

Is Graduate School Right for You?

Consider whether graduate school would help you in your career goals.

- Advanced education is focused more on a specific area of interest and acquiring specialized skills to practice in a profession or do advanced research.
- If you have a profession in mind you are excited to pursue, and it requires advanced education, then you're probably an excellent candidate for graduate school.
- Be aware not all careers require a graduate degree.
 - If you are unsure, ask potential future employers if a particular degree from the programs you're looking into would be considered preferred, required, or irrelevant.
 - If your chosen industry does not require the graduate degree, you may be considered over-qualified.

Be sure you're ready to commit to graduate school as it requires resources.

- A master's degree typically takes two years, a doctorate five to seven years, and professional school anywhere from two to seven years or more.
- The funding for graduate programs is different, and you may or may not have the resources you had as an undergraduate. You will need to procure additional finances for the degree(s), spend additional years out of the work force, and attend classes and conduct research in your chosen field.
- Conduct a self-assessment to come to an informed decision about graduate school. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - What are my short-term and long-term career goals?
 - How might graduate school affect my career or professional plans?
 - Will the graduate degree enhance or narrow my employment prospects?
 - Do I have the interest and abilities to be successful in a graduate program?
 - Am I mentally, physically and financially prepared to undertake another long-term academic commitment?
 - Can I realistically invest the time and money required to pursue another academic degree?
 - At present time, do I have other needs that conflict with pursuing a graduate degree?
 - Would I benefit more by gaining practical experience before pursuing graduate studies?
 - What type of value, if any, do I place on attaining a graduate degree?

Make sure you're going to graduate or professional school for the right reasons.

Some of the **wrong reasons**:

- You don't think you can get a job or don't want to start looking.

- You have yet to find your true calling, so you'll stay in school until you do.
- Everyone else is doing it, so you think you should too.
- You can't figure out what to do with your undergraduate major.

Some of the **right reasons**:

- You need an advanced degree in order to practice your chosen profession (e.g. teaching, clinical psychology, law, medicine, etc.).
- You absolutely love what you're studying and want to explore it further.
- You want to make a contribution to the body of knowledge in your field through research.
- You need an advanced degree to advance your professional career.

Don't go just for the sake of going to graduate school, or because you can't think of anything else to do. Go because you are passionate about something, and you have a topic of research or a set of skills that you want to develop further.

Researching Graduate Schools

- Research your options carefully. There are over 1,800 institutions in the United States offering advanced degrees and the variety in the programs is enormous, so it's important to find one that fits you.
- Things to consider when choosing a program:
 - Reputation of the program and institution and whether or not it is accredited in the field you're entering
 - Size, geographic location, type and availability of housing, community environment
 - Whether standardized tests like the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, or GMAT are required
 - Financial aid opportunities, cost and residency requirements
 - Specialties and interests of the faculty (read their books and publications)
 - Departmental courses and offerings, flexibility of curriculum and length of the program
 - Library holdings and research facilities
 - Your own interests, abilities, and values
 - Availability of post graduation services and information about student outcomes as well as placement rates
- Talk with individuals who have knowledge of the field: faculty, deans, advisors, friends, alumni, or counselors, to determine if and what type of advanced degree is needed.
- Contact individual graduate schools' departments requesting catalogue, application, and financial aid information.
- Review academic journals in your field and pay attention to the authors of the articles and their affiliated college/university.
- Visit institutions and interview, if possible.
- Attend graduate fairs and forums.

Questions to ask any graduate program:

- What would be the largest and/or a typical class size for a graduate class? Are classes restricted to graduate students or are undergraduates common in your graduate classes?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages of going to graduate school immediately after completing the undergraduate program? The advantages and disadvantages of waiting a few years? The best use of the interim time?
- What are the criteria and processes for selecting teaching assistants, research assistants, and fellows?
- Can you tell me how most students fund their studies here?
- How reliable is your financial support year to year? Is the first-year offer always sustained given attainment of academic goals?
- Will I get to develop my own topics, or will I be expected to work on a professor's ongoing research?
- What is the mean time to complete (a) class work, (b) research, (c) dissertation? (I.e., what is the mean time to complete the Ph.D.? Ask about the program as a whole, but perhaps more importantly, by professor.)
- What is your attrition rate? Of those who don't finish, what are their reasons?
- What kind of student thrives in your program?
- What is the age, race, gender balance, ratio of married/single, and geographical origin of graduate students in the program?
- May I meet some currently enrolled students (in person or via phone or email)? (Be sure to ask about their research topics and be sure to take notes on specific professors mentioned.)
- How can I be a strong candidate for a program like this?

Applying

Applying to grad school can be time consuming and difficult if you are not prepared. Plan ahead, and manage your time well.

Consider ahead of time what admissions committees expect from an applicant, such as:

- A bachelor's degree with a solid GPA. Not all programs require the undergraduate degree to be from the same discipline. **Transcripts** from all college-level coursework will be required (including classes you may have taken outside Le Moyne).
- Being able to navigate and complete the application effectively.
- Positive letters of recommendation (see description below). Admissions committees are made of people who teach graduate or professional students, so they require recommendations from individuals who can assess your potential for advanced study.
- Work experience in a field that pertains to the graduate program. Consider looking for part-time jobs, internships, or volunteer work that shows you have experience in the field.
- Your score on a standardized test such as the LSAT, MCAT, GMAT, or GRE. Most programs will require at least one of these as a predictor of your potential.
- Leadership and your involvement in activities. Many graduate programs require group work, so leadership is a valued quality.

