

This handout is meant to give you some basic general information about graduate school. For more information about applying to graduate schools in your area of interest, discuss your goals with your professors and/or meet with the appropriate advisor at the Loeb Center.

WHAT IS GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Graduate school is an advanced program of study in a particular academic discipline or profession with a much more narrowly focused curriculum than undergraduate work. Graduate degrees may be at the master's or doctoral level and may be either academic or professional in nature.

Types of Degrees

Academic degrees (MA, MS, PhD) involve acquiring and communicating new knowledge through original research and are awarded in virtually all liberal arts disciplines (e.g., arts, humanities, sciences, social sciences, etc.).

Professional degrees stress the practical application of knowledge and skills and may be acquired in such areas as business (MBA), law (JD), medicine (MD), and education (MEd). Other fields offering professional degrees include the fine arts (MFA), library science (MLS), public policy (MPP), and social work (MSW) and many more.

Comparison of Doctoral & Masters Degrees

Master's degrees (MA, MS)

- 1-3 years
- Coursework, exams, possibly an internship or other applied experience, and often a thesis or comprehensive exam
- Focus on learning a wide range of knowledge related to a specific field or academic area
- Limited funding

Doctoral degrees (PhD, EdD, etc.)

- 5-8 years, depending on the field
- Coursework, exams, and a dissertation (independent research project)
- Focus on learning a wide range of knowledge related to a specific field or academic area and diving very deeply into a specific topic of interest to the point where you are uncovering new knowledge in the field
- Large amounts of funding due to the range of opportunities to participate in faculty research

IS GRADUATE SCHOOL FOR ME?

Graduate school is a significant investment of time, money, and hard work, so before making the important decision to attend, you should carefully consider whether a graduate degree is necessary to achieve your personal and professional goals and if now is the right time to attend.

Why do you want to attend graduate school?

It's important to think carefully about your reasons for wanting to attend graduate school. Is it an important next step toward your goals or are you trying to avoid making other tough decisions like what kind of job you want? No matter what your reasons, there are some extra steps you should take to confirm your decision.

Graduate School: Exploring

Reason	Next steps
I want to be a researcher or college professor.	Speak with your professors to learn more about their work and determine if it is a path you want to pursue.
I don't know what else to do.	Make an appointment to meet with a career advisor or use the resources on the Loeb Center's website to do some self-assessment and career exploration.
I have a strong desire to be an expert in a field.	Learn as much as you can about your topic of interest while at Amherst to see if it is something you want to continue to study for an additional 2-7 years after you graduate from college.
I can put off paying my college loans.	Communicate with the financial aid office to estimate the total amount of your loans upon graduation and then determine what your monthly payments might actually be. Next try to find out from your prospective graduate schools if you will need to borrow additional money to attend graduate school. The debt will only add up over time!
I place a lot of value on attaining a graduate degree.	Explore your career options through the resources on the Loeb Center website and/or make an appointment to meet with a career advisor to discuss the fields or issues that you would consider studying more in depth in an advanced degree.
A graduate degree will give me better job choices.	Use the alumni directory to search for alumni who completed relevant graduate degrees and review their career trajectory or speak with them to see if the graduate degree opened up more career opportunities.
My parents expect me to go.	Discuss your goals with your family and let them know that you are carefully weighing your options. Show them all the work you have done (informational interviews, networking, research, etc.) to learn more about careers that interest you and determine your next steps.
I'm not ready to enter the world of work.	Make an appointment to meet with a career advisor and discuss your concerns.

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When to attend graduate school

Even if you know that you want to go to graduate school, there's absolutely no rush. Most Amherst graduates eventually go on to graduate or professional school, but the majority take one or more years beforehand to gain experience and clarify personal and professional goals.

Many schools are looking for maturity and work experience in their applicants. However, some programs accept applicants coming right out of undergraduate school. It is important to research this carefully in your chosen field to determine the best time for application. Here are some other questions to ask yourself as you decide whether it is the right time to get an advanced degree:

- How long will it take and how motivated am I right now? Am I mentally and physically prepared to undertake a long-term academic commitment?
- How much will it cost? Can I realistically afford to go to graduate school right now?
- Am I certain about what I want to study, or do I need more time to explore and figure out career options that are a good fit for me?
- What can the degree do for me now versus after I gain some work experience?
- Do I have other needs or desires right now that conflict with pursuing a graduate degree?

