

Whitman College Student Engagement Center

GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

SHOULD YOU GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?

How can you determine if graduate school is the next logical step for you? Some students pursue post-graduate studies merely because they lack a sense of direction. They see it as a way to put off dealing with a career choice and a job search.

Graduate study should not be a postponement of the inevitable entry into the working world, but should be clearly related to your career and life goals. The graduate degree you choose to pursue should be important for entry into or increasing your opportunities in a particular field.

The decision about whether or not to attend graduate school is an important one. In order to understand your reasons for pursuing a graduate education, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are your career goals? How would graduate school affect these goals?
- Is it probable that you would change course after gaining some experience in the working world?
- Would a break from campus life benefit you? Would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after taking time to work for a few years?
- Would a post-graduate degree enhance your job and salary prospects in your chosen field?
- Will it be easier and/or beneficial to enter graduate school in your field directly after college or after gaining experience?
- How much will graduate school cost? (Consider tuition, room, board, books, personal expenses, etc.) Will you need to add to your debt burden to pay for it?
- Is there a possibility that a future employer might pay for you to attend graduate school?

It is ***absolutely essential*** to specify and clarify your goals regarding graduate study before applying. Graduate school applications will include questions about your career choice and why this degree will assist you in reaching your goals. You need to be able to respond effectively to these questions.

As you investigate your possible choices after graduation, be sure to consider the fact that gaining relevant work experience can help you clarify your goals and enhance your application to graduate study.

SELECTING & RESEARCHING A FIELD OF STUDY

The first step in the graduate school decision process is choosing a specific field of study. There are two types of graduate study programs:

- **Academic** programs focus on in-depth study of a given field. These are often research oriented and can be both Master's and Ph.D. programs.
- **Professional** degrees stress the practical application of knowledge and skills required for a particular career field, such as a Master's of Business Administration (MBA), a Doctor of Medicine (MD), or a Juris Doctorate (JD).

Before you begin the application process, you need to make two important decisions:

- In what specialization or area are you most interested?
- What degree do you wish to earn?

In the decision making process, your professors can be your most valuable resource. Also consider speaking to friends or family who have completed or are currently enrolled in graduate study as their first hand experience may give you some valuable insights.

You may want to search the Career Consultant Network in the Student Engagement Center to locate alumni who have completed the degree you are considering. They could give you some good information about their own experiences, the institutions they attended and how they are using their degrees.

The Student Engagement Center Web site will connect you with graduate study resources, including information about programs in different areas of study, as well as identify options to help fund graduate study.

GRADUATE SCHOOL RESOURCES

The internet is the best resources for exploring graduate school options. Nearly every graduate school has a Web site containing program information, much like an on-line catalog. Here you can research schools, contact the admissions office, request applications and course catalogs, and much more! We would recommend spending an afternoon browsing the web pages of any schools in which you might be interested.

Visit the Student Engagement Center's "Graduate Schools" page for links to some excellent Web sites to research schools.

ENHANCING YOUR GRADUATE SCHOOL CANDIDACY

If you are still in school, you can enhance your chances of acceptance into the graduate school of your choice by becoming involved with related undergraduate research and activities which reflect your interest in this field of study.

- Review your course selection, and with the help of your faculty advisor, identify classes which could potentially **strengthen your background academically**.

- **Training and research experience** can complement a solid academic performance. By taking advantage of independent research projects, collaborating on work with faculty members, or engaging in your own thesis construction, you can demonstrate a willingness to undertake in-depth research in a field of your choice and grow to know members of your department quite well.
- **Serving as an undergraduate teaching or laboratory assistant** will not only help confirm your own career goals, but also indicate a level of commitment to your academic field. For example, Whitman has opportunities to become tutors, research or lab assistants, and/or proctors.
- **Getting to know your professors** can increase your comprehension of the classes and subject matter, as well as provide a means through which to strengthen your letters of recommendation. By working with individual faculty members on projects, attending department colloquia, participation in clubs and academic societies (e.g. American Chemical Society), or attending other events involving faculty-student interaction, you can become better acquainted with faculty in your department.
- Many disciplines have **professional organizations** in which you can become a student affiliate. In some of these organizations, you receive journals with recent developments in the field and information on preparation programs. In addition you will learn of upcoming conferences, conventions, and possible job openings. This type of professional involvement will enhance your resume for assistantships.
- You should also consider **related community service opportunities or internships**. These experiences provide invaluable practical knowledge.
- Consider becoming involved in **extracurricular activities** which demonstrate a high degree of dedication and leadership potential.

