

HOW **2** guide: Graduate School

So you're thinking of applying to graduate school to pursue an advanced degree? It is a major decision and one that you should give careful thought and preparation. Here is a step-by-step guide to help walk you through the process. **Please keep in mind, though, that the admission and application processes, requirements, policies, procedures, and deadlines for each school and degree program can vary widely. This guide is intended as an overview of the process. Always adhere to the admissions instructions provided by the graduate schools you are applying to.**

(Note: Some advanced degrees, such as MBA's, are conferred by graduate school programs. Some advanced degrees are conferred by professional schools, such as law schools or medical schools. For the purposes of simplicity and readability, in this guide, the terms "graduate degree" and "graduate school" will encompass the entire scope of all advanced degree programs.)

Step 1 – Making the Decision

Make sure you can answer the question, "Why are you going to graduate school?" Graduate school is a significant investment of time, energy, and money, and should be done for the right reasons. Most students pursue an advanced degree because it is a requirement for their career goals. For example, if you want to pursue a career as a lawyer, doctor, CPA, professor, guidance counselor, physical therapist, nurse anesthetist, or other specialized occupation, you must complete the advanced degree requirements.

Caution: Some students see the grad school option as a way to postpone job hunting in a weak job market. Or they may still be undecided about their career and assume they will get it "figured out" while in grad school. While "more education" is typically never a bad idea in life, it may not always be the best strategy for recent grads with Bachelor's degrees. We recommend that you touch base with a Career Center advisor to ensure that pursuing an advanced degree now is the right plan for your particular career goals.

Step 2 – Picking a program

The decision of **which** graduate degree to pursue is perhaps even more important than whether to go at all. Most Masters Degrees are highly specialized – after all, you are developing a "mastery" in that discipline. Therefore, you need to make sure the degree is correctly aligned with your career goals and the employment marketplace. For example, let's say you wanted to go into environmental advocacy. Should you pursue a highly technical degree, like an M.S. in Environmental Science, or a Master of Public Administration with an Environmental Policy concentration? That decision is based on many factors and should be thoroughly researched. If you are not sure which program is right for you, we encourage you to speak with the faculty in those programs, as well as a Career Center advisor.

Here is some other helpful information that will help you understand what all those "letters" mean when people are talking about advanced degree programs.

Masters Degrees provide more experience in research and scholarship in a particular discipline. For example:

- M.S. – Master of Science
- M.A. – Master of Arts
- M.B.A. – Master of Business Administration
- M.Ed. – Master of Education
- M.S.N. – Master of Science in Nursing
- M.S.W. – Master of Science in Social Work

A **professional degree** provides training to acquire specific skills and knowledge necessary to work in a particular

profession. For example:

- J.D. – Juris Doctorate (law)
- M.D. – Medical Doctor
- D.V.M. – Doctor of Veterinary Medicine
- Pharm.D. – Doctor of Pharmacy
- D.D.S. – Doctor of Dental Surgery
- D.O. – Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine
- D.P.T. – Doctor of Physical Therapy

The highest degrees awarded are **Doctoral Degrees**, which require completion of an academic program of studies, a comprehensive examination, and often a dissertation, which is a significant work of original research. For example: Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), Ed.D. (Doctor of Education), or Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychiatry).

Specialist and Advanced Masters Degrees are study beyond the masters but less extensive than the doctoral. For example: Ed.S. (Education Specialist.) And **Post-Doctorate** degrees are simply advanced study/research/training in a particular area, not really “degrees.”

Step 3 – Selecting the school that is right for you

Once you have determined that grad school is right for you and you have selected a program of study, it’s time to start researching schools. The research and application process can be very time consuming, so start early. Ideally, start the entire process a year and a half before you wish to enroll.

As part of the school selection process, consider these factors:

- Tuition costs (public vs. private)
- Geographic location of the school (in-state vs. out-of-state, travel and housing considerations)
- Reputation/quality of the program (accreditation, ranking)
- Selectivity of the program (your chances of getting in)
- “Culture” of the program (collegiality among/ between students and faculty, level of emphasis on research, etc.)
- Will the schools program meet the necessary educational requirements for licensure or certification
- When classes are offered – some schools have evening programs which allows students to work full-time while attending classes

Most prospective graduate students will apply to several programs, often ranging from the ideal school to acceptable schools to back-up schools. Your selection decision will depend on the compatibility of each program with your personal needs and goals.

There are numerous resources available on the Internet to research schools, such as www.MyPlan.com (click on the “Colleges” tab.) Also, ask your professors if they know about the schools you are interested in. Sometimes there is no substitute to actually going to the school for a visit. A school visit will enable you to tour the campus and surrounding community, check out the housing options, speak with admissions representatives, sit in on classes, and meet current students and faculty. Frequently a campus will have a “feel” to it that you can’t experience without being there. It may not be financially feasible to visit all the schools you wish to attend, so do as much research as possible to narrow your list to the school’s you are most interested in.