Who can I talk to?

Your Professors

Your faculty advisor or a faculty member in your desired field of study can provide information about graduate programs and what to expect from graduate school. Since these are the individuals who may ultimately write your letters of recommendation, speaking with them is an important step. Don't wait until you need the recommendation letter to speak with faculty. Include them in your graduate school exploration process.

Career Advisors

At the Loeb Center, there are advisors who can help you locate resources relevant to your proposed field of study and give you general information about the application process, standardized tests, and financial aid. If possible, try to meet with the advisor who specializes in your area of interest.

Alumni & Your Network

Professionals who work in your field of interest can give you more information about the programs that they attended and give you general advice for your process of exploring and applying for graduate school.

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How do I select a school/program?

Once you know what you want to study, you can begin the process of researching schools and programs. Finding a good fit for your academic, personal, and professional goals is a very important part of the process.

Resources

Alumni, professors, and other professionals who work in your field of interest and have attended graduate school will be able to give you helpful information that they have learned from experience. Academic departments may also have resources on graduate school programs for their specific majors. You can also research schools and programs through many online resources:

- **Petersons:** information on planning for grad school, including resources on choosing a school, test preparation, and financial aid
- **U.S. News and World Report Grad School Rankings**
- **About.com Guide to Graduate School Admissions**
- **Princeton Review:** information on different graduate programs, including rankings of the top programs. Also has financial aid and test preparation information
- **GradSchools.com:** information on different graduate programs as well as the GRE and loans
- **LinkedIn Student pages:** university rankings and a university finder using desirable employers and programs as search criteria

Contact programs directly to get more detailed program information such as courses, professors, cost, financial aid and application forms.

Sample Questions to Ask

In order to determine whether a program is going to be a good fit for you, there are many questions that you should consider asking.

Deciding between a master's and a doctoral degree:

- What level of education do you need to move forward with your professional goals?
- How certain are you about the field you want to pursue?
- Are you motivated to study for a few years (2-3) or many years (5-8)?
- Do you want to jump right into a PhD or is there an option to start with a master's degree and decide later if you want to continue?
- Are you interested in doing original research on a very specific topic to uncover new knowledge in the field?
- What is your comfort with taking on debt? 1) You typically receive substantial funding for a PhD and so you are less likely to incur a lot of debt; however, you probably will not be able to work full time for 5-8 years; 2) You typically don't receive a lot of funding for a master's and you may incur significant debt; however, you will probably be able to get back to working full time after only 1-3 years.

Graduate School: Exploring

Deciding between programs:

- What characteristics distinguish this program from others in the same field?
- What is the reputation of the program? In some fields, the reputation of the school or program you attend might be extremely important and in others, it might be more important that you study under certain faculty or work on certain types of research projects.
- What is the average length of time students spend in the program?
- Does the program lean toward theory or application?
- What planned practical experiences are included in the program? (Ask for examples of internship placements.)
- What percentage of students in the graduate program attend full time/part time?
- What is the level of attrition?
- Can you put me in touch with students enrolled in the program so that I can ask them about their experience directly?
- What is the size of the faculty and faculty/student ratio? Are the top faculty teaching and/or conducting research?
- What have faculty members published lately? (Compare professors' interests with your own.)
- What is the gender and ethnic representation on the faculty?
- How much are tuition costs and fees?
- What types of financial aid are offered: fellowships, assistantships, grants, scholarships? How many are awarded each year? What criteria are used for choosing recipients?
- What are the process and deadlines for applying for the financial aid options?
- What are the social and cultural activities of the department?
- How adequate are the library and other relevant facilities?
- Is there campus housing for graduate students or assistance in locating off-campus housing?
- What transportation options are available to students?
- Where are graduates employed? What can you tell me about last year's graduates?
- What career planning and job hunting assistance is available?
- What is the relative importance of admissions test scores, undergraduate grades, recommendations, personal statements, related experience, and other requirements?
- How important is related-work experience? What kind of experience is the program looking for?

