Graduate and Professional School Planning Guide

The Graduate School Decision

There are so many great reasons to go to graduate or professional school. Graduate school gives students the opportunity to focus on a topic they are enthusiastic about and can open the door to career advancement, financial security as well as a rich and satisfying life. However, before jumping into the graduate school application process, you may want to consider whether graduate school is the right option for you.

The decision to go to graduate school requires careful thought and should not be made lightly. In addition to making a financial commitment, you could be spending from one to seven years enrolled in a program. Reflect and consider the following:

- Do I really love the field enough to obtain an advanced degree?
- Is an advanced degree required to enter my field of interest?
- Am I enthusiastic about continuing my education now? Am I ready for more school or am I feeling "burned out"?
- Am I going to graduate school to postpone entrance into the "real world"?
- Do I have the qualities and skills necessary for success in graduate school?
- Am I making the decision to go to graduate school or am I satisfying the expectations of family, friends and/or faculty?
- Do I have the financial resources and what is the financial cost benefit of attending graduate school currently?

When to attend?

Each year, 25-30% of Ursinus College graduates pursue additional education immediately after graduation. However, a far greater percentage earns a graduate or professional school degree at some point later in their career. Many UC graduates work for a year or more before beginning an advanced degree.

Reasons to attend immediately:
- I am in the "study mode" and continuing now will be easier for me
- I have no major financial pressures such as marriage, mortgage, or children
- My undergraduate loans can be deferred while in graduate school
- I can enter my profession sooner than if I took some time off

Reasons to postpone attending graduate school:
- Senior year is busy; I will have more time to research the right program
- A year of work or service will make me a more competitive & committed applicant
- I need a little time off to re-group, refocus and revive

The Grad School Timeline

The following is a general guide to planning your application process

Junior Year/Summer (before senior year or year before you plan to apply):
- Begin researching programs and discussing plans with your academic advisor, interested faculty and Career and Post-Graduate Development advisors
- Identify appropriate programs, visit websites, and narrow down a list of target schools
- Attend schools' information sessions and/or open houses
- Prepare and sign up for required standardized testing – *complete testing, if possible*

- Explore opportunities for fellowships, scholarships and other financial assistance
- Strengthen your graduate school application by participating in the UC Summer Fellows program and/or completing an honors project in your major.
- Begin to request strong letters of recommendation from faculty & advisors

September/October:
- Begin work on applications and request official transcripts
- Complete all required testing and write first draft of personal statement
- Follow-up with faculty & advisors and continue to request strong letters of recommendation

November/December:
- Get feedback on personal statement and prepare final draft
- Complete all parts of application and mail or submit online. Keep copies of everything you send
- Begin working on financial aid applications
- Remind letter writers of recommendation deadlines

January/February/March:
- Interview or visit potential schools
- Write thank you notes to those who have met with you and helped you
- Relax and wait for your letters of acceptance
- Confirm your enrollment and make the deposit to your new school
- Celebrate!

Researching and Evaluating Graduate Programs
Searching for a graduate school is very different than searching for a college. There are different elements to consider as you pursue a more specialized course of study. Use the following criteria to help guide your decision making:
- The reputation and/or rankings of the university
- The reputation and/or rankings of the specific department
- The curriculum, length of time it takes to complete the degree, and course/research requirements
- The faculty members and their individual research interests
- The number of students and percentage of applicants accepted
- The location and size of the university
- The cost of the program, funding and financial assistance
- Success of the department's graduates

There are many helpful resources for researching and evaluating graduate programs. Consider the following:

- *Faculty* – Faculty often know many of the best programs in their discipline and even know people within those programs. Be sure to consult your faculty about your ideas.
- *Career and Post-Graduate Development* – A large collection of books and directories are housed in the Career Library. Advisors are available to help you navigate the application process.
- *Students* – Talk to students currently enrolled in the programs in which you are interested. Get their perspective on the school, program, faculty, campus culture and quality of life for graduate students.
- *Campus Visits* – If you can afford to go, visit the university before accepting an offer of admission. Some programs will support your travel once you have been accepted.
- *Websites* – Most graduate schools have their own websites with information on their programs, admission requirements, and applications to download. Some general sites for researching programs include:
  - Peterson's   https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx
  - GradSchools.com   www.gradschools.com
  - Princeton Review   http://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school
  - US News and World Report https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools

The Graduate School Application

Completing a competitive application takes time, energy and thoughtful preparation. Don't wait for deadlines to approach. Start early and avoid the last-minute time pressures.