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

Personal Essays

Compose the essay carefully; ask professors and the Writing Center to critique your writing. You will want to be brief, concise, and stick to the information requested. Avoid use of slang and words too elaborate for the purpose at hand. Write something memorable and unique, but not too personal or strange. It is important that you communicate why you wish to attend graduate school, what you hope to gain from the experience and details of your future plans. Tailor the essay to each school's philosophy and requirements. Describe which parts of the program appeal to you and why you have chosen to apply to this school. The Student Engagement Center has copies of [Graduate Admissions Essay: Write Your Way Into the Graduate School of Your Choice](#) by Donald Asher, which is a great resource.

Standardized Tests

Many graduate schools require that you take an entrance exam. In the Student Engagement Center, you can find information for the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT - required of most MBA programs), Graduate Record Exam (GRE), Law School Admission Test (LSAT) and Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). In addition, we have guides for some of the GRE Subject Tests.

Official Transcripts

Admissions committees always require official transcripts from each college or university attended. These must be ordered in writing from the Registrar's office. They must be mailed directly from the University Registrar of the institution to which you are applying. Most colleges and universities charge a fee for official transcripts, but they are free from Whitman. More information about requesting transcripts from Whitman can be found on the Registrar's Web site www.whitman.edu/content/registrar/transcripts.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are an essential component of your application. Make sure to ask professors and previous employers to write these letters early in your application process. Your references should speak to your ability to do graduate level work, your academic accomplishment and skills. Do not send in more letters to an institution than were requested.

Financial Aid

If you are planning to apply for financial aid, you will need to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which can be found at www.fafsa.ed.gov.

Check out the Post-Baccalaureate Fellowships, Scholarships and Grants Office Web site for funding opportunities, which can be found at www.whitman.edu/fellowships.

Many graduate schools offer **graduate or teaching assistantship positions** which usually provide a stipend (the amount varies with the school and with the major field) and often even a fee waiver for tuition costs. The application process for these positions is generally handled directly through the academic department or a centralized office of graduate appointments.

You may want to consider assistantships or work opportunities in other parts of the university. Often residence life positions are available to graduate students from various majors. These positions often include a stipend as well as room and board. Hiring is handled through the residence life department.

Resumes and CVs

Some schools require that you enclose a resume or CV as a part of the application process. You can get assistance writing these in the Student Engagement Center.

Keep in mind a resume or CV will certainly be required if applying for Graduate or Teaching Assistantships or other employment opportunities.

Selection Interviews

Many schools require an interview prior to acceptance into the program. Your effectiveness in such an interview is dependent upon your level of confidence, which in turn is dependent upon the amount of preparation. Consider attending the Student Engagement Center's Interview Strategies Workshops or scheduling a mock interview.

TIMETABLE FOR CHOOSING AND APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Use this timetable to review your choices and actions as you consider graduate school decisions. Plan to recheck this timetable at the end of each semester to make sure that you are progressing effectively in preparing for and applying to graduate schools.

