



Keuka College

# GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

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# Considering Graduate/Professional School

## **Is Graduate School the Right Choice?**

Graduate school means an extensive commitment in terms of time, money, and hard work. Some programs can take anywhere from two to seven years or more to complete. Remember, graduate school in itself is not a plan; it is a step to get you where you want to go. Therefore, you must decide how graduate school fits into your plans and examine where you want to be in the long run, both professionally and personally.

## **Where to Begin:**

Begin your consideration of graduate school by talking to people. Speaking with parents, alumni, friends and siblings is a valid and valuable source of information; the more people you speak with, the better. Conduct informational interviews with current graduate students at different stages of their graduate education. Talk to both graduate and doctoral candidates who have been working on their degree for some time, and also to those who have been working on their degree for only a semester. Ask them:

- How are you feeling about your decision to pursue a graduate degree?
- How do you feel about getting a job once you complete your degree?
- What are your long-term goals?
- How does graduate school fit in with your goals?

Make sure that you speak with faculty members. Faculty often keep up with current industry trends in their specific fields, and are a wonderful resource with their expertise and knowledge of that field. Choose individuals who have different perspectives and backgrounds: those who have just started their careers, those who have just received tenure, and those who have been working for years. Consider asking the following questions:

- What were your career options once you completed this degree?
- What made you decide to become an educator?
- Do you know anyone who obtained this degree and pursued other job areas of the field?
- Can you recommend other faculty members at Keuka College or other institutions who might be willing to speak with me?

## **Self-Assessment**

Deciding to attend graduate school should not be a hasty decision based on limited information. Making an informed decision about pursuing a graduate degree requires in-depth self-assessment and long-term goal setting. Before applying for further study, become aware of the working conditions, employment prospects, and physical and mental requirements of continuing your education. Also consider the more immediate demands of graduate school life, such as research, coursework, papers, and teaching.

The following questions will help you assess how your needs, interests, values, skills, and goals compare with the demands of graduate education:

- What are my long-range and short-range career goals?
- Is graduate study necessary for me to achieve these goals?
- Do I have the interest and abilities to be successful in a graduate program?
- What type of value, if any, do I place on attaining a graduate degree?
- Am I mentally and physically prepared to undertake such a long-term academic commitment?
- At the present time, do I have other needs that conflict with pursuing a graduate degree?
- Can I realistically invest the time and money required to pursue another academic degree?

# Program Selection

## Degrees

Some graduate degrees are academic while others are professional in orientation. *Academic degrees* focus on original research, whereas *professional degrees* stress the practical application of knowledge and skills required for practicing in the profession. For many fields, the Master's may be the only professional degree needed for employment. Some examples are the Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.), the Master of Social Work (M.S.W.), and the Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.). For other careers, the doctorate is necessary for practicing in the field; such degrees are the Doctor of Medicine (M.D.), the Juris Doctor (J.D.), and for college teaching in a specific discipline, and the field of science, the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.).

## Resources

You can use many resources to begin exploring your graduate program options. Here are a few resources you may want to start with:

- <http://www.petersons.com> -comprehensive online guide to graduate schools
- <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/rankguide/rghome.htm>

Use these websites and resources to research potential schools, *then* write for applications, catalogs, and financial aid information approximately one year before your intended matriculation date.

## Things to Consider:

Remember, a program should meet your individual needs, interests and goals. When reviewing graduate programs, you should consider:

- Prominence and/or accreditation of the program
- Flexibility of the curriculum and length of the program
- Departmental courses and offerings
- Theoretical or pragmatic approach to the subject matter
- Philosophical and professional attitudes of the faculty members and the department
- Current research, publications, and professional involvement of the faculty
- Specific specialties of and interests of the faculty

- Application requirements (test scores, essays, interview, etc.) and required background and credentials of students
- Availability of career services and academic support services
- Financial aid opportunities, cost and residency requirements
- Size, geographic location, type and availability of housing, and community environment
- Resources for research information and assistance

We also recommend that you consult school catalogs and graduate bulletins from each institution. Most graduate school catalogs include a summary statement along with admissions information, which outlines a profile of accepted candidates from the previous year. The summary should include average GPA and GRE scores, average age and gender, minority status and undergraduate institution. If the information is not included in the packet you receive, you may request it from the admissions office. Also consult professional journals and association publications to find out which professors are conducting research and publishing in your area of interest; you may want to write them for advice on the best programs to consider given your stated interests.

