, and grammar.
- Ask your professors and advisors to review drafts of your statement.
- Consult writing and grammar aids. Do not rely solely on the spelling and grammar checks in your word processing software.
- Plan ahead so that you have plenty of time to review, rewrite, and edit your essays.

Accepting an offer

To allow students time to consider multiple options, graduate schools have agreed upon April 15 as the national deadline for final and binding decisions. You must accept or decline offers that you receive by this date. It is also good practice to acknowledge your offers promptly when you receive them. If you apply to multiple programs, you may receive multiple offers. If you receive two offers, and you know that you prefer one over the other, it is a good idea to decline the less desirable offer as soon as possible. This way, the graduate program can extend an offer to another student who may be on a waiting list. Be mindful that you are creating relationships with each of your communications, so be courteous and professional in all of your interactions.

Funding graduate education

Most full-time, full-year graduate students receive some form of financial aid, usually in the form of graduate assistantships, fellowships, or loans. Most PhD students are funded through teaching or research assistantships. Funding for master's students varies by field of study, but many master's students rely on student loans to pay at least a portion of their educational expenses. Professional programs such as business, law, and medicine rarely fund their students.

When selecting graduate programs, ask:

- What proportion of students receive funding and how are they funded?
- What are the stipend levels and benefits provided by departmental assistantships? Is tuition waived with an assistantship or is the student responsible for the tuition costs?
- How long does the average student take to complete a PhD?

Graduate Assistantships

- Generally provide a monthly stipend, plus tuition and health care benefits
- Have a service requirement: teaching, research, or administrative duties
- Have a time commitment that depends on the appointment. Typically, full tuition requires a 20-hour per week commitment.
- Provide training, experience, and an opportunity to network in your field

Graduate fellowships

- Generally provide a monthly stipend, plus tuition and health care benefits
- Allow you more time to pursue your own academic and research priorities because they generally do not have a service requirement
- Build your resume and open the door to many future opportunities
- May come from your academic program, the graduate school/university, or external sources

RoSusan Bartee

PhD, Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Current position:

Associate Professor of Education, University of Mississippi

I am very happy about my decision to go to graduate school. It has provided me with the theoretical and applied knowledge about how to develop and implement educational policy. It is also the means to economic and social mobility.

From the course work to the dissertation, to assistantships and/or internships, a graduate education provides a set of skills that should be transferable. As you learn about your topic, you are training yourself how to think, how to critically analyze other topics. Your particular area of study in graduate school may not reflect the actual work you end up doing, but you develop creativity and skills that will be useful in whatever you are doing.

My education informs the work that I do. I studied equity and access. The views I take—the way that I present information about a project and its relationship to higher education—provide a framework for viewing policies and informs my interactions with stakeholders in the current arena I work in.

If at all possible, do not take a break between undergraduate and graduate study. You are in a process when this type of learning is second nature; it is your way of existing. Take advantage of having your mind being motivated in that way. For those who cannot continue straight away, I encourage you to do work that is meaningful in supporting your goals.

To prepare yourself for graduate school, know that the workload will be strenuous. You won't be able to read everything, but you will learn to critically engage texts, get a basic understanding of critical ideas, draw relationships, learn the context of the material. It is more about your ability to critically analyze issues.

Graduate school is both a solitary and social experience. When you start graduate school, observe the landscape. What are people saying, doing? Become involved in discussion groups. Become aware of your cohorts, what they are thinking; they can be a resource for you. People you know in graduate school become people who can hire you, who can recommend you.

It is isolating as well. You have to read and understand the material yourself. The dissertation is a lonely process—you and your computer, the thoughts that you produce. But it helps to know someone else who is going through the same thing, someone you can call up.

Finding fellowships

Use the Web to search for fellowship opportunities. You can start by visiting the graduate school web sites of your prospective institutions. For example, the Fellowships Office in the University of Illinois Graduate College maintains a list of national and university-sponsored fellowship opportunities at grad.illinois.edu/fellowship. Also, inquire about fellowship opportunities at your campus career center or honors program office.

In addition, use Internet search engines to find fellowship programs and professional societies in your field. Use key words such as "fellowship," "graduate," and words relating to your discipline or research interests.

