

GRADUATE STUDIES

Considering a masters or doctoral program in social sciences? Don't make the jump until you've fully considered every aspect!



WHY?

People enroll in graduate school for a variety of reasons:

- Some students enjoy their undergraduate learning experiences so much that they decide to continue in-depth studies in their undergraduate major, or in a different field in graduate school.
- Others attend graduate school because they think a graduate degree will improve their income potential.
- Still others pursue graduate degrees because they are necessary prerequisites for their chosen field of study or are commonly associated with career advancement in that field.

For those who choose graduate school for the right reasons and can devote sufficient time and attention to their studies, graduate programs can be a rewarding experience that will likely pay significant future dividends.

How?

- Research and learn all you can about the program you are planning to apply for. Despite the proliferation of degree types and formats, three general models of graduate programs are most prevalent:
 - **Coursework and Thesis Programs** at the master's level usually require one to two years of formal seminar work followed by a thesis project that takes an additional one or two years to complete. At the doctoral level, these programs usually require students to first complete qualifying exams in one or more fields of study within their major. Students who fail the exams in one or more tries may be dismissed from the program.
Ph.D. programs almost always include rigorous qualifying exams (written, oral, or both) before students advance to the dissertation stage. Many doctoral programs also require students to write a formal dissertation proposal that must be approved by their dissertation committee before the student is considered ABD (“all but dissertation”). The average time a student takes to complete a master's or doctoral thesis varies greatly among disciplines and may even vary among subfields within disciplines.
 - **Coursework and Exam Programs** allow students to forgo the thesis option in favor of comprehensive exams (given orally or in writing, or both). They often require students to take more courses and may maintain higher expectations for students' exam performance. Law programs are generally based on this model as well, but this option usually doesn't apply to doctoral programs.
 - **Coursework and Internship** models are often found in clinical and applied graduate programs, including teaching, social work and counseling. These programs may still require their students to complete a full round of comprehensive exams or a thesis, but the emphasis is generally on the internship as the culminating evaluative experience.

- Keep in mind that graduate seminars tend to be smaller, more rigorous, and more focused on one subject for in-depth study. You will likely read more in a shorter period of time in graduate school than you ever did in school before.
- Also note that graduate programs are usually smaller and their admissions criteria more competitive, so the students in your seminars will likely be more competitive too. In fact, some programs and individual professors encourage competition among students in the hope of generating better work from everyone.

IS GRADUATE SCHOOL RIGHT FOR YOU?

- Do you have a particular career sector in mind that requires a graduate degree** to start (e.g. practicing law) or to advance beyond a particular point (e.g. non-profit management)? Then you should first think seriously about whether graduate school is right for you and whether now is the right time to apply.
- If your desired career field does not require graduate level of training for entry or even middle-level positions, **you might consider delaying the start of graduate school until you are sure you want to remain in that career field.** By working for a few years, you might have a better idea about what you want from graduate school and a better understanding of how to get it.
- Ask yourself if you'd like to see the work environment before you commit yourself to a graduate program.** Some graduate admission officials (e.g. MBA programs) value candidates' work experiences beyond the four-year degree. Also, as a salaried employee of a public or private organization you may qualify for tuition assistance to help offset the costs of your graduate education.
- To understand whether graduate school is right for you, **talk with your professors.** Ask them about the careers associated with specific graduate degrees, and their opinion on the pros and cons of attending graduate school to attain your goals.
- You may also want to **talk with your current employer and other professionals in your desired career field.** This can help you to understand how much they would value pursuing a graduate degree now versus working to gain further on-the-job experience.
- If you have already decided to pursue graduate education, you should **make an appointment with the program coordinators in several graduate programs you are considering.** They can provide information about the program's strengths and specific requirements as well as about the types of students who are currently enrolled.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PROGRAM FOR YOU

Once you decide that graduate school is the right choice, you will need to systematically explore your available options. Because new programs are constantly being developed, choosing a short list of places where you will apply will be more complicated than you think. Once again, your professors will be the best initial source of information.

- While national rankings are helpful in identifying a range of program possibilities, they are no substitute for more in-depth comparisons by you.
- As you explore different alternatives, make sure to ask: "How long on average do students take to complete the degree?" "What percent of students enter the program but fail to finish?" "How many faculty teach in the graduate program?" "What is the student-to-teacher ratio in a seminar?" "Are faculty assigned to students as advisors or mentors, or do they just teach the courses?" "Does the program help students with job placement support?" "Are there opportunities for internships, fieldwork, research assistantship or other forms of faculty-student collaboration?"
- You might weigh other variables including the location of the program: Is the program located in a place where you want to spend the next two to six years?
- Whenever possible, visit potential schools personally in order to see the facilities first hand and talk with some of the faculty and students.

GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

Applying to graduate school does not have to be a scary ordeal. The following guide may help you organize your efforts



PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION MATERIALS

- You should do your homework on each program you are interested in and know their specific requirements. Reading the program information on the web is often a good start. Obviously, you want to attend a university that has a strong reputation in your particular specialty. For example, University "X" may have several leading professors in American politics, but fewer professors who study International Relations. Other programs may be on the cutting edge of methodological research and pay less attention to American politics. Consider this point in making your decision.
- When researching graduate programs, you can also inquire about funding for PhD students, including fellowships and assistantships. For ideas about what questions to ask departments before enrolling in a graduate program, you can check our Key Questions to Consider/ Graduate Student Questions to Ask info sheet.
- As you review each program's application materials, you should pay particular attention to the application deadlines. To be considered for financial aid, scholarships or assistantships, applicants generally need to submit their application materials a month or more prior to the general admission deadline.
- You should read the program information carefully. Sometimes students note that they wish to work in an area the school does not offer, or with a faculty member who has relocated, retired or passed away -and get rejected immediately.

STANDARDIZED ENTRANCE EXAMS

Most accredited graduate programs require applicants to submit scores from a standardized exam. Some programs may allow applicants to forgo the admissions test if their undergraduate GPA is above a certain level, whereas others require the completion of the appropriate standardized test no matter how high the applicant's GPA may be.

- As soon as possible, determine first whether you need to take a test, and then the exact test required.
- The standardized tests required for most programs include the following:
 - **Graduate Record Examination (GRE)** is required by many programs in humanities and social sciences (including political science). Scores on the GRE are determined by your answers to multiple choice questions grouped into verbal (reading comprehension, vocabulary skill) and analytical sections (mathematics through simple geometry and formal logic problems). Some programs also require applicants to take a subject-area test.
 - **Law School Admissions Test (LSAT)** consists of multiple-choice questions in sections testing reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical reasoning. A 30-minute writing sample is also administered at the end of the test. The Law School Admissions Council does not score the sample, but copies are sent to all law schools to which you apply.

- **Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT)** is used by most business and management programs. Like the GRE and LSAT, it tests verbal, quantitative and analytical skills. Unlike the other two, the GMAT's analytical section requires two essays.

- You cannot effectively “study for” these tests in the traditional sense. At the same time, it pays to familiarize yourself with the question types, the scoring method used and some widely accepted test-taking strategies.

GPA / TRANSCRIPTS

- Admission officials will look for solid evidence that you have the academic skills and work ethic to do well in their program, so most schools require official transcripts from all schools you attended beyond high school.
- Generally, your cumulative GPA is considered your official GPA – calculated through from the grades you earned you ever took, including the ones that did not apply towards your undergraduate degree.
- While GPA is important, programs may place emphasis on grades earned in academically rigorous courses such as constitutional law for law school applicants and quantitative methods for political science applications.
- Most graduate programs seek ‘well rounded’ students who have done more in their lives than study hard and get good grades. Do you have significant work experience? Are you active in community affairs? Have you traveled extensively or lived in another country? These may be considered positive factors, and this is where your personal essay makes a difference.

PERSONAL ESSAYS

Beyond the obvious opportunity to show you can write well, a strong essay can:

- Make the case that you are someone who will not only get good grades, but also make a significant contribution to the program
- Effectively offset certain weaknesses in your credentials or help explain why your GPA is not as high as it should be.
- Incorporate details about you and reinforce your particular strengths as a candidate.

Your statement is only as good as the effort you put into it. Many applicants delay drafting their statements until near the application date, and it shows. To get it just right you should expect to spend many hours on your statement and provide a draft to your letter-writers.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Most graduate programs require at least two letters of recommendation from professors or others who can speak knowledgeably about your academic skills and personal attributes. If you diligently cultivate your contacts and make the effort to get to know your professors (and more importantly, give them a chance to get to know you), then you will be positioned to request and secure good letters.

To maximize your chances of receiving a strong letter of recommendation, be sure to follow the basic protocol:

- Give your professor (or other letter writers) plenty of advanced notice and be clear about the final deadline.
- Provide your letter writer a copy of your draft statement, a resume, and if requested, any prior academic work submitted to their class or other classes.
- It is also a good idea to hand deliver these materials, if possible, so your professor (or other letter writers) can connect a face with your name.
- Provide all required forms and self-addressed and stamped envelopes for non-electronic submissions.