

## **Graduate Study in the U.S.**

*Kristin S. Williams, Executive Director  
Graduate Student Enrollment Management  
The George Washington University  
Washington, DC USA*

Beyond the general benefits of a graduate degree -- intellectual stimulation, personal enrichment -- there are several excellent reasons for pursuing a graduate program:

- Increased earnings are related to degree attainment: in the U.S. someone with a graduate degree earns, on the average, 33% more than someone with only a bachelor's degree.
- Graduate school may be necessary to obtain the specific skills, knowledge, or credentials for a particular job or profession.
- A graduate degree can provide greater mobility within your area of interest and the flexibility to change careers, or may simply be necessary to keep up with advances in your current field.

Whatever your reason for deciding to apply for graduate school, you'll want to find the program that is right for you and do everything you can to make sure that your graduate experience is successful. To start the process, there are many general sources of information on graduate schools and programs:

### General Web Sites

Gradschools.com: [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)

*Directory of graduate programs by subject and school, with links to web sites.*

Graduate Guide: [www.GraduateGuide.com](http://www.GraduateGuide.com)

*Directory of graduate programs by school, major, and state, with links to web site.*

EducationUSA: <http://educationusa.state.gov>.

*Includes a searchable database of graduate programs in the US.*

Web U.S. Higher Education: [www.utexas.edu/world/univ](http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ)

*Alphabetically and geographic lists of universities*

EducationUSA Centers. Through a global network of more than 450 advising centers supported by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, EducationUSA offers accurate, complete, and objective information about educational opportunities in the United States. To find the center nearest you, visit their website at <http://educationusa.state.gov>.

Graduate School Fairs and Information Sessions. Graduate school fairs, held in major cities throughout the world, can be a good opportunity to meet and talk face-to-face with representatives from a variety of schools. There is usually no registration fee for students.

GRE and Graduate Management Admission Search Services. If you register for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), you will be automatically included in their Search Service databases, unless you ask to be excluded. Upon request, the Search Service provides your contact information, background data, and academic interests to graduate schools, who may then contact you directly with program information.

Personal Contacts. Faculty members at your undergraduate institution can be an excellent resource when trying to identify prospective graduate schools. You should also check with employers, co-workers, family, and friends who may have studied in the U.S.

Once you've identified the schools in which you may be interested, visit their websites to get program descriptions, admissions and degree requirements, and other important information such as housing availability and costs. You can also contact the university or graduate program directly to request that materials be sent to you. Most universities provide an online request form for this purpose, but you can also send a letter, e-mail, or call. When doing so, be sure to clearly and briefly write or state your full name, complete address (with postal code), e-mail address, and the program and degree in which you are interested

## **Selecting a Graduate Program**

When deciding which schools to apply to, you should:

1. Identify the specific graduate programs that fit your particular interests, background, and goals.
  - What are your personal preferences for the type of school and its location? Small or large? Urban or rural? In a particular part of the country or near a specific city?
  - What kind of academic experience do you want? Hands-on (practical) vs. theoretical?
  - What types of institutional support services are particularly important to you (e.g., internship opportunities, child care, on-campus housing)?
  - How quickly do you want to complete the program?
2. Get information about the following important characteristics of those programs and universities.
  - Faculty credentials, reputation, and research interests
  - Institutional and (if appropriate) program accreditation
  - Direct and indirect costs (tuition, fees, books, living expenses, health insurance) and the availability of financial assistance
  - Degree requirements and courses
  - Institutional facilities (libraries, computers, laboratories, etc.)
  - Job-search success of graduates (job placement)
3. Be honest about your academic background and potential. How selective is the program? Will you be able to meet their admissions requirements?

## **Applying for Admission**

Although specific requirements will vary depending on the university, school, and program in which you are interested, the following materials are generally required:

- 1) A completed and signed application form
- 2) The application fee (few institutions will process your application without the fee)
- 3) Official transcripts from all colleges and universities attended
- 4) Letters of recommendation
- 5) Statement of purpose or a personal statement
- 6) Standardized test scores (see below)
- 7) If requesting an I-20 or a DS-2019 from the university, a completed financial certificate form, with supporting documents

Additionally, many graduate programs also require other materials, such as a resume, writing sample, portfolio, or proof of professional licensing.

## **Tips for Successfully Completing an Application for Admission to Graduate School**

- Read the instructions and follow them carefully.
- Provide complete and accurate information. Your application will usually not be reviewed until ALL required documents have been received.
- Type or write neatly. If your application isn't readable, it can't be evaluated.
- Consistently spell out your full legal name (as it appears on your passport) on all forms.
- Don't wait for deadlines -- get all necessary materials submitted as early as possible.
- Be organized when compiling materials for your application packet and make copies of everything you send in.
- Be sure to contact the admissions office if you have any questions.

