

Preparing for Graduate and Professional Programs

Pacific University Career Development Center

Applying to graduate and professional programs is a big project that will probably take you twice as long as you thought it would, and no matter when you start you'll wish you'd started earlier. The decisions you make about where to apply and attend, and what type of program to pursue, are monumental and will shape the course of the next several years, if not the rest of your life. The purpose of this sheet is to prompt consideration of several issues associated with the process. Above all, don't undertake all this on your own—enlist the support of the many campus resources at your disposal. Consideration of the following questions will help you to get started.

Why are you contemplating graduate or professional school?

- Necessary step toward your career goal? E.g., an OD is required if you want to practice optometry.
- Personal development? E.g., simply wish to pursue your love of literature.
- Buying time, hiding from job search?
- Parental or other outside pressure?

What's the difference between graduate and professional programs?

- Graduate programs consist of advanced study of a particular discipline in the natural or social sciences, humanities, arts, etc., and can prepare you for a variety of careers.
- Professional programs involve training for a specific profession. E.g., PT, PA, OT, etc.

How long will it take to finish a graduate or professional degree?

- Professional programs are fairly regimented, with a cohort of students moving together through a prescribed curriculum. Program lengths vary: 4 years for optometry, 3 for PT, 4 for dental, etc. This can be found in any school's program description.
- Graduate programs at the Masters level vary from 1 to 3 years, with 1 or 2 being common. People complete their Ph.D. at different rates, anywhere from 4 to 7 years.

How can you determine what sort of a program is for you?

- This is easy for those who "just know" what they want to study, but tougher for people with less certainty about career direction. Conducting informational interviews with people in fields of interest can be a great way to learn about the necessity of graduate or professional study. Spend plenty of time discussing this with your academic and career advisors too.

How can you identify suitable schools to apply to once you've chosen your subject?

- Enlist the assistance of your professors and the Career Development Center.
- Use online resources. (See Graduate School Web Sites handout.)
- Consider a range of schools: long shots, maybes, and pretty sures.

- Read program descriptions carefully, noticing which professors are there, what their specialties and interests are, how many students they accept, etc.
- Think about geographic location, climate, etc.—these things can make a difference!

When are most applications due?

- Typically, applications for Fall enrollment are due sometime between January and April.
- Apply early to increase your odds of gaining acceptance and receiving financial aid!!!

What's typically involved in completing an application?

- Taking a standardized test such as the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, CBEST, etc., and reporting your scores to the schools of your choice.
- Submitting all college transcripts.
- Completing a statement of purpose.
- Filling out application forms.
- Some schools ask for a resume and/or writing samples.
- Securing letters of recommendation.

Do you have to take admissions tests? How important are these?

- Schools vary in the weight they place on these scores, but you can't afford to gamble on this. Prepare and do the very best you can. Most schools' program descriptions will indicate typical scores of admitted students.

How can you prepare for admissions tests?

- Talk with others who've taken them.
- Check out resources (books and software) in the Career Center.
- Consider taking a Kaplan course.
- Study early and regularly.

What makes a good personal statement?

- Describe your career aspirations and how further study fits into your plans—that is, why are you pursuing this program? And, why do you believe you should be admitted?
- Outline your intellectual development and preparedness by describing formative courses, ideas, thinkers, etc.
- Indicate academic gaps you need to fill and areas you wish to study, specifying professors and courses of interest to you.
- Spend considerable time researching the publications of faculty in this department, as well as talking to current graduate students in the department, to get a good sense for the environment and to make a case for how you would complement it.

How can you strengthen your application?

- Apply to schools that are a good match for your experiences, abilities, and aspirations.
- Prepare for the standardized tests.
- Take great pains to write an outstanding statement of purpose. (Ask Brian O'Driscoll and your professors for help!)

- Type everything with great care—no mistakes.
- Get help from professors in choosing a suitable essay to submit if a writing sample is required.
- Establish contact with professors in the program with whom you'd like to study. Consult with your Pacific professors and career staff to strategize on how best to handle this.

What sort of financial aid is available for graduate and professional study?

- Graduate teaching assistantships and fellowships are available on a limited basis. The strongest applicants to any given program will receive these. Fellowships generally imply free aid, with no work obligation.
- Tuition waivers, stipends, scholarships, and loans are also available to graduate students.