National fellowships

- **American Political Science Association (APSA) Minority Fellows Program** applicants can be (1) seniors in colleges and universities applying to a doctoral program in political science; or (2) students currently enrolled in a master's program applying for doctoral study at another institution.
  apsanet.org/content_3284.cfm
- **American Psychological Association (APA) Minority Fellowships** support the training of doctoral-level ethnic minority students and postdoctoral trainees with career goals aimed at the mental health needs of ethnic and racial minorities.
  apa.org/pi/mfp/index.aspx
- **American Sociological Association (ASA) Minority Fellowships** support the development and training of sociologists of color in mental illness and disorders and related co-morbidities.
  asanet.org/funding/mfp.cfm
- The **Jacob K. Javits Fellowship Program** awards fellowships for doctoral and Master of Fine Arts students in selected fields of arts, humanities, and social sciences.
  ed.gov/programs/jacobjavits/index.html
- The **National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP)** is intended for students in their early stages of graduate study. It provides three years of support for graduate study leading to research-based master's or doctoral degrees.
  nsf.gov/funding
- **Ford Foundation Diversity Fellowships** provide three years of support for individuals engaged in graduate study leading to a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or Doctor of Science (ScD) degree.
  sites.nationalacademies.org/pga/fellowships

- **National Institutes of Health (NIH) Predoctoral Fellowships for Minority Students** provide up to five years of support for research training leading to the PhD or equivalent; the combined MD/PhD degree; or other combined professional degree and research doctoral degree in the biomedical, behavioral sciences, or health services research.
  grants.nih.gov/training/nrsa.htm
- The **National Physical Science Consortium (NPSC) Fellowship Program** seeks to increase the number of PhDs in the physical sciences and related engineering fields, emphasizing recruitment of a diverse pool of women and historically underrepresented minorities.
  npsc.org

Applying for fellowships

- Prepare a timetable of deadlines and a list of documents you will need to gather.
- Visit your writing center; ask your professors/advisors to review your applications.
- When you apply, ask for university/departmental awards. These may require additional applications.
- Be aware that government agencies and professional organizations have different deadlines.

Loans and outside work

- Complete a FAFSA. Student loan programs are available and most graduate students qualify.
- Inquire about other grants and student aid resources.
- Be cautious about planning to take on work outside of your program. Course load, lab time, teaching, and personal/family obligations leave little time for outside work.

Other funding tips

- Ask about assistantships available outside of your department. Inquire at campus units such as libraries, student affairs offices, and other services units. Also, search the university web sites for potential opportunities.
- Regularly seek out opportunities to apply for fellowships and grants.
- Be wise about managing your money now. This is one threat to success that *you* can control.

Reviewing the funding offer

- It is critical to understand your funding offer before you accept it.
- Assistantships and fellowships usually provide a stipend plus tuition, but make sure you understand the terms before accepting an offer.
- What fees are you expected to pay?
- Does your funding include health insurance coverage? Who pays the premium?

Money management

An important step you can take now to prepare for graduate study is to manage your money wisely. Learn to live on a student budget so that you will avoid the financial pressures that can limit opportunities available to you. Remember, the decisions you make now can make it possible for you to take advantage of opportunities down the road. Know and understand your finances today so that you are well prepared for your future.

Budget

Write down your regular income and expenses. Plan for future expenses like campus visits, the GRE, and graduate application fees. Set limits on your discretionary spending and stick to them. A sample budget worksheet is provided to help you get started.

Get a credit card

Credit cards have become essential, even for graduate students. You will need a credit card to purchase items online, secure plane tickets, rent a car, or stay in a hotel. If you are planning visits to prospective graduate institutions, professional meetings, conferences, or other activities related to graduate study, then you should have access to a credit card.

Manage your credit wisely

It is much harder to dedicate your energy and attention fully to your studies if you are worrying about bill collectors or if you are forced to work extra jobs to pay your debts. Paying your bills on time and keeping your debt to a minimum will ensure that you have access to credit when you need it, but that your credit will be a tool and not a hindrance to your success.

Budget worksheet

Anticipating your income sources and monthly expenses can help you plan for a successful graduate experience. You can find tuition and fee schedules on most university web sites, along with typical housing and cost-of-living expenses.

Cristina Azocar

PhD, Communications Study, University of Michigan

Current position:

Director, Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism

San Francisco State University

"Graduate school is an arduous process. There were times when I was ready to drop out; but without a doubt, I would go back and do it again. It made me a stronger person. Graduate school taught me how to deal with the things that I would be dealing with the rest of my life.

I was told that I needed to take a class on writing because I didn't know how to write. I was told that I needed to drop a class. I was even told that I should drop out of the program. My undergraduate professor described graduate school to me as "paying penance for the credentials that enable you to say what you want to say."