It is also wise to ask for a placement report from the graduate school you are considering. Many schools produce such documents as a matter of routine and will be happy to share them with you. The report will tell you where their graduates have been placed and what salaries they are earning. The information is usually broken down by discipline and sometimes by geographic area.

### **Graduate Exams:**

Most graduate schools require that you take an exam and submit the results with your application. Which test you will need is dependent on which degree area you plan on pursuing. Those students going on to law school will need to take the LSAT, those headed to medical school will take the MCAT, more business-oriented schooling will require that you take the GMAT, and most other fields require the GRE.

**Current bulletins and registration materials for the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, and MCAT may be picked up at Career Services in the Center for Experiential Learning.**

Read the test bulletin carefully and thoroughly. You will find explanations and examples of the types of questions and, in some cases, a practice test. Career Services also has information on Kaplan test preparation courses. It is usually a good idea to register and take these tests early so that you may retake them for a better score if necessary (With the exception of the LSAT, which should be taken only once if possible.)

# The application process

Applying to graduate school can become complex, time consuming, and difficult if you are not well organized and prepared. In general, the procedure for applying to graduate school is similar to the procedure you followed in applying to your undergraduate college. The primary differences are the emphasis on strong recommendations and clearly articulated goals on the part of the applicant.

Application requirements differ substantially among institutions and programs, so read each school's materials conscientiously to make sure you file a complete and timely application. Application deadlines can range from August before senior year (for graduate study in medical school) to July before matriculation in the fall (for schools with rolling admissions.) Keep in mind the following requirements when applying:

## Application Forms:

- Follow instructions carefully and provide accurate information.
- Tailor your communication to specific aspects of the graduate program.
- Complete the forms online, or by using a typewriter or pen.
- Include all requested documents and materials: résumé, fees, autobiography, etc.
- Check all deadline dates for early admissions, financial aid, and notification of acceptance. These dates are published in university catalogs and should also appear on the application.
- Always make copies of your records before sending in the application.

## Reference Letters:

- Usually, two or three reference letters, also called letters of recommendation, are needed from professors and/or employers to complete your application. Schools often specify who should write the letters and what issues should be addressed.
- The best reference writer is one who has high regard for your work, knows you well, has credibility, and is a good writer.
- Give your reference writers the school's recommendation forms with stamped, addressed envelopes and enough supporting material to enable them to write a good, detailed letter on your behalf. This material may include a cover sheet reminding them of classes taken with them and projects you have done for them, a transcript, a résumé, a research paper, a copy of your application essay, and/or other documents that will assist them.
- Approach your references early in the fall of your senior year to give them time to write before other academic pressures mount.
- To have your reference letters filed and sent from Career Services, stop in and fill out the credential file paperwork. You may then have your reference writers send their letters there. Once we receive the letters, we will file them in your credential file and notify you of their receipt if you so request.
- To then have your credential file sent out to potential graduate schools, submit a *Request for distribution of credential file* form, stating which letters you need to have sent and to whom the letters need to go with a complete address. **If you waive the right to see your letters, Career Services can forward your letters directly to the school, but cannot by law give you a copy to include with your other materials.**

## Educational Transcripts:

- Official transcripts of your undergraduate coursework must also be sent to the graduate schools; contact the Registrar to have your transcripts sent.

- Admissions committees will review your transcripts with regard to the rigor and types of courses taken, the course load per semester, and your grades. The reputation of the undergraduate school will also be taken into consideration.

### **Statement of Purpose:**

Perhaps the most important of all your application essays is the Statement of Purpose. A Statement of Purpose should not be confused with a personal or autobiographical essay, nor is it a prose version of your transcript. Most graduate schools will ask you to explain to them why you are seeking acceptance to their program. Your Statement of Purpose should prove to the admissions committee your interest in and dedication to the subject of study. This is an important and time-consuming aspect of the application because it is your opportunity to put a face or personality with impersonal test scores and GPA.

- This is one measure of your ability to write, so be meticulous about spelling, grammar, and writing style.
- Since a graduate program means extensive work with one or two faculty members, it would be wise to research the faculty in your area of interest. Know who they are, and research and read what they have written. Committee members will see that you have done your homework if you show your interest in studying a specific topic, explain why, and elaborate on your familiarity with the work done by faculty members.
- Ask your faculty, Career Services advisor, and/or references to critique your essay for content. They often will be able to tell you what to stress and what to delete. Your essay will take time to develop, so begin working on it the summer before you apply.
- Organize your statement to be clear, specific, detailed and concise. Think of how your background, skills, abilities and goals match the characteristics and opportunities of the graduate school/program.

