

Preparing for Graduate School



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Where can I find more information?

Graduate and professional school information is available in the Helmke Library (LB), Academic Counseling and Career Services (ACCS), and may be available in various academic departments. ACCS has some graduate and professional school catalogs and copies of the *Graduate School Guide* available. Information about graduate admissions tests (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, etc.) is available through Testing Services (Kettler 232B, 260-481-6600). Make an appointment with one of our staff members or a faculty member in your department to review your graduate school admissions strategy.

- ***Published Guides:*** Peterson's Guides to Graduate School available on-line at www.petersons.com is a highly recommended series. In addition to program statistics, there is also information on program offerings, admission and contact information. Another good resource is www.gradschools.com
- ***Professional Journals and Associations:*** It is a good idea to find out which faculty members are publishing in professional journals in your field—read their author profiles to find out where they are teaching. Professional associations often publish lists of accredited programs, and you can either look on the association web site or write to the association for information.
- ***Published Rankings:*** Groups publish rankings of graduate programs each year. *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Gourman Report* and *MacLeans* are good places to start. These provide lists of nationally known programs in your field of interest. It is important to remember that these rankings are subjective and do not provide information about professors, job placement records, financial aid possibilities or politics.

Considering graduate school?

There are many reasons to pursue a graduate education. Some of the best reasons for enrolling in a graduate program are the love of a particular subject of study and the desire to study it in depth, and/or the need for an advanced degree to enter the profession of your choice.

Unfortunately, some students will use graduate school as a way to temporarily delay career decisions. Students who are apprehensive about entering the job market should carefully evaluate their decision to enter graduate school. In some instances, an advanced degree will increase your marketability, while in other instances additional work experience in your field will be more relevant. Consult with a staff member in ACCS for more information.

Many students will also face pressure to attend graduate school from parents, peers, or mentors. Make sure any advice taken also reaffirms your own professional goals. Graduate school is self-directed, and it can be difficult for a student to be successful in graduate school when not self-motivated.

Prepared to commit to a career field?

Perhaps you are interested in attending graduate school but are unable to select a specific field or degree program. You will want to spend some time defining your interests before graduation. Visit the ACCS career resources library, use DISCOVER (a computerized career exploration package), talk with faculty members, read educational institution literature, and consider doing an internship or co-op. If those exercises aren't helpful, you may want to consider gaining a year or two of work experience to enhance your perspective.

Have you given some thought to your long-range career and lifestyle goals?

Whatever your motives are for attending graduate school, it is a good idea to think about the impact this decision will have on your life. Will the degree prepare you for a specific occupation or career field? If so, what is the employment outlook for that field? When you select a field of graduate study, you are also defining a profession and lifestyle. Make arrangements to talk with professionals in that field about the benefits and liabilities of that path. Currently enrolled graduate students are also useful sources of information.

A full-time Master's program will typically take two years to complete, while Ph.D.'s and some professional degrees require three or more years. Part time enrollment will require additional time and may even be discouraged in some universities. During this time period you will focus intensely on your academic subjects and the individuals in your program. You will typically forfeit a competitive salary, workday routine, and leisure time. Are you comfortable with the thought of living the lifestyle of a student for a few more years?

Is it worth the financial investment?

Given the costs that you and/or your family have incurred over the past few years, this can be a legitimate concern. Everybody places a different value on education, and ultimately you will need to decide if graduate school is worth the financial sacrifice. Before making that decision, however, you should familiarize yourself with potential funding sources. Fellowships, assistantships, or scholarships may be awarded by individual departments or institutions as well as outside organizations. Institution-based aid most frequently takes the form of a graduate assistantship. Graduate teaching or research assistants work part-time in exchange for a stipend or tuition reimbursement. Federal loans are also available to many graduate students. The types of aid available to you will vary tremendously from one institution to another. Make sure you investigate these options carefully before making any decisions.

Deciding Factors

Once you've made the decision to attend graduate or professional school, you'll then need to evaluate which institutions and programs are best suited to you. It is also very important to understand how the application process works. In deciding where to apply and ultimately which graduate program to enter, there are many factors to consider.

Reputation

Is the program/institution nationally recognized? Recognized on a regional or local level? For those of you, who choose to look into program rankings, be advised that there is no single rating for graduate or professional schools which is universally accepted. Read several different reports and ask faculty members about the reputations of the programs you are considering.

Program of Study

What emphasis does the program use? Theory? Research? Case Study? Thesis vs. Non-Thesis? How many students are enrolled in the program? What are their academic backgrounds?

Geographic Location

Is this an area in which you want to spend two or more years? Ties that you develop here could also lead to jobs in this area. Also, be sure to consider the cost of living in the area when weighing total expenses. Look into on-campus and off-campus options.

Time Commitment/Attrition

How long does it take to complete the program, and how many students drop out?

Post-Grad School Employment

Where do graduates of the program typically find work? What are the job market trends in your chosen field? How much assistance is provided by the institution to find employment?

Entrance Requirements

Do you meet the prerequisite requirements, GPA, and graduate admission test scores?

Faculty

Are the faculty conducting research in areas that are of interest to you? Are professors seen as being on the cutting edge of their field? What have they published? What is the student-faculty ratio? Have you visited the campus to meet with any faculty to discuss the program?

