



Career Center
Lewis & Clark College
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GEARING UP FOR GRAD SCHOOL

There are many reasons you might choose to pursue a graduate degree, including...

- You're mentally and emotionally ready for a new challenge.
- You're pursuing a career in academia.
- You need the credential to get professional licensing.
- You're looking for a career change
 - For example: switch from practitioner to administrator
- You're looking for a career/salary advancement.
- It's the next logical step for you professionally.

It is important to recognize that **taking on graduate school is a big commitment**. Graduate school requires devoting a lot of time and financial resources, so the best reason to pursue a degree is because you love what you do!

WHEN SHOULD I GO?

Around graduation, consider: Am I ready for another three to eight years of education? Taking time off from school between undergrad and graduate is a good idea for some, but there are no right or wrong answers when it comes to this. If you have any doubts about your educational and career aspirations, **take your time and rethink your goals**.

Ask professors and professionals in your field for recommendations about next steps and their experiences. Do they wish they had taken time to pursue experiences prior to commencing graduate studies?

Some considerations

- **You're exhausted** – This is understandable. After all, you have just spent 16 or more years in school. If this is the primary reason for taking time off, consider whether your fatigue will ease over the 2-3 months of summer. Alternatively, if you're certain that graduate school is in your future, perhaps you want to keep up your academic momentum.
- **You need to prepare** – A year off may enhance your application. You could take a prep course or other standardized tests for graduate admissions.
- **You need research experience** – This experience can enhance your application and give you insight about the experience of working in your field. One way to achieve this experience is by maintaining your undergraduate contacts with faculty and seeking research experiences with them. These individuals can also write personal letters of recommendation.

- **You need work experience** – Some fields require or recommend some work experience. Taking a year to work is an opportunity to earn an income and save for the future. Graduate school is expensive and it can be challenging to fit work hours into your busy schedule. This experience can also inform you on the nature of work in your field.

Addressing concerns

Students often worry about whether they will return to school after a year or two away from the grind. While this is a realistic consideration, graduate school requires a lot of motivation. **Taking time to hone your professional interests is valuable in the long-term.** Students who are more interested and committed to their studies are more likely to be successful. Time off may help increase your desire and dedication to your goals.

Attending graduate school several years after completing your Bachelor's is not unusual. Over half of graduate students in the US are over the age of 30. If you're waiting to attend graduate school, be prepared to explain your decision, what you learned in your time off, and how it improves your candidacy for admission.

WHAT DEGREE DO I WANT?

The two main categories of graduate degrees are Master's and Doctoral, though there are many hybrid combined-degree and certificate programs at many universities.

Master's (1-3 years to complete)

- Degrees in just about every field exist, as Master's programs are constantly evolving.
- Professional Master's are designed for employment or advancement within a field.
 - For example: Master of Business Administration (MBA)
- Academic Master's are designed for intellectual growth. They can also be a prerequisite for doctoral work in a field.
 - For example: Master of Science

Doctorate (3-6 years to complete)

- These are the highest possible earned academic degrees.
- Professional doctoral degrees stress practical application of knowledge and skills.
 - For example: Doctor of Medicine (MD) & Juris Doctor (JD)
- Academic doctoral degrees focus on advancing knowledge through original research.
 - For example: Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

WHERE SHOULD I GO?

Ask professionals and use your resources

A great first step is to discuss your decision to attend graduate school with your professors and ask for their input. They have been through this process and can offer meaningful advice. Take note of journal articles in your field and ask yourself: who is writing and where are they teaching?

Other resources:

- Peterson's Guide to Graduate Programs
- The Gourman Report
- The Princeton Review
- US News & World Report

Another strategy is to find professional programs that fit with your long-term career and personal plans. If you don't know anyone personally who can talk with you about graduate programs, you can seek advice from LC alumni. They are typically happy to help fellow Pios. Use LinkedIn to find professionals to connect with about your field of interest. Information on these resources can be found on the Career Center website.

Choosing the right graduate school: Objective and subjective criteria

A list of criteria can be very helpful in evaluating different programs. The following factors are adapted from Howard Figler's PATH: A Career Workbook for Liberal Arts Students. Additional academic, geographical, and personal factors can be incorporated as well.

Make a list of desirable traits of the following criteria:

- Fit of the program with your career goals
- Program's purpose and goals
- Availability of practical/professional experience
- Success of graduates in your intended discipline
- Success of graduates in obtaining professional positions
- Size of classes
- Faculty: student ratio
- Faculty representation
- Diversity of faculty and student body
- Availability of financial aid (and alternative funding resources, such as graduate assistantships)

After compiling your list:

- Prioritize your list with your personal criteria in mind and research programs that fulfill your specific needs.
- Contact programs you are interested in.
- Visit schools to get a better idea of the campus environment, faculty, and programs.
- Meet with graduate admissions counselors.
- Request to speak with current students in the program.
- Speak with alumni from the program.