Your Statement of Purpose is a way to distinguish yourself from other applicants. Admission committees will be evaluating the following: motivation and commitment to the field of study; expectations regarding the program and career opportunities; major areas of interest; research and/or work experience; educational background; immediate and long-term goals; reasons for pursuing graduate education in a certain field at that institution; maturity; and why you would add to the diversity of the entering class.

### **Tips on Writing a Statement of Purpose:**

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| <b>Be Organized</b> | Your statement should be well thought out and structured; develop your major ideas in an orderly fashion, using examples where needed. |
| <b>Be Positive</b>  | Sell yourself using positive attributes; explain any weakness in your academic record and emphasize your strengths.                    |
| <b>Be Concise</b>   | Say what you have to as efficiently as possible (use words economically, no long sentences) in about one and one-half pages typed.     |
| <b>Be Clear</b>     | It should say exactly what you want it to say, no ambiguity.   |
| <b>Be Honest</b>    | Do not inflate your achievements, and do not underestimate your potential.   |
| <b>Be Personal</b>  | Remember, it's your "Statement of Purpose," don't philosophize, talk about you.  |

### **Graduate Admissions Deadlines and Decisions**

Preparation and planning are key to effectively meeting graduate admissions deadlines. Research and discover the specific time requirements for submitting applications, test scores, financial aid information, and other related materials. Develop a checklist of requirements, noting all pertinent deadlines. (Utilize the "Application Checklist," on the last page of this handout.)

# Financing Your Graduate Education

A major concern and obstacle to pursuing an advanced degree is the monetary obligation. If you are willing to pursue a variety of financial aid avenues, you should be able to finance the cost of your graduate education. Be aware that financial aid deadlines are usually earlier than the comprehensive application deadlines. Many programs will not communicate these deadlines unless you ask. Financial aid information can be found in most graduate/professional school catalogs and/or specific departmental brochures. Some areas to explore:

## **Fellowships and Grants:**

- These are outright awards usually requiring no service to the institution in return. Awarded on a competitive basis, grants vary in terms of amount and length of funding.
- Explore institutional, private, and governmental fellowship opportunities. Do not limit your application to one type of grant because it may take several combined awards to fund your graduate education.
- Consult faculty and the Career Services Library resources for information about national fellowships and grants.

With both grants and fellowships, the applications need to be completed and turned in on time. Do your homework, use Career Services resources to find out which grants or fellowships you might be eligible for well in advance so that you are ready to send the applications out before the deadlines.

## **Loans:**

- Remember that any undergraduate loan can be deferred while you are a full-time graduate student.
- Most institutions have loan programs for graduate students including private, state, and federally sponsored loan information. Visit <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov> or <http://www.finaid.org/loans>
- Make sure to submit your tax information as early as possible.

With loans, the application process is lengthy; be sure to get your materials in early to allow for resolution of any discrepancies the government may find between your tax return and application. The government will require verification forms if your data does not mesh and it can cause significant delays. To save yourself hassles, make sure you do not knowingly or unknowingly falsify any information on your application: if you are married, be sure your social security number matches your married name; if your parents are divorced, be sure to ask which parent's income taxes you need to turn in with your application. Attention to these matters early on will save you a headache later.

### **Graduate Assistantships:**

- Teaching and/or research assistantships are common opportunities for financing your advanced degree. These awards usually carry full or partial tuition remuneration plus a stipend.
- Your commitment normally involves a 10 to 20-hour per week workload dealing with teaching, tutoring, proctoring exams, developing lesson plans, and/or performing a variety of research activities.
- Assistantships typically are available through the specific department to which you are applying; however, many related areas of study might also have opportunities available.
- Competition for these positions can be intense. Apply early and always submit a résumé with your inquiry. If possible, visit the department and arrange a personal interview.

### **Resident Assistantships:**

- Graduate programs also may offer assistance in the form of resident assignments involving room, board, and stipend by working as managers in undergraduate residence halls.
- These comprehensive opportunities many times also include tuition remuneration with the assignment.
- Competitively based, obtaining a resident assistantship will involve utilizing your job search skills. Always include your résumé and a cover letter, requesting an interview for available jobs.
- Inquire about these opportunities at the institution's residence life office or student affairs office.

