

Graduate School

EXPLORE

Are you considering graduate school as your next step in life? The decision to attend graduate school is not an easy one. Graduate school represents an extensive commitment of time, money and hard work. Graduate school in itself is not a plan. It is a step in the plan. Asking yourself the below questions about your motivations for graduate school and honestly answering them will help determine if graduate school is right for you.

Why do you want to go to graduate school?

- Do you know what your short and long term goals are and how a graduate degree can help you achieve them?
- Do you want to enter a profession that requires an advanced degree?
- Do you want a higher salary? (Will a graduate degree really affect your salary?)
- Are you stalling on making a career decision? (Have you talked to a career counselor?)
- Are you applying to graduate school because “everyone else is doing it” or because you are getting “pressured” into it? (The decision to attend graduate school is ideally based on your own criteria, including how graduate education will fit in with your goals.)

Are you applying to graduate school because you feel like you have no career options? (Have you used all job search methods? Have you talked to a career counselor?)

Do you really want to be a graduate student?

- Can a single topic or narrow range of topics sustain your interest for the next 2-7 years?
- Are you comfortable initiating and carrying out independent research?
- Will career-related work experience help you get into graduate school?
- Are you willing to invest the time, energy, and money associated with going to graduate school? Have you thoroughly investigated these costs?
- Are you prepared to spend the majority of the next 2-7 years studying while living on a limited budget?
- Do you need a break from school?

OPTIONS

What type should I choose?

As a graduate student, you will be among students who share your interest in the subject matter you are studying. Many of the courses will be held in small classes and seminars and you will get to know more students in your program. The faculty members will also be more likely to get to know you, especially if you are attending classes full time.

The expectation in most graduate programs is that you not merely pass these courses but that you do well in them. It will require a high level of self-discipline and independent work. Your focus of interest will be narrowed over time, but you need to select a program that will match your career aspirations.

Does my undergraduate major determine my graduate school options?

There is no single academic standard for this. You must check the academic prerequisites of the programs in which you are interested. Your undergraduate major by itself does not “determine” the graduate programs available to you. Typically if your undergraduate major is in the same field as your graduate degree, you would have adequate preparation for graduate admission.

If you are using the graduate degree to switch to a field in which you have little or no academic background, you will need to improve your qualifications. This may mean taking a few college level classes in the field or gaining related work experience.

What is a Professional Graduate School?

Some graduate programs are considered Professional Degree programs. These are usually considered “terminal degrees” because once students complete these programs, they enter the professional work world. In some fields like medicine the degree is required by the profession. Typical Professional Degree programs are in the fields of Medicine, Law, Business, Library Science, Architecture, etc.

Other graduate programs are academic and/or research oriented. These involve the student in on-going research or prepare students for the academic world. These programs include PhD's and EdD's.

CHOOSE

How do I choose?

Once you have made the decision to go to graduate school and decided on what you are interested in, the next step is to research programs that match your interests and fit your needs.

Gathering Information

Since most universities have web-sites, the Internet is a great resource to find information quickly and easily. Some sites will provide complete information, while others may tell you where to write to get additional information.

At the Career Center Resource Lab, and the campus or local library, you will find books, brochures, catalogues, directories and guides that list information on universities that grant graduate or professional degrees. Some guides that may be helpful are the Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs, gradschools.com and College Source On-line, which contains both short and long descriptions of virtually all accredited graduate programs.

These sources can provide you with the best information to help steer you in the direction of good programs. You may also want to look at journal articles in the field in which you are interested. Pick the good ones, and find out who the authors are and where they are teaching.

Conduct informational interviews with current graduate students at the schools you are considering to gain insider information about programs. Talk to faculty on campus and at other institutions that teach in the field that you plan to pursue. Discuss graduate education with professionals in the field in which you are interested to find out what they thought about their graduate education. These sources can provide you with the best information to help steer you in the direction of good programs. You may also want to look at journal articles in the field in which you are interested. Pick the good ones, and find out who the authors are and where they are teaching.

There are also a variety of graduate programs available at Santa Clara University. They would be able to provide specific information on their programs, as well as general information about their field.

Deciding Where

After researching your options, the next step is to decide where to apply. Here are some factors to consider when evaluating programs:

- The Reputation of the Faculty
- The Quality of the Program
- Financial Cost of the Program
- The Program Requirements
- Available Course Offerings
- Facilities
- Program Outcomes
- Geographic Location
- Student life

APPLY

Once you have determined that graduate school is for you, it's time to begin the application process. The application process for every school and program is different. We have laid out the steps in the process in general terms. We discuss such subjects as the application timeline, how to write a personal statement, securing letters of recommendation, graduate entrance examinations, and financial resources. Please visit the Graduate School Resources Guide under the Resources & Publications section of the Career Center Online at www.scu.edu/careercenter for more detailed information.

Application & Transcript

A complete graduate school application usually consists of:

- Application Form
- Application Fee
- Official Transcripts from all institutions attended
- Graduate Admissions Test Scores
- Personal Statement
- Letters of Recommendation

Most programs will not review your application until all parts of it are submitted. So, start preparing the application components early and send them in as soon as possible.

Request your official transcript. You must authorize the Registrar to send the transcript directly to the institution. Find out how many days or weeks an official transcript request takes to complete. Submit your request and any fees accordingly so your information can arrive ahead of the due date. Check your record to see that it is complete and correct. It is advisable to call the Registrar's Office to be sure that the transcripts have actually been mailed. If you have taken courses at other institutions, it is your responsibility to contact them and request that a transcript be sent to the schools you have applied to.