HOW DO I GET IN?

Unfortunately, there is no common application for graduate schools. **Each program will require its own application.** It is important to keep an eye on deadlines – they creep up on you! Be sure

to notify your recommenders **at least two months** before you need their letter. Follow the application instructions carefully and pay attention to the details. Most applications require some combination of the following:

- Statement of purpose – Why me? Why this program? How do you fit in? What do you hope to contribute?
- Official standardized exam scores
- Letters of recommendation – somewhere around three letters is typical
- Official transcripts or academic records – from every institution you've attended and earned college credit from

Statement of purpose

This is a written statement to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant who should be admitted. The content must be presented in a manner that gives coherence to the whole statement. Length of the statement will be determined by the admissions committee. Be sure to follow the instructions carefully, as they vary with each application.

Be intentional with your statement, leaving out extraneous material that does not align with the purpose of your statement. Answer any indicated questions fully. Analyze these questions or other guiding information for the essay completely and answer all parts. Some fairly standard topics for these statements are:

- Your purpose in graduate study
- The area of study in which you wish to specialize
 - Learn about this field in detail so you are able to state your preferences using the language of the discipline. Can you mirror any skills they seek with ones you possess in your application?
- Your intended future use of your graduate study
 - Include career goals and plans for the future
- Your unique preparation for study in the field
 - Correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate. This can also be helpful to demonstrate that your intended topic of study has been a consistent passion.
- Why you wish to attend this school
 - Research the program and describe its special appeal to you. Be clear and specific for each program.
- Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores, such as a bad semester.
 - Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities. In some instances, it may be more appropriate to discuss this outside of your statement of purpose.
 - Stress how you overcame the obstacle and how you are ultimately a good (or better!) fit because of it.
- Any special conditions that are not mentioned elsewhere in your application, such as a significant (35+ hours per week) workload outside of school.

- This should also be followed by a positive statement about yourself and your future. Be specific about how it makes you a better candidate.
- Remember: this is a statement about you as a person. They know nothing unless you tell them, and **don't be afraid to flaunt your strengths and qualifications**. Don't be shy!

Standardized examinations

Be sure to **arrange for the appropriate testing agency to report your scores directly** to the graduate school. Register early!

Specific handouts about each exam can be found in the Career Center, but here is a quick summary:

- **Graduate Record Examination (GRE)** <http://www.ets.org/gre>
 - In most cases, the **GRE General Test is required of all applicants**.
 - The GRE general test includes questions that closely reflect the kind of thinking you will do in graduate school, with questions targeting both verbal and quantitative reasoning and analytical writing, among other qualities.
 - Many departments and programs require particular GRE Subject Test scores. Check to determine whether Subject Test scores are needed for your programs of interest.
- **Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT)** <http://www.mba.com/us>
 - Some programs require the GMAT. This requirement will be listed in the program description under a heading like “Special Admissions Requirements.”
- **Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)**
<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/>
 - This exam is required for **all students applying to medical school**.
 - The MCAT is a standardized, multiple-choice exam designed to assess your problem solving, critical thinking, and knowledge of natural, behavioral, and social science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine.
- **Law School Admission Test (LSAT)** <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/about-the-lsat>
 - The LSAT is an integral part of the law school admission process in the United States. It provides a standard level of measuring skills of applicants.
 - The LSAT is designed to measure skills that are considered essential for success in law school, including the reading and comprehension of complex texts with accuracy and insight, the organization and management of information, and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from it, the ability to think critically, and the analysis and evaluation of the reasoning and arguments of others.
- **Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)** <http://www.ets.org/toefl>
 - The TOEFL is required of **all applicants whose native language is not English**.
 - This requirement is waived only for applicants who will receive a baccalaureate degree, or its foreign equivalent, prior to matriculation, from a college or university where English is the primary language.
- **International English Language Test System (IELTS)** <https://www.ielts.org>

- The IELTS may be substituted for the requirement to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Test of Spoken English (TSE).

Special admissions requirements

Many departments and programs have special admissions requirements, many require the identification of a concentration or sub-field of study, and several encourage interviews as a part of the admissions process. Review the application process thoroughly to determine any special admission requirements. Other examples include a particular standardized test, a writing sample, or a language requirement.

Letters of recommendation

Although it can vary, generally speaking, you will be asked for **three letters**. You should only send the number of letters requested, as admissions counselors do not have enough time to read extra credentials.

Tips on selecting your recommenders:

- Start by making a list of professors and/or supervisors who will be your best advocates.
- Set up an appointment to discuss your request in person. **Do not make the request over email.**
- Letters of recommendation are written on a voluntary basis. Professors are generally pleased to write on your behalf, but they are usually involved in many obligations.
- Articulate your interest and reasons for attending graduate school.
- Be considerate of your recommenders' time and approach them **at least two months** before you need their letter. Do not wait until the last minute to ask for letters!
- After asking potential writers if they are willing to write you a strong recommendation, if you sense reluctance or if the answer is no, ask someone else.