Application and Fees

Many schools have applications available on their Web site for downloading. Some schools prefer the application be typed or neatly hand-written. Apply as early as possible – particularly if there is a rolling admissions process.

Letters of Recommendation

Schools typically require 2-4 letters of recommendation from current or former professors. In choosing your writers, remember that your graduate school is looking to assess your potential as a student and a scholar, so letters from faculty are stronger than letters from past employers or supervisors. Letters are more valuable to the evaluator if they are written by people who know you well and can evaluate your work. (Do not focus on people with important titles- solicit writers who know your work and can provide examples to illustrate your strengths.)

Provide your letter writers with a resume, list of activities, your graduate school essay and other pertinent information that can help them write a strong letter. Make an appointment with your writers to discuss your goals and reasons for applying to schools.

Give your writers a deadline and continue to check-in with them to see if they have completed the letter. To allow ample time for a response, ask your writers early in the fall semester or beforehand if he/she will be on sabbatical.

Personal Statement/Grad Essay

The personal essay is a critical piece of the application packet. A well-written essay could make the difference when all the static pieces of your application (GPA, test scores, etc.) are equal. Spend some time on drafting your essay. Ask several people to review and provide feedback and suggestions. Be concise, and compelling.

Consult the following online resources:
https://www.ursinus.edu/offices/career-and-post-graduate-development/graduate-and-professional-school/
http://gradschool.about.com/od/essaywriting/

Graduate Admissions Tests

Research the programs where you are applying to determine if graduate testing is required or recommended. The following are the most requested graduate exams:

- GRE (for arts & science programs) https://www.ets.org/gre.html
- LSAT (for law programs) www.lsac.org
- MCAT (for medical school) https://students-residents.aamc.org/register-mcat-exam/register-mcat-exam
- GMAT (for business programs) www.mba.com

Additional exams that may be required:
- MAT (Miller Analogies Test) http://www.milleranalogies.com
- DAT (Dental Admission Test)   http://www.ada.org/101.aspx
- OAT (Optometry Admission Test) http://www.ada.org/en/oat
- TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) *When English is not your native language.* http://www.ets.org/toefl

For information on test preparation:
- Kaplan   www.kaptest.com
- Princeton Review   www.princetonreview.com

Official Transcripts
You will need to provide an official Ursinus transcript for all the schools where you apply. Requests for transcripts should be made to the Office of the Registrar. There is a $2.00 charge for each transcript requested. Contact the Registrar's office or visit their Web site at https://www.ursinus.edu/offices/registrar/transcripts/.

Resume
You may be asked to submit a resume with your application to graduate school. Obtain a copy of the Resume Guide in the Career and Post-Graduate Development Office and draft a rough copy. Be sure you bring your rough draft to Career and Post-Graduate Development to be critiqued by a career advisor. To download a copy of the resume guide, go to https://www.ursinus.edu/offices/career-and-professional-development/resume-and-cover-letters/.

Interview
Some schools will require an interview for admission to their graduate programs. Others - particularly large research institutions - cannot offer personal interviews because of the volume of applications. However, it may be in your best interest to schedule time to talk with the faculty who share your research interests. If you do have an interview, be sure to prepare by researching the institution and considering what makes you a good candidate for the program. Review interviewing tips and guidelines in the Career and Post-Graduate Development office and online at https://www.ursinus.edu/offices/career-and-post-graduate-development/interviewing-and-networking/.

Funding and Financial Assistance
There is a variety of aid and funding you can explore

Grants & Scholarships: Assistance that does not need to be paid back and does not require any work in exchange

Assistantships: Research, Teaching and Residential assistantships are available in many departments and usually will include a tuition waiver and stipend

Federal Loans: Stafford Loans and Federal Perkins Loans

State Loans
Public or Private Fellowships
In-State Tuition: sometimes an out of state applicant will be given in-state tuition as a grant

Web Resources for Financial Assistance
- https://www.fastweb.com/
- https://studentaid.gov/
- https://www.ursinus.edu/offices/student-financial-services/financial-aid/igrad-financial-literacy/

Competitive Fellowships
There are several competitive fellowship programs that have outlined an extensive and formal application procedure. Find out more online at https://www.ursinus.edu/offices/scholarships-and-fellowships/.