

Guide To

Graduate School

Application

Career Center

Colorado College ♦ 226 Worner Center ♦ vColorado Springs, CO 80903 ♦ 719/389-6893

Introduction

Thinking about attending graduate school commonly raises questions like:

- How do I decide whether to go to graduate school?
- When should I attend?
- How do I choose which school to attend? How do I find out about schools that I may be interested in?
- If I decide to apply, how can I make myself a better candidate?
- What if more than one school admits me? What if no one admits me?

The purpose of this booklet is to answer some of these questions and to suggest ways you can find the information you need. Only **you** can (with a little help) figure out exactly what your questions are, seek out the answers to those questions, and make the best decisions regarding your own future.

Graduate School or Professional School: What is the Difference?

There is a technical distinction between graduate schools and professional schools. Typically, professional schools include schools of medicine, law, dentistry, veterinary medicine, engineering, architecture, and several other specialized fields. Graduate schools include most other types of post undergraduate programs, such as psychology, history, and art. For the sake of simplicity, we will use the term graduate school throughout this booklet recognizing that most of the issues involved in the decision-making process are similar whether you are considering applying for a Master's degree in Sociology, or an M.D. program.

Graduate School and You—A Self-Assessment

Deciding whether to attend graduate school requires self-assessment. In addition to identifying your interests, skills, values, goals and objectives you need to be able to answer these questions:

- What kind of student have you been as an undergraduate? What are your particular areas of academic strength and weakness? How might these effect graduate school?
- What appeals to you about academia?
- What kinds of learning experiences have you had outside of the classroom that have affected your interests and academic goals?
- What other interests, skills and values are important to you that may influence your decision?
- Are there people in your life who need to be considered in making this decision? How will it affect them?

Should I Attend Graduate School?

It is common for undergraduates to be unsure about the future. Before investing time, energy and money in graduate school, you should have a fairly clear idea about how graduate school will help you meet your career goals. If you aren't sure, you need to think further about what your goals are.

As you start your self-assessment you will be focusing on questions having to do with **why** you should or shouldn't attend graduate school. When asked this question, the answers people give vary, depending on each person's particular goals. However, some common responses include:

Preparing for a Profession: Many people enter graduate schools—particularly professional schools—to prepare for specific types of professions. For example, if you wish to be a pediatrician or a surgeon, the only way to obtain the appropriate training and qualifications is to attend medical school. Similarly, if you wish to become a trial lawyer or corporate attorney, you must complete a law degree. And, if you want to become a college or university professor, you will probably need a Ph.D.

Getting a Job: It is important to realize that a graduate degree is not a guarantee of a particular job or type of career. For many fields, a graduate degree is not required. Students often mistakenly assume that you have to have a graduate degree to engage in many professions, when the fact is that while such a degree might enhance your marketability and your salary, it may not be necessary. The only way to find out is to do some career exploration, determine what kinds of career areas you wish to pursue, and what kinds of qualifications are required. While holding a Ph.D. will enhance your chances of getting a job as a math professor, for example, and is most likely required, it does not guarantee that you will be able to obtain such employment. Actually getting particular jobs depends on many things, including the state of the economy, the number and qualifications of people with whom you are competing for positions, the number of positions available, and a variety of other factors. In some fields, a graduate school degree with little or no experience can actually be a detriment. Teaching, consulting, and business fields tend to value actual experience before getting a higher degree.

Earning More: People with graduate degrees do, on average, earn more than people who don't have such degrees. However, when you take into account other variables that are part of reality--motivation, work experience, opportunities, realities of the market, etc.---simply having a graduate degree does not guarantee you any higher earnings.

Personal Achievement: Another motivation for attending graduate school is for personal satisfaction. Many of us see ourselves as "life-long learners," and are happiest in settings that allow us to develop and exercise intellectual and academic abilities. Generally, people who derive pleasure and satisfaction from academic pursuits, and have a clear sense of their career goals and how graduate education meshes with those goals, are more likely to enjoy and be successful at their graduate studies.