The Gap Year(s)

If you want to go to graduate school but prefer to wait for a year or several years to do so, there are a number of ways to approach your time away from academia:

Getting “real world” experience

Many graduate programs require or strongly prefer that applicants have concrete work experience in the field. This is especially the case for professional schools where they want to be sure that their applicants know what they're getting into and are prepared to get the most out their program. Moreover, some students feel that they could learn or benefit more from graduate school after gaining knowledge from work experiences in their field.

Graduate School: Preparing

Strengthening your application

If your academic record isn't strong or you are lacking some of the required undergraduate coursework to be eligible, you may want or need to take additional courses to strengthen your application. Getting work experience also allows you to gain more familiarity and expertise in a field which will be reflected in your application materials. Professional experience will also give you the opportunity to establish solid relationships with supervisors or colleagues who may be willing to write you a letter of recommendation.

Career Exploration

If you are interested in several careers that require different types of graduate training, it is wise to take a year or more to continue exploring the fields through internships, jobs, volunteer work, or informational interviews with professionals who are doing different types of work. Graduate school can be expensive and time-consuming so you want to make sure that you choose the field that is the best match for you and your interests.

Travel/personal exploration

After 16 years of school, you may want to pursue personal goals that have gone unrealized or challenge yourself to continue exploring the world before you commit to a specific career path. Depending on your circumstances, this may be as good of a time as any to travel, intern or work internationally, explore other passions, or try something new!

TIMELINE

The following timeline will help you to get started in the process of applying for an advanced degree.

Spring/Summer Prior to Applying

- Identify the area of study you would like to pursue
- Research schools that have programs in your field of choice
- Speak with faculty members about programs
- Determine test requirements, prerequisites, and application deadlines
- Register for standardized exams (GMAT, GRE, MAT, etc.)
- Start exploring financial aid resources, including assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships
- Investigate national fellowships and scholarships on the Amherst College Fellowships page

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Summer/Fall Prior to Applying

- Request information and application materials from the schools where you want to apply
- Take standardized tests
- Draft your personal statement and meet with someone from the Writing Center or the Loeb Center for feedback
- Request your letters of recommendation from faculty and others who can speak to your skills and interests

November & December

- Order official transcripts from Registrar's Office to be sent to graduate programs. You may want to ask that they be sent out AFTER your fall term grades are in
- Finalize your personal statement
- Mail applications as early as possible. Deadlines usually fall between November and March; however, it is in your best interest to apply early!
- Apply for assistantships, fellowships and grants
- Check with the institutions before the deadline to make sure your file is complete

January – April

- Contact schools about the possibility of visiting and/or scheduling an interview if necessary
- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Discuss acceptances, rejections, and other career options with family, a faculty member, or member of the Loeb Center and make a decision
- Send a deposit to the institution of your choice and notify the schools you will not be attending
- Send thank you letters to your recommenders

FINANCIAL AID

In order to cover the costs of your graduate education, you may need to pursue a variety of funding sources. This is especially true for master's programs. Doctoral programs typically have much more funding available. Consult with the graduate school's financial aid office and the application processes and eligibility for scholarships and grants. Ask for a list of private scholarships for additional funding opportunities. Below is a list of the most common forms for financial aid. Most students utilize a combination of various types of aid.

Types of Funding

- **Loans** are available from the government and other private sources. To be eligible for federal or state loans, you must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
- **Assistantships** are usually campus-affiliated work assignments (e.g. graduate teaching instructor, research associate, administrative intern, etc.) that provide an individual a stipend and often waive tuition and/or other matriculation fees. Early contact with the department is critical in obtaining assistantships.
- **Fellowships** are typically granted to individuals to cover their living expenses while they carry out research or work on a project. Awards may be single or multiple-year. Awards are competitive and usually based on an individual's merit as measured by grades, GRE scores, publications,

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and letters of recommendation. **Amherst College offers fellowships to its alumni if you are pursuing a full-time graduate degree.

- **Grants** are most often awarded to cover expenses associated with carrying out research or other specific projects, such as travel, materials, or computers. The funding may come from a variety of sources, including government agencies, corporations, or foundations.
- **Scholarship awards** are based on one or more of several criteria - merit, financial need, area of study, career goals, or membership within a minority group.
- **Work study awards** are based on financial need and offer you the potential for a part-time job on campus while you're a student. You can request work study when you fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). If you receive the work study award, you can look for work study positions in school job banks or other campus job boards and then apply and be considered for those positions.
- **Additional employment** can be obtained on or off campus to help supplement your aid package from the school. Most institutions have an employment page or job bank for on-campus jobs but you can also contact the offices or departments where you'd like to work directly. For jobs in the local area, review job sites such as Indeed.com, or Craigslist and look for help wanted signs.

