



**COLORADO
COLLEGE**

Career Center



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Graduate School Application

Thinking about attending graduate school typically 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 can I make myself a better candidate?
- What if more than one school admits me? What if no one admits me?

Only **you** (with a little help!) can figure out exactly what your questions are, seek out the answers to those questions, and make the best decisions regarding your own future.

Professional School or Graduate School: What's the Difference?

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 packet; 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.

Should I Attend Graduate School?

Before investing your time, energy, and money into graduate school, you should have a fairly clear idea about how it will help you meet your career goals.

- **Preparing for a Profession:** Many people enter graduate schools—particularly professional schools—to prepare for specific careers.
- **Getting a Job:** For many fields, a graduate degree is not required. It is important to realize that **a graduate degree is not a guarantee of a particular job or type of career.** While that 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. **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:** On **average**, people that have graduate degrees earn more than people who don't. When you take into account other variables that are part of reality, however—motivation, work experience, opportunities, realities of the market, etc.—simply having a graduate degree does not **guarantee** you higher earnings.
- **Personal Achievement:** 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.

Self-Reflection

If you aren't sure about whether or not to attend, you need to think further about your goals. Spend some time answering these self-reflection questions.

What kind of student have I been as an undergraduate? What are my particular areas of academic strength and weakness? How might these effect my experience in graduate school?

What appeals to me about academia?

What kinds of learning experiences have I had outside of the classroom that affected my interests and academic goals?

What other interests, skills, and values are important to me that may influence my decision?

Are there people in my life that I need to consider when making this decision?

When Should I Go?

It may seem easiest to **attend graduate school immediately after CC**, because much of what you have learned as an undergraduate is still fresh in your mind. And for some people, that is the best option. Don't stress if going right away doesn't work out for you!

If you **think you want to go, but are uncertain whether now is the right time**, check out your options. 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 before deciding what's right for you.

If you **aren't clear on your goals, or about how graduate school fits into your plans**, you may want to delay applying. Your experiences in the world may lead you on a different path than you anticipate. Similarly, if you are not excited about studying and academia, think about pursuing other options. Practically speaking, working for a while after graduating can provide some financial resources that will ease the expense of graduate school. Although some aid is available to support graduate education, tuition is still expensive, especially if you go full-time.

Choosing a Program

Program Requirements: Requirements in graduate programs, even within single disciplines, vary considerably at 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.

Reputation of the School and Program: One of the measures of quality at the graduate level is reputation. To get a sense of the school's reputation, consult some resources such as *U.S. News & World Report's* rankings of graduate school programs. 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 in that field can tell you which programs are well-respected. **Often, an excellent program at a less prestigious school is a wiser choice than a poorly respected program at a better known school.**

Program Accreditation: In most areas of study, it is **essential** to attend a program that is accredited. If you are in a professional program 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, ask faculty or write to state accreditation boards in your field of interest.

Time to Complete the Program: There can be 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 the majority of students complete their degrees.

Application and Admission

Applicants are frequently 'not processed' because individuals failed to put in the time and effort needed to complete the application exactly as instructed. Take the time to do it right.

You will also need to:

- Contact the CC Registrar's Office to request that your undergraduate transcripts be sent to the institutions;
- Take the appropriate standardized tests;
- Visit faculty and/or others to discuss and request letters of recommendation.

Admissions Requirements: These will usually include a minimum GPA, 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. Some will require a personal interview. When interviewing, applicants typically pay for their own travel expenses.

Deadlines: As you research each institution of 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 have early deadlines in late **November**. Submit your materials ahead of time, and check with the school at least three weeks before their final deadline to confirm that they received your materials.

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

Graduate school generally costs more than undergraduate education and usually there is less financial aid available; don't assume, however, that you won't be able to afford it. 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; (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 research what is available from the programs that interest you.

- **Assistantships:** When support is available, it is typically in the form of an “RA”, Research Assistant, or a “TA”, Teaching Assistant, awarded directly from the department in which you are doing your graduate work. RAs typically assist with the research of a faculty member, while TAs 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 and exams. Both positions typically require a commitment of about 10-20 hours per week. Student Life Assistantships (like Hall Director positions) are sometimes available through the school's Residential Life Department. There also are sometimes administrative assistantships available, particularly at larger institutions.
- **Fellowships and Grants:** Some departments and institutions also offer fellowships, scholarships, or training grants. These are mostly monetary awards that do not require work-hour commitments and are typically awarded on the basis of academic merit. But, 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. It is worth your time to carefully investigate resources and discuss funding possibilities with faculty familiar with your programs of interest.
- **Loans:** This includes government (state and/or federal) loan programs, as well as some government sponsored fellowships (scholarships that do not require payment). Most loans are administered through the institution's financial aid office rather than through the academic department, so reach out to both offices for information.
- **Jobs:** Many students work throughout their graduate school experience. Some obtain jobs connected to their academic program, while others work completely outside the school. 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.

Think about your present circumstances and gather information about what kinds of aid are available from the programs that interest you.

- What kinds of financial restraints will affect your choice of programs? Be realistic.
- 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?

Don't be afraid about how it might “look” – take the initiative and ask programs directly for financial aid information. ■