Admissions Tests

Most graduates and professional schools require test scores for admission. There are a variety of tests and depending upon the type of program for which you are applying you may need to take one or more of them. Most often required are the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), the Miller Analogies Test (MAT), the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST), or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Please refer to the admissions requirements of specific schools, to find out which tests are required for your programs of interest. To find out more information about specific tests, including preparation and registration information, you can refer to the websites for these tests which are listed in the Graduate School Resources Guide

under Resources & Publications section of the Career Center Online at www.scu.edu/careercenter. Furthermore, SCU's Counseling Center in Benson 201 is a great resource to find out about local testing.

Personal Statement

Graduate and professional schools often require some sort of written statement as a part of the application. The terminology differs, but may include "statement of purpose," "personal statement," "letter of intent," "personal narrative," etc. Some statements require rather specific information - for example, the applicant's intended area of study within a graduate field. Others suggest subjects which should be addressed specifically. Still others are quite unstructured, leaving the applicant free to address a wide range of matters. Some applications call for one statement, while others require responses to a series of six or more questions, ranging from 250 to 750 words each. The importance of the statement varies from school to school and from field to field. Please visit the Graduate School Resources Guide under Resources & Publications section of the Career Center Online at www.scu.edu/careercenter, for more information regarding how to write a personal statement.

Tip: Ask one or two faculty members (ideally, one or two of those who will write you a letter of recommendation) if they would be willing to read and comment on your statement draft when you get it completed. Use their time well by giving them a well-considered draft, not just your first effort.

Make sure that you leave time to rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. You'll want to revise this as you would an undergraduate research paper.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are required for almost every graduate school application and are a very important part of the application process. Usually grades and test scores factor in most heavily; however, your letters of recommendation could be the deciding factor in the admission process. Strong letters of recommendation can strengthen your application and if there are deficiencies in your application, they can help to outweigh them.

Graduate and professional school admissions people tell us the following make the best letter writers:

- Someone who knows you well
- Someone with the title of "Professor"
- Someone who is a professor at the school granting your baccalaureate degree
- Someone who has earned the degree which you are seeking in your graduate work

- Someone with an advanced degree who has supervised you in a job or internship aligned with the graduate program you are pursuing (e.g., Public Health, Social Work, Business Administration, etc.)
- Someone who has academically evaluated you in an upper-division class
- Note: letters from family friends, political figures, and the like usually are discouraged and may, in fact, be detrimental.

Since your best letters will come from those who know you well, make an effort to get to know your professors and/or supervisors. A few ways you can do this are to speak up in class, select courses with small class sizes, take more than one class from a professor, do research for a professor, take on optional projects (e.g., write an honor thesis or start an outreach program at work), and regularly attend office hours. Visit the Graduate School Resources Guide under Resources & Publications section of the Career Center Online at www.scu.edu/careercenter, to find out more about how you can help your letter writers write enlightening letters about you.

Tip: Graduate programs generally prefer confidential letters. Admissions officials say that it displays more confidence on the part of the applicant if letters are "confidential" (meaning you, the applicant cannot see the letter).

FINANCIAL AID

It is important to prepare ahead of time if you are interested in obtaining a scholarship or fellowship.

- Don't wait until your senior year to start researching programs. Many are available prior to your senior year and some require you to apply before you become a senior.
- Research programs via the internet to find programs that will suit your interests and goals.
- Consult with faculty, Career Center or Drahnann Center advisors for helpful suggestions regarding your application.

Types of Financial Aid:

Fellowships: Usually granted to individuals to cover their living expenses while they carry out research or projects. Awards may be single or multiple-year. Awards are usually based on an individual's merit as measured by grades, GRE scores, publications and letters of recommendation.

Assistantships: Usually campus-affiliated work assignments (e.g. graduate teaching instructor, research associate) that provide an individual stipend and often waive tuition and/or other matriculation fees.

Grants: Most often awarded to cover expenses associated with carrying out research or other specific projects, such as travel, materials or computers.

Loans: Available from the government or other private sources that needs to be paid back.

Internal Financial Aid: Often within specific graduate school programs, especially Ph.D. programs, internal financial aid is available. Once you have decided which programs you are interested in, talk with them about these possibilities.

For a list of Financial Aid Resources, visit the Graduate School Resources Guide under the Resources & Publications section of the Career Center Online at www.scu.edu/careercenter.

A FINAL WORD

Please remember that this handout is intended as a guide to help you begin your exploration of the world of graduate study. It is not intended to replace the advice and guidance that can be offered by a professor or counselor who is aware of your particular circumstances and personal goals.

For additional information, please visit the Graduate School Resources Guide under Resources & Publications section of the Career Center Online at www.scu.edu/careercenter.

TIMELINE

Summer (approximately 12 to 18 months before start of program)

- Think about why you want to go to graduate school
- Begin researching available programs and talk to people in the industry or area of study
- Identify and request applications from target schools
- Take a practice graduate school admissions test(s) and find out test dates for fall
- Identify potential recommendation letter writers
- Order an unofficial transcript and check for and correct any discrepancies
- Investigate and fulfill all prerequisites for your specific program
- Write a draft of your personal statement

Fall

- Review personal statement with a faculty member, a friend, or a career counselor
- Rewrite personal statement
- Provide faculty with copy of personal statement and any forms which they must complete and ask for letters of reference

- Register for appropriate graduate school admissions test and complete
- Order an official transcript(s)
- Finalize personal statement
- Complete applications .

Fall/Winter

- Mail applications. Even if deadlines are later, it may be beneficial to apply earlier as applications are usually evaluated as they are received.
- Make sure to follow up with programs to ensure that your application and all supporting materials were received.

Winter/Spring

- This is a good time to arrange for campus visits. While you are there, sit in on classes and talk with faculty and current students.

Spring

- If you are applying for need-based financial aid programs, you may have to file a copy of your federal income tax return.

*Note: This is a general timeline. Please make sure you follow the specific steps and process for each program you choose.