When Should I Go?

In addition to deciding whether or not to attend graduate school, you also need to decide when to attend.

Now?: It may seem easiest to attend graduate school immediately after completing your bachelor's degree, because much of what you have learned as an undergraduate is still fresh in your mind. Information about graduate schools and faculty recommendations are still readily accessible. Likewise, some advanced programs do prefer to recruit students directly from undergraduate programs.

Later?: If you aren't clear on your goals, or about how graduate school fits into your plans, you may want to delay applying for awhile. Your experiences in the world may lead you on a different path than you anticipate. Allow for change. Similarly, if you are not excited about studying and academia, you may want to pursue other options. Finally, practically speaking, working for awhile after graduating can provide some financial resources that will ease the expense or debt of graduate school. Although some aid is available to support graduate education, it is still expensive, particularly if you go full-time.

If I don't go now...: A common concern of many undergraduates is: "If I don't go to graduate school right away will I ever go?" The data suggests that the answer to that question is yes. If you decide in the future that graduate school becomes an important part of your career plan (and you are properly prepared), you will almost certainly go on. On average, about 20-30% of CC alumni attends graduate school within two years of completing their degree. Over the long run, it appears that another 10-15% (or more--the data are hard to collect) go on to graduate programs.

Other Options: If you think you want to go on, but are uncertain that now is the right time, check out your options. Some schools offer deferred admissions. The best plan is to weigh the pros and cons of going directly after graduation versus waiting awhile. Get as much information as you can, from as many sources as you can, before deciding what's right for you.

Some important questions to ask yourself include:

- Do you know the financial costs of graduate school? Do you have the resources to meet these costs? If not, what are your alternatives?
- Do you have an interest in continuing with several more years of study? Is there an area of study that you want to pursue?
- Would working for several years make my graduate school experience more meaningful?

Choosing a Program

There are many factors to consider when selecting a graduate program. You need to research programs to determine which are best suited to meet your needs.

Quality of the Program

Reputation of the School and Program: At the graduate level, quality is measured by a number of different factors. One of these is the reputation of the school. To get a sense of the school's reputation, consult some of the graduate school directories in the Career Center. If you turn to the popular press, each year, "U.S. News & World Report" publishes an issue that ranks the top schools in several professional fields. To find out about the prestige of particular departments, you should talk to CC faculty who are in the discipline which you plan to pursue. Faculty members can tell you which programs are well thought of, and which are not. In many areas of study, an excellent program at a less prestigious school is a wiser choice than a poorly thought of program at a better known school.

Program Accreditation: In many areas of study, it is **essential** to attend a program that is accredited. If you are in a professional program (e.g., dentistry, and mental health) that is not accredited, you might be unable to gain certification or licensure to practice your profession after graduation. If you are unclear about what kinds of accreditation are important in your future career field, find out from faculty here, and/or by writing to state accreditation boards in your field of interest. Information about accreditation is available in a variety of indexes of graduate programs in the Career Center, and in the literature published by the institutions themselves.

Type of Program

You probably chose The Colorado College for a variety of reasons. At least one reason probably involved the Block Plan. Graduate programs also have distinct curriculums and teaching styles. Some factors to consider include:

Program Requirements: Requirements in graduate programs—even in the very same academic discipline—vary considerably in different institutions. For example, in graduate programs in the social sciences one school may require a great many hours of course-work combined with a little research experience, while another school may only require a handful of core graduate courses and a great deal of research involvement. You need to know what courses and other learning experiences (internships, field experiences, etc.) are required to complete the program, which may affect your choice of one program over another.

Time to Complete the Program: The average length of time required to complete the program is another important piece of information. There is a significant variation in the length of time required to complete similar degrees in different programs. For example, some programs require only two years to complete a Master's Degree, while other programs take three years or more.