In some ways, graduate school is a game. A lot of people had the perception coming into the program that they were uber-smart, uber-intelligent, the cream of the crop. But then they realized that all of us were good. You have to be good at jumping through hoops, playing the game, being a good strategist. If you weren't a good strategist going in, you learn how to play the game. You learn how to read a lot of material, how to handle a heavy work load. You develop intellectual rigor. People skills are also very important, learning how to work the system.

Community is important. I found a Native American community on campus. The Rackham minority fellowship paired us with other graduate students, and we met twice a week during a summer bridge program. We were able to meet others like ourselves. One or two friendships developed from the group. Even if you are not a joiner, it is important to have some social outlet, to have some sense of community.

When choosing a graduate program, visit the program if you can or talk on the phone with faculty. Tell them, "This is what I want to study, will I be supported?" It took a while to find a faculty advisor. My third year was a crucial turning point. The program hired a new faculty member who needed a graduate student. I went to work for him, and he really pushed me. I finally understood what it was to really work. I was lucky to have someone, an advisor, who was willing to push me, to make me do what was necessary. My work was not related to my advisor's work, but he was an excellent mentor. I knew I could succeed, but students need to have a faculty member who will take you under his/her wings as you develop."

Monthly expense worksheet

Tuition and fees	$
Books and supplies	$
Transportation (bus or rail pass, gas, oil, car payment, travel at holidays)	$
Car insurance	$
Health insurance	$
Rent or mortgage	$
Food	$
Utilities (heat, water, electricity)	$
Telephone or cell phone	$
Snacks/dining out	$
Child care	$
Loans and credit card payments	$
Clothes	$
Entertainment	$
Savings	$
Other	$
Total expenses	$

CIC member universities

University of Chicago
Full-time faculty: 2,160
Graduate students enrolled: 5,885
uchicago.edu

University of Illinois
University of Illinois at Chicago
Full-time faculty: 1,732
Graduate students enrolled: 4,634
uic.edu

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Full-time faculty: 2,013
Graduate students enrolled: 7,823
illinois.edu

Indiana University
Full-time faculty: 1,481
Graduate students enrolled: 4,741
indiana.edu

University of Iowa
Full-time faculty: 1,876
Graduate students enrolled: 2,969
uiowa.edu

University of Michigan
Full-time faculty: 3,282
Graduate students enrolled: 10,301
umich.edu

Michigan State University
Full-time faculty: 2,359
Graduate students enrolled: 5,672
msu.edu

University of Minnesota
Full-time faculty: 2,853
Graduate students enrolled: 5,816
umn.edu

Northwestern University
Full-time faculty: 1,734
Graduate students enrolled: 6,110
northwestern.edu

The Ohio State University
Full-time faculty: 3,096
Graduate students enrolled: 7,158
osu.edu

Pennsylvania State University
Full-time faculty: 2,280
Graduate students enrolled: 5,278
psu.edu

Purdue University
Full-time faculty: 1,907
Graduate students enrolled: 4,928
purdue.edu

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Full-time faculty: 2,905
Graduate students enrolled: 6,921
wisc.edu

Other participating campuses:

Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis
Full-time faculty: 1,955
Graduate students enrolled: 1,596
iupui.edu

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Full-time faculty: 2,225
Graduate students enrolled: 1,029
uwm.edu

Source: U.S. Department of Education 2007. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

The Committee on Institutional Cooperation

The graduate schools in the CIC play an enormous role in graduate education, enrolling more than 76,000 graduate students and producing more than 15% of all PhDs awarded annually in the United States.

We invite you to explore the graduate offerings at our member universities. You can start by visiting the web sites listed at left. Inquire about opportunities to visit the campus and investigate the many degree programs, fellowship opportunities, and extracurricular offerings.

A world of adventure and discovery lies before you when you undertake graduate study. Use this guide as a starting point to create your own map to a successful graduate education and an exciting career.

FreeApp Program

The FreeApp program is an easy way for prospective students to request a graduate application fee waiver for PhD or Master of Fine Arts programs at participating CIC universities. For more information, visit: cic.net/FreeApp.

Summer Research Opportunity Program

If you're interested in research or improving your academic skills, you can put your summer to good use through the Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP). This all-expense-paid summer program gives talented undergraduates the chance to study and conduct research at one of our CIC universities (see list at left). Housing and transportation are paid; a stipend is provided; and all fields of study are supported. For program details, visit: cic.net/SROP.

Alternative Format

If you require an alternative format of this publication (Braille, digital, tape, or large print), please contact the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, (217) 333-8475, or visit: cic.net.

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