Planning for Graduate School

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Is graduate school for you?

- Work experience
- Bridge/postbaccalaureate program
- “Professional” training and schools
- Graduate programs
- Long Term Goals
Types of degrees

• **Masters**
  (Masters, MS, MA, MBA, MFA)

• **Project**
  • Length: approximately 2-3 years
  • Focus: courses and research project

• **Course**
  • Length: 1-2 years
  • Focus: typically only coursework; work load can be heavy
  • Some research may be possible
Types of degrees

• Doctorate and Professional
  (Ph.D., M.D., J.D., Ed.D., D.Arch., D.M.A., etc.)

  • Length: typically 5-7 years in STEM, 6-10 years in other disciplines
  • Focus: research and practice > courses
  • Trend toward “direct” doctoral programs immediately after bachelor’s, possibly with master’s along the way
  • Essential for academic and high-level industry positions
  • Choice of advisor and program is critical and complex
Looking for graduate programs

• Define your interests and goals
  • What courses and/or research have you enjoyed?
  • What are you prepared for academically?
  • What is important to you?

• Choose a field
  • What fields seem interesting?
  • What fields are promising?
  • Which fields integrate well with others?
  • What type of degree is needed for the position you ultimately seek?
Looking for graduate programs

• Learn about schools and departments
  • Philosophy, focus, research areas, size, student profiles, alumni placement
  • “Objective” evidence of excellence: rankings, publications
  • Anecdotal evidence of excellence: reputation
  • Procedures: Web information; various guides; “centralized” vs. “decentralized” graduate programs

• Learn about faculty
  • Research, teaching, and mentoring interests
  • Current student population
  • Publications
    – Is their work interesting?
    – Are they well-known and well-published in their field?
Financial considerations

• **Masters Programs**: Students are **self-supporting** in most Master’s programs and professional schools
  • Limited fellowships- internal or external

• **Ph.D. Programs**: Tuition and stipend (for living expenses) are typically **covered**
  • Support from department, advisor’s research grant or institutional training grant
  • Fellowships, e.g., NSF, NIH, HHMI (apply in senior year or in first year of grad school)
  • External Fellowships
What’s weak?

• Grades and GPA → additional coursework

• Coursework → additional and/or graduate level

• Test scores (GRE, others) → RETAKE

• Research or practical experience → work; postbac program

• Reference Letters → find stronger writers
Applying to graduate programs

Typically, 4-8 customized applications, “reach” and “safety” schools

• Application form
• Personal Statement/Statement of Purpose/Essay
• Academic transcripts
• Standardized test scores
• Letters of recommendation
• Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV)
• Application fee
Action timeline

• Junior Year
  ▪ Engage in undergraduate research experiences
  ▪ Maintain strong academic record
  ▪ Talk to faculty and current graduate students about graduate school (Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants)
  ▪ Attend a professional conference in your field
  ▪ Review professional publications to identify top schools and programs in your area of interest
Action timeline

• **Junior Summer:**
  - Undergraduate research experiences/Programs
  - Draft Statement of Purpose and other general essays
  - Make list of potential recommenders
  - Explore funding options- national fellowships
  - Research schools of interest
    - Look at programs
    - Check out faculty websites- read papers on their research
    - Look at their graduate student academic websites
    - Ask faculty and graduate students about their impressions- @home institution, CMU, conferences
  - Look at application requirements
  - Gather all data necessary for completing application forms
Action Timeline

• **Senior Year-**
  
  • *Applications may be due as early as December 1*
    
    – **By end of September:**
      
      • Discuss options with advisors and mentors and finalize list of schools to apply to
      • Take GRE
      • Complete Statement of Purpose and other essays
      • Secure writers for letters of recommendation
      • Check funding applications- deadlines in Nov. and Dec.

    – **By end of October**
      
      • Complete all essays
      • Start on-line applications
      • Remind recommenders and provide copies of essays and other materials
Action Timeline

• **Senior Year**-

  – By end of November
    • Complete applications
    • Arrange for transcripts to be sent to schools of choice
    • Confirm that transcripts and GRE scores have been sent

  – By 2 weeks before application is due
    • Confirm that application package is complete
    • Confirm that letters of recommendation are submitted
Action Timeline

• Senior Year-
  
  – Early spring of senior year:
    • Program interview- in some programs
    • Learning the outcome
    • Visit programs

  – April 15- deadline to notify schools of intent to attend
Steps to success in the application process

• **Strategize early:**

  • Know yourself: interests, goals, strengths, weaknesses
  
  • Develop multiple trajectories
  
  • Learn about your chosen field(s)
  
  • Investigate which graduate programs will work for you
  
  • Consider who will serve as your recommenders
Application form

• Provide **accurate** information

• Provide **complete** information

• Provide contact information which will be current in the spring semester
Statement of Purpose

• Content
  • Demonstrate understanding of your chosen field
  • Express reasons for your interest in the field
  • Show that you have the appropriate background
  • Discuss your undergraduate projects/practical work in detail
  • Explain reasons for applying to that particular school
  • Identify possible advisors of interest

• Style
  • Use formal style
  • Be concise yet include appropriate details
  • Express enthusiasm, perseverance
  • Avoid sentimentality
Grades and Standardized Tests

- **Grades**
  - Viewed in the context of your undergraduate training
  - Grades in your subject of interest are especially important
  - Required or desired GPA varies with strength of graduate program

- **Standardized tests**
  - Determine which exams your programs require
  - Prepare for your exams
    - Materials from testing services
    - Practice books
    - Review courses
  - Decide whether to take the exam more than once
Letters of Recommendation

• Written by people who know your work
• Must be able to comment on your:
  • ability to do independent work
  • intellectual/technical strengths
  • interests and motivation
  • ability to work with others
• Make arrangements and coach them
  • Ask 2-3 months before letters are due; reminders will be necessary
  • Provide background information (statement of purpose, resume, referral form)
  • Meet with recommenders and talk about your goals and plans, let them know how you want them to represent you
Steps to success in the application process

• **Follow through:**
  
  • Prepare a thoughtful and thorough Statement of Purpose
  
  • Complete accurate applications (proofread)
  
  • Submit application and supporting materials on time
  
  • Support your recommendation writers
  
  • Follow up (online or via communication)
How are admissions decisions made?

• In master’s programs, the academic record dominates

• In doctoral programs, the admissions process is often linked to faculty research needs and interests
  o In some cases, individual faculty make the admissions decision
  o In others, a committee makes the decision

• Evaluation of entire application package
• **Fit** is important
• Consideration in the context of the applicant pool
• Special requests: updated GREs, midterm grades, phone interviews, work experience
• Contacting advisors and recommenders
Which offer should you accept?

• After receiving an offer of admission, try to arrange a visit

• Costs of an interview visit may be covered by the program

• Some programs do not offer admission without an interview

• Some programs hold visitation weekends for admitted students
Visit

- Interviews
- Meeting other faculty, administrators, and staff
- Meeting other students
- Listening or observing classes or research presentations
- Tours of departmental facilities
- Tours of campus facilities and city

- Engage! Have your questions answered!
- Etiquette and Follow-up
Which offer should you accept?

**Factors to consider:**

- Faculty
  - Potential advisors
  - Accessibility and work style

- Requirements

- General environment for graduate study: facilities, resources, atmosphere, location, other students

- Financial support (fellowships, grants, teaching assistantships, research assistantships, required costs and fees)
QUESTIONS?

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