Facilities

What type of housing is available? How extensive and available are labs and facilities? How comprehensive is the library? What computer and laboratory resources are available?

Cost and Scholarship/Aid

How will I pay for school? What are the average starting salaries of graduates in this field? Will I be able to support my loan payments? Is financial aid available and what sort of time commitment will that require? Keep in mind that it can sometimes cost less to go to a school that seems expensive at first. Internships, fellowships, and assistantships that offer tuition and a stipend in exchange for teaching or working on campus can offset the costs of graduate school.

The Application Process

Gather information early. It is a good idea to begin seriously considering graduate school at least a year before you begin further study. Application deadlines vary, and it is important to know when a particular institution's deadline is well in advance. Generally speaking, the deadlines fall between January and March. Applications by those requesting consideration of financial support (scholarships/assistantships) always have earlier deadlines. Some schools have rolling admissions.

To obtain applications, send a neatly written or typed postcard requesting information to the schools of your choice. Request an application, catalog, and any specific information they may have on the program in which you are interested. Most schools also have information available on their websites.

Each field has different requirements, and schools offering the same type of degree may have different requirements. It is therefore important that you read the information available from each program and decide what needs to be completed before applying. Colleges and universities usually require specific graduate admissions tests, and departments sometimes have their own requirements as well. Most programs will require the following items:

Application Form

Make sure it is neat. Before typing your final version, it might be helpful to prepare copies for practice versions.

Essay

The essay varies from school to school and is often the most difficult part of the application process. Your essay should be well organized, succinct, customized, and proofread. Remember to stay on topic and consider your audience. The essay is your chance to demonstrate why you want to attend graduate school, your strengths and achievements, and why you are interested in a particular department or program. The essay should represent your best writing efforts. It is a good idea to ask for input from others on your essay. Faculty members who are involved in graduate programs are often good mentors in this process, and you can also take advantage of the writing lab to have your essay proof-read. You can contact the Writing Center at: 260-481-5740. Keep in mind that, when evaluating essays, admission committees may consider the following:

- Expectations of the program and future career opportunities
- Major areas of interest
- Writing ability
- Research or work experience
- Immediate and long-term goals
- Education background
- Reasons for pursuing graduate studies at that institution and in a particular field
- Maturity level
- Personal uniqueness – what you have to add to the diversity of the entering class

Transcripts

Official transcripts for IPFW students in Indiana University programs can be obtained by contacting the Office of the Registrar (Kettler 107). There is a \$4.00 charge for this request.

Official transcripts for IPFW students in Purdue University programs must be obtained from the Office of the Registrar at the main campus in West Lafayette:

Office of the Registrar
Purdue University
1095 Hovde Hall
West Lafayette, IN 47907-1095
Phone: 765-494-6153
Fax: 765-494-0570

Standardized Tests

All standardized tests are offered periodically throughout the year. The commonly taken tests are the GRE (for most academic disciplines), GMAT (business), MAT (psychology, education), LSAT (law), and MCAT (medicine).

Prepare for your exam by studying test guides and software, enrolling in test preparation courses, or taking practice tests. Guides are available at libraries and bookstores.

Check with the school to which you are applying to see when you should take the test. It is a good idea to take the entrance exam during your junior year or the beginning of your senior year. It typically takes six weeks for your scores to reach the schools to which you are applying. You may retake the exam to improve your score, and the results are valid for up to five years.

Contact Testing Services (Kettler 232B, 260-481-6600) for more information regarding these tests.

Letters of Recommendation

It is a good idea to start this process early and allow enough time for the authors of each letter to complete the task; provide your references with at least a month to complete the recommendation letter. You should select faculty and professionals who know you well and are recent references. Ask them if they can make a strong recommendation for you. Prepare them with the following information: recommendation form, due date, stamped and addressed envelope, and supporting documents such as a resume, transcript, and research papers. Make sure they know your deadlines. It is a good idea to select at least one extra in case you fall short. Remember to thank your references and stay in contact with them.

Application Fee

Don't forget that most graduate schools require an application fee.

Interview

Some graduate schools require you to appear for an interview. It can be a very important opportunity for you to persuade faculty and administrators from that department or discipline that you are an excellent candidate for their program. The ideal candidate is a mature, thoughtful, well prepared person who has a mission and clear vision of his/her life. You can practice for your interview by scheduling a mock interview at ACCS.

Finally, keep copies of everything and check on the status of your application to ensure all materials were received by your desired program(s).

Application Timeline

End of junior year

- Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs
- Talk with your advisors about application requirements
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission tests
- Investigate national scholarships and financial aid

Summer before senior year

- Request application materials
- Take required graduate admission tests
- Visit schools of interest
- Write your application essay
- Check on application deadlines and rolling admissions
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.

First semester of senior year

- Obtain letters of recommendation
- Take graduate admission tests if you haven't already, or retake if so desired
- Submit completed applications

Last semester of senior year

- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Financial Aid profile, if required (<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>) and turn in at the beginning of January
- Check with schools to ensure application file is complete
- Send fall transcripts
- Once accepted, visit programs to which you have been accepted
- Send deposits and registration material
- Notify other colleges and universities that accepted you of your decision so that they may admit students on their waiting list if you choose not to attend
- Send thank you notes to people who wrote you letters of recommendation, informing them of your success