The best recommenders are individuals who know you well and can provide an evaluation of your ability to perform and succeed at the graduate level. Make an effort to get to know your professors and/or supervisors. To receive a strong recommendation, provide writers with ample information. Give your recommenders a portfolio with a cover note including:

- Information on how to contact you if they need to reach you
- What you would like emphasized in each specific letter
- A list of schools to which you are applying and due dates for the applications with the earliest due date at the top
- Any other relevant information
- An opening and closing statement with thanks and acknowledgment that the writer's time is valuable.

Also include:

- Your recommenders' name, title, contact information (telephone number, email and physical address, etc.)
- Your unofficial transcripts (highlight or note the courses you took with them)

- A draft of your statement of purpose
- A copy of your best work in the course, including lab evaluations, projects, papers, etc., with instructor comments on them
- Your resume

HOW DO I FINANCE GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Financial aid is available for graduate school. Most students finance their education through a combination of funding sources such as:

Assistantships

Assistantships are usually campus-affiliated work assignments, such as a graduate teaching instructor or a research associate. These provide students a stipend and often waive tuition and/or other matriculation fees.

Fellowships

These awards are typically granted to individuals to cover their living expenses while they carry out research or work on a project. Awards may be single or multiple-year. Awards are usually based on an individual's merit as measured by grades, GRE scores, publications, and letters of recommendation.

Grants

These are most often awarded to cover expenses associated with carrying out research or other specific projects, such as travel, materials, or computers.

Loans

These are available from the government and other private sources. Students who meet federal eligibility requirements are able to borrow under the Stafford, Perkins, and GradPlus federal loan programs. Students must be U.S. citizens or permanent residents and enrolled at least half-time in a degree-granting program. Additional information is available on the Department of Education's website. Be sure to carefully review your total loan debt against the potential earnings with a graduate or professional degree.

Scholarships

These awards are based on one or more criteria, such as merit, financial need, discipline of study, career goals, or minority identity.

Additional resources and aid tools:

- Lewis Clark's Academic Awards and Fellowships page
- FastWeb
- Fellowships for University Students and Graduates

APPLICATION TIMELINE

This rough timeline can be bolstered by researching specific programs' deadlines, including when to submit test scores, letters of recommendation, personal essays, etc. The following assumes you will be attending graduate school the year after you complete your undergraduate education, though much of this timeline applies if you take a year or two off.

In your **junior year**...

- Begin researching available programs
- Visit schools' websites
- Review general graduate school guides and directories
- Request promotional materials
- Talk to faculty, alumni, and current students in the program
- Start exploring financial aid resources
- Sign up for required standardized tests and try out a practice test
- Identify potential recommenders
- Take required standardized tests

In your **fall semester of senior year**...

- Write the first draft of your statement of purpose
- Request letters of recommendation from faculty and/or supervisors
- Order official transcripts
- Write the final draft of your statement of purpose
- Complete and mail you applications
- Apply for aid available through assistantships, fellowships, scholarships, etc.

In your **spring semester of senior year**...

- Complete and submit financial aid applications
- Visit prospective campuses if possible and speak with faculty and students there
- Follow up with schools to ensure your file is complete
- After receiving acceptance from schools, select your school of choice
- Send in the required deposit
- Contact other schools to decline acceptance
- Write thank you notes to people who helped you

CHOOSING A SCHOOL

If you've made it through the application process, congratulations! Now it is time to choose a school. Philip S. Mack from the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work created a decision making model to help this process. He developed the 6 Cs, key factors to consider when selecting a school.

1. **Credentials** – Many professional degrees, such as medicine, law, nursing, clinical psychology, and social work, have national accreditation standards. Do your future career or licensing goals require a degree from an accredited program?

2. **Curriculum** – Make sure the courses offered will enhance your knowledge and skills in your field of interest.
3. **Campus life** – We tend to perform better academically when we are happy socially. Do you prefer an urban, suburban or rural environment? What is the housing situation in the local community? Is there access to public transportation? Are there student organizations on campus that are of interest to you? How do you plan to participate in them? Does the campus have a diverse student and faculty population?
4. **Counseling** – Student support services are essential to success. What type of advising will you receive? What level of supervision or guidance will be available to you?
5. **Costs** – Being able to afford your education is key to setting your future up for success. See the above information to learn more about this.
6. **Career opportunities** – What type of employment will you be able to find on campus or in the community? What type of employment does this program set you up for? What is the starting salary of individuals with your level of education or those graduated from this program? Is there a career center to assist you in your employment search?

Using these factors and evaluating your priorities will help you make an informed decision. Best of luck in your graduate studies!