Funding Resources

- **Access Group:** Financial education resources and services
- **FinAid:** Student guide to a lot of general financial aid information
- **FastWeb:** Search engine for scholarships
- **100 Minority Scholarship Gateway List:** Scholarships for minority students
- **Petersons & International Student:** Two resources with financial aid information for international students

STANDARDIZED TESTS

Most graduate and professional schools require test scores as part of the application process. The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) General and Subject tests are required by many academic programs (Masters and Doctoral degrees). Some schools accept the Miller Analogies Test in lieu of the GRE. MBA programs usually require the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) or the GRE. Other tests are required in other fields such as the LSAT for law school, the MCAT for medical school, the DAT for dentistry school, the OAT for optometry school, the PCAT for pharmacy school, etc.

If you are receiving substantial financial aid, contact the Financial Aid Office to learn if you are eligible for a test fee waiver and/or waivers for your graduate school application fees.

For information on the test and how to register, along with resources to help you study for a test, see the test's specific website. The majority of tests are computer-based so seek out resources that allow you to practice online. Some students enroll in a test prep course if they need help with preparation. There are several companies that run test prep courses around the country. The more popular companies include Kaplan and The Princeton Review. They are expensive, but some students find them valuable. However, if you are a disciplined student, you should be able to study on your own with preparation guides. See the Loeb Center library for sample study guides.

Graduate School: Applying

APPLICATION PROCESS

Application requirements and deadlines differ among programs so read the instructions carefully for each program. We recommend you develop a checklist of requirements with all the important deadlines. The most common application materials are the following:

Application Forms & Fees

Most application materials and information can be found on a program's website. Follow the instructions carefully when completing the necessary form(s) and paying application fees.

Letters of Recommendation

Two to three letters of recommendation are required by most graduate schools. You should request recommendation letters well in advance of the application deadline to give letter writers plenty of time to write on your behalf. As you think about who to ask to write your recommendation letters, try to choose people who:

- Have a high opinion of your ability to perform well in graduate school
- Know you well, such as a faculty member with whom you have taken several classes
- Are knowledgeable about the programs to which you are applying
- Write well

In order to get the best possible letter of recommendation, we suggest that you provide letter writers with the following information:

- Deadlines for application and any specific instructions necessary to complete the letter of recommendation
- A statement about what you are applying for and why (your personal statement or statement of purpose if it's completed)
- A resume
- A copy of your transcript

Finally, it is your responsibility to ensure that your application is completed on time. We strongly advise you to follow up with your recommenders to confirm that your letter has been submitted. After your application is complete, write your recommenders a thank you note and keep them up-to-date on your plans.

Personal statement or statement of purpose

The personal statement is your opportunity to speak about yourself and why you would be an asset to the graduate program. The statement serves dual purposes. First, it is an opportunity to discuss yourself and your background. It can address your goals, your commitment to the field of study, and can highlight any relevant experiences you have had. Second, it serves as an indication of how you think and write and is a reflection of your personality and intellect. For more information, see the Writing Your Personal Statement handout.

Transcripts

Submit official transcripts from all institutions at which you have taken college level courses. For Amherst College transcripts, visit the Registrar's webpage.

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Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV)

If the program requests a resume, target it to the type of work or field of study you're pursuing. If a curriculum vitae (CV) is requested, you can include more information. A CV usually includes a more exhaustive list of your education, work experience, volunteer work, research, presentations, publications, associations, etc.

Standardized test results

At some point in the process of registering for and/or taking the standardized test(s), you will be allowed to select schools to which you want your official test scores sent. Make sure that you take the tests with sufficient time for the schools to receive your scores by the application deadline.

Writing Samples/Portfolios

In the creative fields, programs may request samples of your work. You may need to create new materials if you do not already have the requested pieces. There are many resources on the Internet about creating specific types of portfolios.

Interviews

Some graduate school programs require an interview as part of the application process. Even if an interview is not required, we suggest that you visit the campus and set up appointments to meet with admission officers, faculty, and current students.