Reference Letters:

- For reference letters, select recommenders who you know will be able to write a positive letter for you. You want someone who can give a detailed account of your work and can comment on your potential to do graduate level work.
- When requesting this service, be sure to be clear about your goals and purpose. Provide a copy of your resume to recommenders so they are better able to get an idea of your background and skills.
- Allow the recommender ample time to complete the letter, and always follow up to ensure completion. Be sure to thank those who have written letters for you--a formal thank you note wouldn't go amiss.

Application forms:

- Follow the instructions carefully to make sure you are filling out your forms accurately.
- Tailor your content to the specific aspects of the program.
- Complete the forms online whenever possible to ensure a neat and professional appearance.
- Make sure to include all requested materials: resume, fees, personal statements, etc.
- Always print or retain copies for your records before sending.

Be aware of deadlines! It is imperative you research specific time requirements for **each** school for submitting applications, test scores, and financial information. Financial aid deadlines are usually before comprehensive application material. It is also important to check with each school to ensure all materials have arrived before the deadline.

Three Great Ways to Stand Out in the Application Process

1. Contact the professors. Good ways to strike up conversation and draw attention to yourself are to ask for a clarification of the program offerings, comment on a recent publication, or propose an area for further study.
2. Visit the department. Make your own appointments with the professors, and make sure to confirm the appointment a day ahead of time. Send a thank you note afterward: this is sure to make a good impression!
3. Submit an outstanding work sample. Send in your best paper, lab, article, or writing sample. Just make sure the sample is directly related to the program you're applying to, and have a professor review the work sample first!

Financing Graduate School

There are various ways to finance your graduate program and they are listed below.

- Fellowships and Grants:
 - These consist of outright awards usually requiring no service to the institution in return. Awarded on a competitive basis, grants vary in terms of monetary amount and length of funding.
 - Explore institutional, private, and governmental fellowship opportunities. Do not limit your application to one type of grant -- it may take several combined awards

to completely fund your graduate education.

- Graduate Assistantships:
 - Individual departments award general graduate, teaching and/or research assistantships. These awards usually carry full or partial tuition remuneration plus a stipend.
 - The commitment normally involves a 10-20 hour per week workload comprised of teaching, tutoring, proctoring exams, developing lesson plans, and/or performing a variety of research activities.
 - Competition for these awards is strong. Apply early and always submit a resume with your inquiry. If possible, visit the department and arrange a personal interview. Be aware of deadlines.
 - Be sure to specifically request assistantship information at the time you request application materials.

- Resident Assistantship:
 - These are a type of financial assistance in the form of residence assignments involving room, board, and a stipend by working as managers in undergraduate residence halls.
 - These opportunities may be the most financially supportive because some schools will also include tuition remuneration with the assignment.
 - Again, competitively based, resident assistantships will involve utilizing your job search skills. Always include your resume and cover letter, requesting an interview for available jobs.
 - Inquire about these opportunities at the institution's residence life or student affairs office.

- Loans:
 - Remember, most undergraduate loans 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 Guaranteed Student Loan opportunities.
 - Explore GAPS FAS (Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service), offering low interest loans and financial assistance to graduate students.

- Employer Contributions:
 - If you are working, your employer may have supports in place to assist you in paying for graduate programs which might be required to gain tenure, certifications, etc..

- Scholarships:
 - Be sure to inquire about special offerings at your institutions of choice.

Graduate School Timeline

- Up to Junior Year
 - Many graduate schools examine applicants' grades from the last two years of undergraduate years. If your GPA isn't where you'd like it to be, now is the time to pull it up.

- Junior Year (Spring)

- Decide which areas interest you, and start looking for programs that match your interests.
 - Contact programs to request catalogues and applications, and bookmark websites for further review. See the list of questions to ask graduate programs as listed previously.
 - Determine standardized test requirements and schedule your necessary entrance exams. You may want to take these tests in the spring of your junior year to get them out of the way, so you can spend your fall semester senior year filling out applications and working on writing samples without having to worry about test preparation.
 - Make note of **all** deadlines. It may be a good idea to organize them into a calendar so you don't forget.
- **Summer Before Senior Year**
 - Many graduate schools look for well-rounded individuals with good grades **and** some relevant work experience on their resumes. Find relevant internships or volunteer work (as long as the volunteer work isn't just "envelope stuffing" work and actually provides relevant experience).
- **Senior Year (Fall)**
 - Schedule your entrance exams. If you weren't satisfied with your first score, or decided to give yourself more time to prepare, you can take your tests in the fall.
 - Obtain transcripts from all of your post-secondary education, including an up-to-date transcript for your current institution, as well as transcripts from any study-abroad programs or other institutions that transferred credits.
 - Request reference letters from faculty and supervisors; give them all the information and computer links they need to provide a complete reference.
 - Fill out your applications. Take your time, read directions carefully, and check your applications multiple times to make sure they are complete and error-free. Have someone proofread them as well; an extra set of eyes can catch mistakes you missed.
 - Write a draft of your personal statement early, so you have time to give yourself distance from it before you revise. Finalize your personal statement by in the fall semester, and have it critiqued by a faculty member and/or someone from the Career Advising Office.
- **Senior Year (Spring)**
 - This is when acceptance letters arrive. If you applied to and were accepted into more than one school, start contacting schools regarding the opportunity for a visit or interview if you haven't already, or you wish to do so again. This is similar to the undergraduate process.
 - Discuss your choices with a family member or trusted faculty member.
 - Fill out GAPS FAS if you plan to apply for financial aid (you'll need your prior year's income tax return to complete this form).
 - Once you make a decision, notify the school of your acceptance. As a courtesy, inform the other schools that you are declining their offers.
 - If you will be relocating for graduate school, start researching housing options in your new location. Can you afford to live alone, or will you need to find a roommate? Find out whether your school offers assistance with housing or pairing graduate students with roommates.