Graduation Rate: Knowing the number of students who complete the program is also important. You want to enter a program where students do complete their degrees.

Here are some additional questions and suggestions to use as a starting place for further exploration:

- Are there any schools or programs that you have an interest in at this time? If not, do you need to do some more exploring, or should you consider options other than continuing on to graduate school at this point in time?
- How important is location and size in selecting an institution?
- What other kinds of institutional resources are important to you and why?
- What types of students and faculty members do you wish to work with and why? What kinds of characteristics are undesirable in fellow students and in faculty and why?
- Using the Career Center's Alumnae Network list, call and talk with alumni who have completed graduate programs in the fields and at the schools in which you are potentially interested.
- Read through some of the graduate school directories in the Career Center to find out about schools that offer the kinds of programs in which you are interested.
- If you can afford it, visit the campuses of the schools that interest you, talk with faculty and with other graduate students in the department that interests you.
- Talk with faculty (preferably in the discipline or field in which you are interested) about their graduate school experiences and their suggestions.

Issues to Consider

Should I Apply to a Highly Selective Program?: One thing you need to decide is what level program—in the terms of prestige and difficulty of admissions—you will apply to. If you are a top-notch student, with an excellent G.P.A., test scores, and letters of recommendation, you will probably have a wide range of programs to choose from. If your academic record and credentials are not as strong, you will need to realistically evaluate the admission requirements of various programs and apply to several programs to which you can reasonably expect to be admitted.

How Many Programs Should I Apply To?: You should discuss this question with faculty who are knowledgeable about the area of graduate study you want to pursue. Because application fees are expensive, it is unlikely that you will want to apply to dozens of programs. You should, however, plan to apply to several programs, rather than “putting all your eggs in one basket.” Occasionally a student will apply to only one or two programs, and when rejected by those, has no alternatives available. Basically, all students should select several potential programs, including some acceptable “back-ups” if you are not accepted at your first or second choice schools.

How Much Does It Cost And How Can I Pay For It?

Graduate school generally costs more than undergraduate education; often imposes a heavy debt burden (possibly adding to the debt you are already carrying); and usually has less financial aid available than is available at undergraduate institutions. However, you shouldn't automatically assume that you won't be able to afford graduate school--there are a number of sources of aid that are available, several of which are described below. What you need to do is engage in a realistic evaluation of costs and of available resources.

There are three basic kinds of financial support available to support graduate education. They are: (1) education-related salaries, typically in the form of teaching or research assistantships, but sometimes including administrative assistantships and counseling assistantships; (2) outright grants and fellowships; and (3) government or institutional loans or loans from private sources. Not all of these kinds of support are equally available in all schools, nor to all students, so you must again do some homework on what is available from the programs that interest you.

Assistantships: When support is available, it is most typically in the form of an “RA” or a “TA” awarded directly from the department in which you are doing your graduate work. A RA is a Research Assistant, while a TA is a Teaching Assistant. As an RA, you would typically assist with the research of a faculty member--and sometimes, you will be able to piggyback onto that research project in ways that will benefit you, in terms of developing your own line of research and/or related publications. If you are a TA, you will usually assist with one or more sections of an undergraduate course; this assistance may include facilitating discussion groups, writing exam questions, and/or grading undergraduates' papers or exams. Both RA and TA positions typically require a commitment of about 10 to 20 hours per week. Student Life Assistantships (like Hall Director positions) are sometimes available through the school's Residential Life Department. In addition, there are sometimes administrative assistantships available, particularly at larger institutions. The graduate school office (rather than the department) can give you information on who to contact about these, if they are available.

