Planning for Graduate School

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June 21, 2018
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
  
  • Develop relationships with faculty and employers who can write strong letters of recommendation
Types of Degrees - Masters

- **Course/Professional Masters**
  - Length: 1-2 years
  - Focus: typically only coursework;
    - work load can be heavy
  - Some research may be possible

- **Project (may be pre-Ph.D.)**
  - Length: approximately 2-2.5 years
  - Focus: courses and research project
Types of Degrees: Doctorate and Professional

- Length: Ph.D. typically 5-7 years in STEM, 6-10 years in other disciplines, Professional - 2-10 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
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, faculty, post-docs, graduate students
Looking for Graduate Programs

- Learn about faculty
  - Research, teaching, and mentoring
  - 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

• 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**

**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
Action Timeline - Senior Year

- Applications due as early as December 1

- By end of August:
  - 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 October - December
Action Timeline - Senior Year

- By end of October
  - Complete all essays
  - Start on-line applications
  - Remind recommenders and provide them copies of essays and other materials
  - Complete funding applications
**Action Timeline - Senior Year**

**By end of November**
- Complete applications
- Arrange for transcripts to be sent
- Confirm that transcripts and GRE scores have been sent

**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
  - Admissions letters sent out
  - Visitation events for programs

- Mid- April- deadline to notify schools of intent to attend
Applying to Graduate Programs

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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
Statement of Purpose

- 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
Grades and Standardized Tests

Standardized tests

• Determine which exams your programs require- GRE, GMAT, Subject Areas, LSAT, MCAT......

• 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
Letters of Recommendation

• Make arrangements and coach them
  • Ask 3-4 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
  • Provide Context Sheet for each program you are applying to
Letters of Recommendation

• Context Sheet:
  • Name of School
  • Why you are applying to that program— from statement you are writing in your letter
  • Who you want to work with at that institution— if you know
  • If there are any issues you want them to specifically address— may be the same for all or different
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.
  - In some cases, individual faculty make the admissions decision.
  - 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!
Which offer should you accept?

Factors to consider:

- Faculty
  - Potential advisors
  - Accessibility and work style
- Requirements for the degree
- General environment for graduate study: facilities, resources, atmosphere, location, other students
- Financial support (fellowships, grants, teaching assistantships, research assistantships, required costs and fees) Cost of Living
QUESTIONS?

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