

Before making the decision to apply to graduate school, it is important to understand the type of career you want. Is a graduate degree required for entry into or advancement in your career? Will the cost of graduate school be worth the investment? This handout addresses deciding on a program, the application, and the timeline.

Deciding on a program

Find out what graduate programs will be cost effective for your career. Many career fields have national associations who give accreditation to programs that meet specific requirements. Research the accreditation important to your field and what schools maintain this distinction.

- Is the program research based or practical application?
- What is the reputation of the program/ faculty/ graduates in the field?
- Does the program require an Internship or field experience for graduation?
- Do they allow spring entrance or fall only?
- Are classes offered in the evening or during the day?
- What is the faculty/ student ratio?
- What is the program's ranking nationally?

Using resources like the *U. S. News and World Report* <http://gradschools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com> or *Newsweek* <http://education.newsweek.com> can be helpful to see ranking lists. Touring the campus, meeting with faculty and students, and speaking to professionals in the community will help you gauge your fit with the program.

Deciding on a location

Before deciding on a program and university, do some research on the city you may be living in for the next 2+ years. Consider weather, cost of living, housing availability, culture, and any prominent religions or politics.

Be realistic with yourself on what you are comfortable compromising on and what is a necessity. Make sure to discuss this with your significant other and support system. Graduate school can put a lot of strain on you and your relationships. It is important you have the support of those around you before getting started.

Funding

Graduate school can cost thousands of dollars each year. Unless you plan to pay out of pocket you will want to find options. Some options include scholarships, fellowships, teacher assistantships (TA), graduate assistantships (GA), grants and student loans. Scholarships may be available through the university and other sources. Use websites like www.fastweb.com or www.scholarshipexperts.com to search for scholarships.

TA and GA positions are available on many campuses and provide partial to full tuition payment and may even include a stipend for living expenses. These positions are highly sought after and competitive, so it is important to research the application process on each campus and apply early. The student loan process for graduate school is the same as undergraduate programs and a FAFSA www.fafsa.ed.gov is needed to apply.

Application Process

This section includes tips to make the application process easier. We'll cover gathering materials, transcripts, application fees, testing, letters of reference, interviewing, and statement of purpose.

Gathering materials

Keeping all of your materials organized will be essential to your application process. Every program will require different materials to be sent and have a range of deadlines and start dates. Be sure to have all of this information in one place for easy reference.

Applying to schools

The act of applying to graduate schools can be very expensive in itself, so it is common to limit the number of programs. The application fee can range from free to hundreds of dollars depending on the program. Separate applications may be required for the university and the program, and often require sending multiple copies of official transcripts which may also cost money. Transcripts at MSU can be requested from the Registrars' office free of cost at www.missouristate.edu/registrar/transcripts.html.

Testing

Many programs will require a standardized test like the GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT, or other similar instrument and can cost hundreds of dollars each time it is taken. Taking the tests early can be helpful, but make sure you are prepared. Most test will send the scores to the university and will often average the scores instead of taking the highest. For more information about testing, contact the Counseling and Testing Center at <http://counselingandtesting.missouristate.edu>.

Letters of reference

Letters of reference are a very important part of the application process. You will want to ask professors and supervisors who know you well to write these letters. Make sure you give them enough information to write the best letter possible; a transcript, a resume, and a copy of your statement of purpose are helpful. Also, remember to give them stamped and addressed envelopes to send the letters directly to the schools with a list of deadlines (see Reference handout for more information).

Interviewing

Many programs require an interview before making decisions. This may require you taking a trip to the university, so budget accordingly. Be sure to practice your interview skills by making an appointment for a mock interview in the Career Center (See interview handout for information on how to prepare).

Statement of purpose

Many applications will require a statement of purpose, personal statement to be sent. Remember to follow the guidelines and answer all the questions asked. Showing a genuine interest in the field and the specific program will go a long way. Telling stories can be helpful. In showing this and is more engaging to the reader.

The more you know about the mission and values of the specific programs, the more prepared you will be to demonstrate your fit within the culture. Have a variety of people read these to make sure they are free from errors and to get suggestions for improvements. The Writing Center at <http://writingcenter.missouristate.edu> can help you structure your thoughts and give suggestions.

Graduate school application timetable

All times indicated below are approximate. Carefully notice deadlines for the specific programs you are considering. Typical advice is to begin preparing a year before you wish to begin the program. Complete all applications early, because the sooner you apply the better your chance of acceptance.

Junior year/ summer

- Determine your reasons for pursuing an advanced degree; clarify your goals
- Browse directories to graduate programs and decide where to apply
- Visit university websites, request catalogs and application forms
- Talk with faculty to gain advice and opinions
- If possible, take a graduate class, checking first to ensure the credits will transfer
- Determine application deadlines for admission, financial aid, and assistant or fellowship application
- Ensure you have satisfied admission requirements (such as shadowing and foreign language)
- Learn test requirements, deadlines, and test dates. Prepare for tests. Test application booklets are available from the Missouri State Counseling and Testing Center (Carrington 311)
- Contact school concerning the possibility of visiting and sitting in on classes
- In your junior year. Take standardized tests and arrange for the results to be sent to the university to which you are applying. This will allow you to repeat tests if you are dissatisfied with your scores. Knowing your scores early also will determine which schools you qualify for.

September/ October

- Request letters of recommendation from your references. Discuss your application with your references and establish reasonable deadlines for completion. After 3 weeks contact them to check on progress. Provide them with your resume and curriculum vitae to aid them.
- Write drafts of your personal statements. Following are helpful sources:
Stelzer, Richard J. *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*. Princeton, NJ: Peterson's, 1997.
Stewart, Mark Alan. *Perfect Personal Statements*. Princeton, NJ: Peterson's, 2002.
Also look at the information on the Career Center's website:
<http://careercenter.missouristate.edu/StatementsofPurpose.htm>
- Request all of your official transcripts. Allow approximately two months

November/ December

- Complete essays and have others review them (Writing Center, Career Center, colleagues, etc.)
- Complete and mail applications early. Most are due between January and March.
- Apply for grants, scholarships, assistantships, and fellowships. The earlier you apply, the better your chances.

January / February

- If applying for need based financial aid, you may need to file your federal income tax returns.
- Keep photocopies of all of your applications and documents for your records
- When mailing applications, allow time for universities to receive the packets. Postmarks usually don't count.
- If you decide to defer enrollment, check with the graduate department concerning policies.
- If your application is rejected, consider contacting the school and discussing reasons. Obtain suggestions for getting admitted in the future.