Fellowships and Grants: Some departments and institutions also offer fellowships, scholarships, or training grants. These are usually straight monetary awards that do not require work-hour commitments, and they are typically awarded on the basis of academic merit. However, no matter how good your undergraduate record is, you cannot count on such fellowships, as they are becoming ever more scarce in the graduate world today. It is worth your time to carefully investigate resources like The Graduate Scholarship Book, Grants for Graduate Students, The Grants Register, and others that are available in the Career Center. These books list both large and small grants and fellowships available across the country. It is worthwhile to apply for even fairly small fellowships, since you can sometimes put together a substantial package for yourself from several sources.

Loans: Another general source of financial support includes government (state and/or federal) loan programs. There are some government sponsored fellowships (scholarships that do not require payment) as well as government loans. Two current loan programs are the Carl Perkins National Direct Student Loan Program, and the Stafford Guaranteed Student Loan Program. Most loans will be administered through the institution's financial aid office rather than through the academic department, so you need to be sure to contact both places.

Jobs: Finally, jobs. Many students work throughout their graduate school experience. Some obtain jobs connected with various academic programs while others work completely outside the school. Some law schools, for example, now offer job/internship programs that are affiliated with the law school, so that you can complete both course work and paid career-related work at the same time. Some medical schools also make provisions for employment affiliated with health centers or hospitals. Many institutions also have work-study programs that provide part-time employment during the academic year, and full or part-time employment during the summer.

When evaluating your ability to meet financial costs of attending graduate school, you will need to realistically evaluate both your own present circumstances, and gather information about what kinds of aid are available from the programs that interest you. You should be able to answer these questions:

- What kinds of realistic financial restraints will affect your choice of programs?
- How important is financial aid in making your decision?
- How much time do you have available to work a job in addition to a full class load?
- If you receive financial support, is it year-round or only during the academic year? Are other sources of support available to you in the summer?
- How much of your financial aid is taxable income?

Although you may be concerned that questions about financial support will appear inappropriate or tacky, institutions should be happy to tell you what aid is available to help graduate students. However, you need to take responsibility and ask!

The Application and Admission Process

It is important to learn about the specific application requirements for the programs you are interested in and complete the application process. Applicants are frequently 'not processed' because individuals failed to allocate the time and effort needed to complete the application exactly as instructed. Take time and do it right! You will also need to: (a) visit the CC Registrar to request that your undergraduate transcripts be sent to the institutions to whom you are applying, (b) register for and take the appropriate standardized tests, and visit faculty and/or others to discuss and request letters of recommendation.

Graduate Admissions Criteria

Admissions Requirements: All graduate schools and departments have admissions requirements. These will usually include a minimum G.P.A., particular scores or score ranges on one or more standardized tests (e.g., the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT, etc.), official transcripts from your undergraduate institution, letters of recommendation, an application essay, and a nonrefundable application fee. The amount of weight given to each of these factors varies by program and school. Some schools will also ask for samples of previous academic work, some will require the completion of particular courses in an academic area, or completion of a particular major (although this is becoming less common), and some will require a personal interview. Where an interview is required, applicants will typically have to pay for their travel and other expenses themselves.

Required Tests

The most common standardized tests required for admission to graduate programs in the U.S. are the Graduate Records Exam (GRE), the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), and the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). Professional schools typically require the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), and the Dental Admission Test (DAT). The deadlines for registering to take these tests are far in advance of the actual test dates, and most are given only a few times a year.

Web Pages for Standardized Tests

Dental Admission Test (DAT): <http://wwilkins.edoc.com/sor/DAT.html>

Graduate Records Exam (GRE): <http://www.gre.org/>

Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT): <http://gmat.org/>

Law School Admission Test (LSAT): <http://lsac.org/lSATinfo.htm>

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT): <http://aamc.org/stuapps/admiss/mcat/start.htm>

Miller Analogies Test (MAT): See specific school and program information

Deadlines

As you research each institution of potential interest to you, keep a file noting their admissions requirements and their deadlines for application. Although deadlines vary from school to school, most are in early January. Some schools do, however, have deadlines as early as late November. Get your materials in on time and check with the graduate school at least three weeks before their final deadline to ask whether your materials have been received.