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# 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 DEGREE**

(Masters, MS, MA, MBA, MFA, MET)

- **Project**

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

- **Course**

- Length: 2-3 semesters long
- Focus: typically only coursework; work load can be heavy
- Some research may be possible

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# Types of degrees

- **Doctorate**

(Ph.D., M.D., J.D., Ed.D., D.Arch., D.M.A., etc.)

- Length: typically 4-6 years
- 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

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# Looking for graduate programs

- **Define your interests and goals**

- What courses and/or research have you enjoyed?
- What are you prepared for?
- What's important to you? management or administration, \$\$, teaching, writing, etc.

- **Choose a field**

- What fields seem interesting?
- What fields are **promising**?
- Which fields play well with others?
- What type of degree is needed?

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# 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
  - Publications
    - Is their work interesting?
    - Are they well-known and well-published in their field?

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# Financial considerations

- **Tuition and stipend** are covered in many Ph.D. programs
  - 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- see Fellowship listings
- Students are **self-supported** in most Master's programs and professional schools
  - Research project may be externally funded
  - Possible fellowships- internal or external

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# What's weak?

- Grades and GPA →→ additional coursework
- Coursework →→ additional coursework
- Test scores (GRE, others) →→ RETAKE
- Statement of Purpose →→ REWRITE
- Research or practical experience →→ work; postbac program
- Letters →→ additional letters?

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# 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

# Typical 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

# Typical 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 via the web-
  - Look at programs
  - Check out faculty websites- read papers on their research
  - Look at their graduate student academic websites
  - Look at application requirements
  - Gather all data necessary for completing application forms

# Typical 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 November and December

- **By end of October**

- Complete all essays
- Start on-line applications
- Remind recommenders

# Typical 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
  - **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

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# Application form

- Provide **accurate** information
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- Provide **complete** information
- Provide contact information which will be current in the spring semester

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# Statement of Purpose

- **Content**

- Demonstrate **understanding** of your chosen field
- Express **reasons** for your interest
- 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

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# 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 the testing service
  - Practice books
  - Review courses
- Decide whether to take the exam more than once

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# 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
- Importance: can override weaknesses **or** strengths
- Make arrangements
  - Ask 1-2 months before letters are due; remind
  - Provide background information (**personal statement**)
  - Talk about your goals and plans

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# 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
  - Follow-up

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# 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

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# 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
- Follow up (online or via communication)

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# How are admissions decisions made?

- In doctoral programs, the admissions process is often linked to **faculty research needs and interests**
  - In some cases, individual faculty make the admissions decision
  - In others, a committee makes the decision
- In master's programs, the academic record dominates
- 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 are usually covered by the program
  - Some programs do not offer admission without an interview
- **Factors to consider:**
  - Reputation of the department and the university
  - Faculty
    - Teaching faculty
    - Possible thesis advisors: quality of **public work**
  - Requirements
  - General environment for graduate study: facilities, resources, atmosphere, location
  - Financial support (fellowships, grants, teaching assistantships, research assistantships, health insurance)

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# QUESTIONS?

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