### **College Work-Study Programs:**

- Eligible students are provided part-time jobs on campus. These federally funded programs are usually administered by the institution's financial aid office.

### **Additional Employment:**

- Several college communities offer a wide variety of employment opportunities and welcome graduate students to apply. Local businesses and industries may have agreements with the institution for part-time placement programs.
- Explore temporary employment for local part-time jobs.

Finding employment at graduate school is a daunting task. These jobs and opportunities will not always be openly advertised or presented to you. You **MUST** take the initiative (and your résumé) and go to the different departments and offices that might have employment opportunities. Talk to people around campus; classmates who are closer to graduation, professors and other office staff, they may know of opportunities!!

# Timeline

Researching and applying to graduate schools is a very time-consuming process. In order to facilitate the procedure, an ideal timeline has been provided to give you a quick overview of necessary steps and an appropriate time frame for completion.

## **Junior Year, Fall & Spring:**

- ✓ Get to know your professors and consult their expertise
- ✓ Talk to advisors about application requirements.
- ✓ Use the Career Services resources to find and identify programs.
- ✓ Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs.
- ✓ Speak with alumni, faculty, parents, and friends about their graduate experiences.
- ✓ Narrow your list of schools.
- ✓ Pick up test bulletins at Career Services
- ✓ Investigate national fellowships and scholarships.
- ✓ Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission tests.

## **Summer Before Senior Year:**

- ✓ Identify reference writers and request letters of recommendation.
- ✓ Request application materials, school catalogs, and financial aid information from selected schools.
- ✓ Check on application deadlines and rolling admissions policies.
- ✓ For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may feel the need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.
- ✓ Visit institutions of interest if possible.
- ✓ Register for fall graduate admissions tests.
- ✓ Study sample test questions. Enroll in a test prep course if needed.
- ✓ Begin applying for fellowships and scholarships.
- ✓ Begin writing application essays and your Statement of Purpose.

Junior year is a good time to explore your options. Take a look at your interests and how they match with different graduate programs, talk with alumni and professors in your field of interest, and research graduate schools carefully to find the right fit for your needs.

### **Senior Year, Fall:**

- ✓ Take graduate admissions test(s) if you have not already done so.
- ✓ Request that reference writers send letters to Career Services to begin your credential file, or obtain and manage the letters yourself.
- ✓ Apply for assistantships, fellowships, grants, etc.
- ✓ Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Financial Aid PROFILE, if required.
- ✓ Mail completed applications.
- ✓ Request that transcripts and letters of recommendation be mailed if you have not obtained them to include in your packet.
- ✓ Make plans to visit selected institutions during winter break.

### **Senior Year, Spring:**

- ✓ Check with institutions **before** the deadline to ensure your file is complete.
- ✓ Keep track of acceptances, wait lists, and rejections.
- ✓ Visit institutions that have accepted you.
- ✓ Evaluate offers of admission and make your decision.
- ✓ Send a deposit to the institution of your choice.
- ✓ Be sure to notify the schools you have declined so that they can go to their wait lists.
- ✓ Send thank you letters to people who wrote your recommendation letters, informing them of your success.
- ✓ Upon graduation, forward an updated transcript to the institution you will attend in the fall.

You may not be able to adhere to this timetable if your application deadlines are early, as is the case with medical schools, or if you decide to attend graduate school later. Keep these application requirements in mind and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.

### **Taking Time Off Before Graduate School:**

If you are planning to take time off before graduate school, you may still benefit by taking several steps before graduation:

- ✓ Stop into Career Services and fill out the paperwork to start your credential file.
- ✓ Ask your reference writers to write your letters and send them to you or to Career Services. Your letters will remain on file for ten years post-graduation. Generally, professors will be able to write a more effective letter while you are still fresh in their minds than if they are trying to remember you several years after you have graduated.
- ✓ Take required admissions tests. Usually candidates achieve higher test scores while still in school, rather than after being away from the student role for an extended period. Schools will accept test scores up to three years later, sometimes even longer.
- ✓ Gather information, you have easiest access to information about graduate school while you are still a student. Take advantage of the resources at Career Services and talk to faculty for suggestions about strong programs in your field of interest.