You can usually apply for admissions either online or by paper. However, most universities prefer that you use the online application, as it can be processed more quickly. Additionally, it may include several features not available through the paper application, such as electronic submission of letters of recommendation and other supporting documents (statement of purpose, writing samples, resume, etc.).

### ***Transcripts and Grades***

Transcripts, a Detailed Marks Certificate, or comparable document showing all course work, grades, and proof of earned degrees for each institution attended must be submitted for all colleges and universities attended, whether or not credit was earned, the program was completed, or the credit appears as transfer credit on another transcript. Transcripts must be official and forwarded in their original sealed envelopes. If academic records are provided in a language other than English, a certified English translation must also be provided – translations alone will be not be accepted. Both documents must be certified by an official government agency or authorized official.

Schools may indicate they are looking for a specific minimum grade-point average (GPA), but can be impressed by a pattern of improvement. Depending on the particular graduate program, the school may also consider your GPA for course work in your major or in grades for individual courses related to the graduate program.

### ***Recommendations***

The number of recommendations required may vary by school and program. Be sure to check admissions guidelines to ensure that you submit the appropriate number of recommendations and type (e.g., academic vs. professional) required for the program to which you are applying.

When selecting a recommender, go to those who know you and have had positive experiences with you: use only people who know you well AND who know you when you did well. Faculty recommendations are particularly important if you're planning on pursuing a research degree. If you're applying to a professional degree program, a mix of faculty and those who may know you in a professional capacity are usually acceptable. Do not submit recommendations from people who only know you as a family member or friend.

Make the process as easy as possible for your recommender. Contact them first to ask if they would be willing – and have time -- to provide a recommendation. Be sure to tell them the program and degree to which you're applying and include information about yourself (a resume or bio, a copy of your personal statement, a copy of a good paper you may have submitted in their class).

The U.S. Family & Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA) requires that you have access to the recommendation, unless you specifically waive access. This is your decision. However, many admissions committees view the accuracy and honesty of a recommendation more favorably if access is waived.

### ***Statement of Purpose/Personal Statement***

The statement of purpose is your opportunity to stand out from the rest of the applicants. Let the school know what is interesting or unique about you and why they should want you as a student. Include information that is not on your resume or listed elsewhere in your application materials, such as interesting experiences or unique characteristics.

It is important that you follow the school's guidelines for the statement. Read the explanation in the admissions packet carefully to determine the content and length required. Generally speaking, the statement should be honest and accurate, well-written, and not contain grammatical or spelling errors. Don't use the statement to explain any negative aspects of your application -- put those explanations in a separate statement or letter.

### ***Standardized Test Scores***

Check with the program to which you are applying to determine which (if any) standardized tests are required (e.g., GRE, GRE subject, GMAT, Miller Analogies Test). As it may take up to six weeks for a school to receive official test scores, be sure to take tests well in advance of the application deadline. You must arrange to have the appropriate official score reports mailed directly to the school's graduate admissions office by the testing service. Test scores more than five years old are generally not accepted for admissions review, and TOEFL and IELTS scores may not be more than two years old.

Scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are generally required for all applicants whose native language is not English and who are not citizens of countries where English is an official language. Please note that the minimum score required may be different for admission versus consideration for graduate teaching assistantships.

Finally, don't overstress about taking standardized tests. They are just one factor in the admission decision, and you can prepare for them, either on your own or by enrolling in a test preparation workshop. Practice test-taking skills; train to work under pressure and time constraints; and complete sample questions to become familiar with the kinds of questions and the test format.

### **Preparing for success**

Success in graduate school depends on a combination of academic preparation and personal characteristics. While your undergraduate record and standardized test scores are generally good predictors of success, graduate school also requires persistence, self-discipline, initiative, and the ability to work well with faculty and colleagues. It is also important to stay motivated, with a clear picture of how the program contributes to your personal and professional goals. Further, direct knowledge of your prospective career field, through paid or unpaid work experience and/or discussions with working professionals, can both strengthen your application to graduate school and help you make more accurate decisions about the specific degree or program to pursue.

Before you begin graduate study, establish personal support systems by sharing your plans with your employer and colleagues, family and friends, and professional and academic mentors. You should also assess your time and stress management skills and work to fine-tune them.

While in graduate school, be proactive in seeking out university services to help you succeed. Beyond the academic guidance of your faculty advisor, utilize other support services universities provide graduate students, such as workshops to develop study, writing and research skills, opportunities to fine-tune your English language skills, and career counseling services.

Finally, make the most of your time in graduate school. Enjoy the opportunity to meet new people, take advantage of the chance to broaden your professional network, and expand the value of your experience by getting involved in the intellectual and cultural life of the University.