JUNIOR YEAR

- With the help of your faculty advisor, select courses beyond the general college requirements which will enhance your graduate school preparation.
- Notice authors of articles or research in your field of interest, if it doesn't say which university the author is from, you should Google their name to find out. Check out that university as a possibility.
- Note your professors' research areas. Get in touch with those professors whose research interests you and investigate ways in which you can get involved in learning more about it.
- Try to talk to recent alumni who are now graduate students. Ask them what graduate student life is like; what kind of study load you can expect in their specialties; which professors can provide detailed information about graduate school; and which professors you should work with on research projects. The Student Engagement Center's Career Consultant Network can assist you in targeting such alumni.
- Begin preparation and register for the appropriate graduate school entrance exam(s). By taking these tests in the spring of your junior year, you will have the assurance that your scores have reached all programs before the deadline. Also, you will have more time during your senior year to work on other parts of the application.

BEGINNING OF SENIOR YEAR

- Check with the Registrar and your department advisor to confirm your eligibility for graduation.
- Speak with faculty who are knowledgeable about graduate schools in your areas of study. Bring a copy of your transcript and resume so that they can recommend schools which may best match your interests.
- Request bulletins, brochures, assistantship information, financial aid forms, and department application forms from schools that you are considering.
- Register for and take the entrance exam if you have not previously taken it. Remember scores are not immediately available after you have taken the test – it often takes up to six weeks to get them. Plan ahead! Send your test scores to Whitman College (the code is 4951); the test center will send them out to the universities you request for free!
- With the help of the Student Engagement Center, prepare a resume to supplement your graduate study and assistantship application.

- Request a student copy of your transcript from each undergraduate institution you have attended. Check for errors since any changes may take a while. Don't wait until the application deadline to do this! You may either miss the deadline or be forced to submit an incomplete transcript. Obtaining a transcript from another institution may take several weeks!

NOVEMBER OF SENIOR YEAR

- Narrow down your list of possible schools. Check the application deadline for each school.
- Graduate schools generally require from 3 to 5 letters of recommendation. Remember to ask professors and supervisors for these early! At least a month in advance. Provide them with as much information as possible, including information about the program to which you are applying, resume or CV, etc.
- Begin working on your personal statements and other required essays.
- Request that your entrance test results be sent to all schools to which you have applied.

DECEMBER OF SENIOR YEAR

- Prepare final copies of application materials. Everything should be submitted at least one week before the deadline. Be sure to include the necessary fees with your applications.
- Request, through the Registrar's Office, for your transcript to be sent to all the institutions to which you are applying.

JANUARY-APRIL OF SENIOR YEAR

- Prior to the deadline, call to verify that your application materials, references, transcripts, etc., were received.

DEFERMENT

Universities are unlikely to consider a deferment and usually prefer that students apply when they are ready to attend school. If you are awarded a prestigious fellowship or research opportunity they may allow you to defer your start date, however, if you receive an assistantship, you will probably lose that award. Consider your reasons and plan out your request before you ask, because deferment is not something that is typically granted.

ACCEPTING AND DECLINING OFFERS

You may be notified by telephone or in writing that you have been accepted for admission into a program or that you are an alternate on a waiting list.

- One method for dealing with making your final decision is fairly simple. When you have received two acceptances, decide which of the two is best for you and send a letter to the other school letting them know of your decision. Repeat this comparison and decision process as you receive each new offer.

- Another method is a bit more involved. Make a spreadsheet of the school you applied to and the most important factors in your decision, quality of the program, location, cost, assistantship offer, etc. Then rank all of these factors for each school.
- As soon as you have reached a decision of which offer to accept, send an acceptance letter to the school immediately and notify the other schools to which you have applied of your decision. They will appreciate your thoughtfulness in opening the way for another student.
- After you have accepted admission, do not take your commitment lightly. Reneging on your decision for anything other than a very serious new life development may negatively affect your reputation with other institutions and with your sponsors.

Graduate school is an exciting and rewarding experience that allows you to grow both professionally and personally. The Student Engagement Center is prepared to assist you throughout the decision making and application process, and has a number of resources that provide useful information.

Drop by the Center during our office hours (9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.) and take a look at our various resources. You can also make an appointment with one of the Career Counselors to discuss your personal essays, recommendations, resume and other aspects of your graduate school search and application.

GOOD LUCK!