Graduate School Preparation at a Glance

The decision to attend graduate school should not be made lightly. You will invest many additional semesters of study as well as financial resources, and you want to make sure it’s a well-researched and thought-out decision. Some of the questions to ask yourself include:

- Why do I want to attend graduate school?
- Am I considering graduate school because I’m not finding job opportunities right now?
- Am I clear about my short and long term career goals - and how an advanced degree will help me attain them?
- Have I researched my chosen career to determine the optimum timing for graduate school? Would I be better advised to work a few years before pursuing a graduate degree?
- Does my chosen field require an advanced degree? Will it make me more marketable in the future?
- Do I understand the differences between the graduate degree options in my chosen field? Is a master’s or doctoral degree more beneficial for my career goals?
- How will I finance graduate school?

Once you’ve decided that graduate school is right for you, you should plan ahead for the application process. Applying to graduate school can be a daunting process. Unlike some undergraduate admissions, graduate admissions timelines and expectations are more stringent. The Career Center has a variety of resources to assist you in evaluating schools, preparing for admissions tests, and preparing personal statements in a timely manner. Schedule an appointment with a career advisor or come in during Walk-in hours if you’d like to discuss your options.

Spring/ Summer (Before Senior Year)

- Decide what type of graduate program you would like to pursue. Remember that the goal of attending graduate school is to work toward your ultimate career. Be careful not to turn to graduate school as a means of avoiding a tough job search. Pick up a FREE copy of the Graduate School Guide from the ISU Career Center. Also look at www.gradschools.com for more information. Decide if you want to stay in your current geographic area or if you are open to relocating. This will help you make an initial list of your top ten schools.

- Programs in graduate school are highly specialized so it is important to do your research on which program will lead you toward your ultimate career goal. For example, degrees in clinical psychology, counseling, and school psychology are all very different and will train you for different career paths.

- Research admission requirements for programs in your geographic target. Every program is different, but most require a 3.0 GPA and a minimum score on one of the graduate school admissions tests. Often schools will take into consideration letters of recommendation, personal statements and your interview. Also, some schools may give a conditional admission for those with below the minimum GPA or test score. DO YOUR RESEARCH!!!
• Email or call the colleges/universities of interest and ask them to mail you information about the program, the college, financial aid and assistantships. At this time, you may ask to speak with a student enrolled in the program or a faculty member. A good question to inquire about is research, fellowship or assistantship opportunities (this is a great way to fund your graduate education and get related experience). From this information, try to narrow your list to your top five schools.

Senior Year

August
• After narrowing down your list to the top five schools, begin to look at when they have open houses or information sessions. It is important to attend these to get a feel for the campus, speak with current students and talk with faculty about your program of interest. Admissions representatives will likely also be on hand at these events to answer any questions you may have about the process.
• Look at the professional experience and research done by faculty in your program of interest. Are their experiences and research in line with your ultimate professional goals? Depending on the type of graduate degree you are interested in, you will spend a lot of time learning and working with these individuals. Often as part of research assistantships or similar funding you will have a chance to assist faculty in their research. You may also work with faculty as teaching assistants within the department.
• Make sure to have a resume with your related experiences and accomplishments prepared. Many programs ask for a resume as part of the application. You want to highlight related experiences and academic work that make you a good fit for the graduate programs. Schedule an appointment with the Career Center or stop by during Walk-in hours to have it reviewed by a career advisor.

September
• Determine if you will be required to take a graduate school admission test and when applications are due. There are several common exams including the GRE (general test), LSAT (for law school), MCAT (for medical school), and GMAT (for business school). Purchase a study guide from any bookstore and begin preparing to take the exam. There are also test preparation courses that teach test strategy and are available for a substantial fee. LSAT, MCAT, and GMAT exams can be found online at www.princetonreview.com or www.kaptest.com
• Sign up to take any required graduate admission tests. Keep in mind that it will take approximately six weeks for your scores to be sent to the graduate schools. You want colleges to have those test results before they begin reviewing graduate applications.

October
• Typically, the cost is between $30 and $100 when submitting an application for graduate school. This fee is often nonrefundable. Schools sometimes waive the application fee if you attend an open house.
• Graduate schools usually ask candidates to gather three letters of recommendation. Ask primary faculty members and/or other appropriate people (bosses, supervisors, staff advisors) if they would be willing to write you a letter of reference for graduate school admission. Faculty can submit a similar letter for all the schools to which you apply. Please remember to give each reference a copy of your current resume to use as a guide when writing your letter of recommendation and give them plenty of lead time. Do not forget to thank them!
• Take a standardized test(s). If you are not happy with your score, take the test again. You may have to wait one month or longer until you can retake the test.