Step 4 – The Admissions Process

Every degree program has a set of “Admissions Requirements” which must be fulfilled to be considered as an applicant. It is critical that you know exactly what is required and when. The application procedures and deadlines can vary from institution to institution. We recommend that you create a timeline/checklist for each school you are applying to in order to keep yourself organized and on track. Remember, start the entire process a year and a half before you wish to enroll. Generally speaking, it is better to apply early rather than later. Monitor the schools website to keep abreast of

any changes in deadlines or requirements.

The graduate/professional school admittance process can be very competitive. Many graduate programs receive many more applications than they have space available, and can therefore be selective. Graduate schools look at a number of factors in deciding whom to admit. The goal is to pick people who are likely to have the background, aptitude and work habits necessary to complete their graduate program. Schools typically look at some combination of factors in making their decisions, including: grades and coursework in college; test scores; research experience; and experiences related to your field. Community service, extracurricular activities, and honors/awards are also helpful. The relative weight that each program gives to these factors varies. To gather this information, they will look at your test scores, transcripts, resume, letters of recommendation, personal statement (if required), and perhaps even conduct an interview.

Let's look at these areas in more details to help you better understand what selection committees are looking for in candidates. They are arranged in alphabetical order, not order of importance.

Coursework – Have you completed the required degree and/or coursework for admittance? Some programs, like law school, do not have a specific degree requirement. However, admissions committees tend to look favorably upon highly rigorous programs (math, sciences, economics, engineering), those that require a significant amount of writing (English and history), or those that develop analytical skills (philosophy.)

Community Service – Some degree programs, like law schools, often have an “advocacy” element to their mission. Consequently, they want students who believe in the importance of volunteering and giving back. Spread your community service over all four years of your bachelors degree – don't cram it all into your senior year or admissions committee will assume you volunteered to enhance your admissions prospects.

Extracurricular Activities – While grad schools want to attract students who are involved on campus, are well-rounded, and have demonstrated leadership skills, it is typically not a major factor. Just a list of organizations to which you belong will not be helpful either, since many students join and don't actively participate. You are probably better off being an active participant and leader in a few key organizations than simply being a member of a plethora of them.

Grades - Most programs have a minimum GPA, below which you typically will not make the "cut" unless you have some outstanding compensating factor. Note also that even though programs have minimum scores, their incoming students are likely to have higher scores than the minimum. It is important to “finish strong” in your bachelors degree since most programs look at your last 60 hours of upper division coursework. Academic honors and awards are also important.

The Interview - Once you are a finalist for admission to a program, some graduate programs may ask you to interview with them, either in person or by telephone. The interview is a way for a program to meet you and to see how well you "fit" with their program. It is an important way for you to let the decision makers know about your personal and professional qualities. Treat this like a job interview. Be prepared, dress professionally, and sell yourself!

Letters of Recommendation (or Reference) - These can be very helpful, as they provide an opportunity for people who know your qualifications to describe your skills, personality, and accomplishments - something that cannot be gleaned by grades and scores. Pay attention to the degree requirements and who they want these letters from. Some schools want the letters from faculty; some want them from professionals in the field. Also, know the format to follow – some schools ask references to fill out a form, others ask for individualized letters. Make sure you give your references:

- Plenty of time to write them (four weeks prior to the deadline is a good rule of thumb to follow.) And tell them exactly when the deadline date is!
- A copy of your personal statement and resume, and tell them which schools/programs you are applying to.
- Addressed, stamped envelopes or the information on how to submit them electronically

Send a thank you note to all your references, and let them know which program you decided to attend.

Personal statement (sometimes called an “application essay” or “statement of goals”) – Admission committees use these to help assess your:

1. Interest and motivation in the occupation, program, field, and institution
2. Personality and personal attributes
3. Ability to write clearly and effectively
4. Unique qualifications relative to other applicants

It is not intended to be a review of your resume, so use it to discuss information that may not be revealed anywhere else. Here are some of the elements typically included on a personal statement

- How you became interested in the field
- Your career goals
- What you have learned from experience related to the field
- Obstacles/hardships you have overcome
- Personal qualities/skills that would enhance your prospects for success in the program
- Why you want to attend that particular school
- Personal characteristics (integrity, perseverance) or special skills that enhance your prospects for success
- Explanation of inconsistencies (for example, a poor GPA freshman year)

Be sure to seek feedback from others before submitting the document. It must be perfect in terms of grammar and spelling. If you would like help crafting your personal statement or would just like us to review yours, set up an appointment with a Career Center advisor.