• Order transcripts from all post-secondary institutions attended. If fall term grades are expected, then indicate on the transcript request form to mail “after current term grades.” Also be sure to ask the Office of Registration and Records if the current term grades can be sent in time to meet the graduate school application deadline. Even if you have already been accepted to a graduate program, the University will likely require a copy of your final transcript after your degree has been conferred.

November
• Complete the applications and be certain to follow the instructions exactly. Of your top five schools, apply to at least four schools. You don't want to put all of your eggs in one basket.

• Some graduate schools require applicants to write a personal statement or send a resume as part of the application process. You can ask a faculty member or an advisor from the Career Center to help you critique it. Remember to have a first draft with you when you come to the Career Center.

Late December/ Early January
• Mail all of your graduate applications no later than January 15 (unless the deadline is earlier). This will put you in line for the best assistantships, fellowships and/or financial aid packages. You can certainly apply later but you may lessen your chances for receiving financial assistance. Many graduate schools send out acceptance letters as early as March for a fall start date.

January/ February
• It is always a good idea to have “Plan B,” so begin exploring job opportunities as well. That way if graduate school is not an option for you at this time, you will have already begun a preliminary job search.

• The majority of graduate/pre-professional schools have an April 15 deadline on accepting or declining attendance into their program.
  o Make sure it is the school you want to attend before accepting.
  o Be aware of policies for accepting offers of financial assistance.
  o If you ARE NOT ATTENDING, let the institution know ASAP. This may free up a spot for someone else who is trying to get into the program.
**Tips for Writing Personal Statements**

Personal statements are one of the top selection criteria admission offices and departments use when evaluating applicants for graduate school. It is important to represent yourself in a way that gets the reader’s attention. The following are guidelines to get you started. Once you have a draft, make an appointment to have a career advisor review your materials. Be sure to bring any information the school(s) provided regarding the required content for your personal statement.

**What are graduate schools looking for?**

- Academic ability
- Experience in and passion for your chosen area of study
- Character (Are you the right fit for their program?)
- Ability to communicate
- Persistence and dedication (Will you stick with the program and finish?)

**Important questions to answer in graduate school applications:**

- Why do you want to go to graduate school?
- Why our school, rather than others?
- How does this program fit into your future goals?

**General Tips:**

- Do your research on the schools and the academic and career fields with this major/program
- Include relevant skills, experiences and accomplishments
- Give examples and tell stories that demonstrate your interest
- Being unique means showing your passion
- Choose your stories carefully
- Know your audience
- Build your theme
- Make sure to get feedback

### Dos and Don'ts of the Personal Statement

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<th>Dos</th>
<th>Don'ts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provide evidence and examples that illustrate who you are, how you have developed, and what matters to you</td>
<td>Do not recycle your resume or transcript</td>
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<td>Discuss intellectual and career goals</td>
<td>Do not beg or appear desperate</td>
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<td>Demonstrate a fit with the program</td>
<td>Do not think that being qualified will automatically get you in</td>
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<td>Show how you are unique and what you will bring to the program</td>
<td>Avoid writing a laundry list of your personal traits</td>
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<td>Stay away from using clichés, emotion, or unusual language</td>
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The most common mistakes:
• Not demonstrating personality, character and motivation
• Not demonstrating a fit with the specific program
• Writing what you “think” they want to hear

Four step plan to write an application essay:

Step 1: Brainstorm
• What have I done?
  o Academic career
  o Extracurricular activities
  o Employment
  o Accomplishments
• What have I learned?
  o Significant life experiences
  o Failure or setback from which you learned
• How does a graduate degree fit into your intellectual and career goals?

Step 2: Plan
• Choose best experiences for each question/application
• Create a brief outline for each essay
• Tell stories interestingly, yet professionally
• Keep an organized structure
• Try audio recording an experience and transcribing it

Step 3: Write
• Start the essay strong; the first impression matters
• Keep it engaging and interesting but be careful with humor
• Tailor essays to each school and incorporate the department’s mission statement
• Never blame, brag, beg or bore
• Remember you are selling yourself

Step 4: Edit
• Ask yourself, “How will this sound to graduate schools?” and “What does it say about the person who wrote it?”
• Be sure it fulfills length requirements
• Get feedback from someone who knows you well, someone who does not know you well, one who has been or is currently a graduate student, and someone who is a great writer
• Read your essay out loud to hear how it sounds; Does it flow well? Is the grammar correct?