Related Experience – Sometimes related experience is required, sometimes it is preferred, and sometimes it is not necessary. If you do not have professional experience in the field, pursue opportunities such as internships (even unpaid), part-time jobs, or community service. Experience is valuable and this will show you dedication to the field.

Research experience – Degree programs can vary widely in the amount and intensity of the research expected. Some programs even require a “statement of research goals.” For these types of programs, ensure that your resume includes all the research projects you have been involved with. You may even want to create a portfolio showcasing your efforts.

Resume – In terms of overall format, the resume that you would use for a grad school application is not that different from one you would use in the job search. The main differences are that you are not obligated to keep it to one page, and that you should include as much information as possible about your academic achievements. (By the way, sometimes grad schools will ask you to submit a “CV,” or “curriculum vita,” which is loosely translated as “*course of life*.” It differs from a résumé in that it is often used in academic environments and is far more comprehensive.)

Your grad school resume should include the following:

- Education (with most recent institution on top)
- Academic awards, scholarships, and recognition
- Research experience and interests
- Internships or field experience
- Publications or professional presentations
- Professional association and committee leadership positions and activities
- Foreign study and travel abroad
- Special training
- Language competencies
- Technical and computer skills
- Employment experience
- Community Service
- Certificates and licensure

Some creative programs, like art or graphic design, may require you to submit a portfolio of work samples. Some writing intensive programs, like English or journalism, may require writing samples.

If you would like help creating your resume, set up an appointment with a Career Center advisor.

Test Scores – Most graduate schools require that you take a standardized test for admission. The test needed will depend on the field you plan to enter. The most widely used are the GRE, GMAT, MAT, LSAT, MCAT, and DAT. The time needed to study and prepare can be substantial. For example, most law school applicants will study in excess of 9 months for the LSAT. You may also want to build in time in case you choose to retake the test. These factors should be accounted for in your planning timeline. Determine whether you want or need a test prep class. It is a highly individual choice and can often depend on your learning style and level of discipline.

Transcripts – Graduate schools require that you send an official record, or transcript, of all undergraduate coursework from all schools that you attended. The official transcript bears the institutions' seal and will be sent directly to the graduate school's admissions office. If you are applying to graduate school while still finishing your undergraduate degree, have the registrar send your current incomplete transcript, and arrange for a final transcript to be sent after you finish the degree.

Step 6 – Financing your degree

As part of your school research process, look into the financing options available, such as:

- Assistantships – Paid, part-time employment that may include tuition waivers
- Fellowships – Based on academic achievement
- Loans – Low interest loans are available to most graduate students
- Grants and Scholarships – Gifts of money, typically with no obligation for work or repayment, but may be linked to an academic discipline or project

Financial aid packages, based on both merit and need, are first come, first served. It is to your advantage to submit your application early.

Be aware that some schools and some programs limit the amount of time students may work so that they concentrate on academic success.

For more information on how to finance your degree, go to www.MyPlan.com and click on the "Colleges" tab.

Step 7 – Decision Time!

If you are accepted to multiple programs (always a good problem to have), compare each school based on the criteria established in "Step 3." You may also want to speak with faculty that are familiar with you and the schools for their feedback in terms of your "fit."

If you are not accepted or are placed on a waiting list, contact the school. If you are on a wait list, see if you can find out if the list is ranked and what percentage of the wait list is usually admitted. Ask if supplementing your file with updated transcripts or additional letters of recommendation will improve your ranking. You may also consider asking what you could improve on in the event you apply again. Some schools may allow you to take a few classes to improve your GPA or "prove yourself" and may reevaluate their decision to admit you. Some schools may allow you to take up to three classes in the program as a non-degree seeking student while you take/retake admissions tests or get ready to apply again.

Using MyPlan.com for Graduate School Research and Career Planning

MyPlan.com is a great one-stop-shop for graduate school information! Go to www.MyPlan.com and click on the “Colleges” tab. This site includes:

- A comprehensive database of graduate schools
- College rankings
- Test prep information
- Financial aid information
- Media library with virtual tours

MyPlan.com is a web-based career planning resource free for FGCU students. If you are still exploring whether graduate school is right for you, or what kind of program you should study, MyPlan.com enables you to take assessments of your personality, skills, interests, and work values, and see how those results relate to different occupations.

[Click here](#) to access instructions for registering with MyPlan.com and take free assessments.

Self-assessment tools **DO NOT** tell you what you "should do" as a career. It is a starting point to help you learn more about your personal characteristics, and how those characteristics may relate to different occupational fields. Ultimately, it is YOUR decision to determine the best career path to pursue.

If you are a currently enrolled student, we suggest that you schedule a follow-up appointment with a career counselor to discuss your results and learn about additional steps you can take to make effective career decisions. To schedule an appointment, contact Counseling and Psychological Services at 590-7950 or caps@fgcu.edu.