

Researching Graduate Programs

1. *Decide on the type of graduate program that interests you and meets your needs.*

- Identify the factors that you want to consider:
 - Size
 - Faculty
 - Facilities
 - Location
 - Reputation
 - Financial Aid
 - Student Body
 - School Affiliation
 - Campus Environment
 - Tuition Requirements
 - Student Organizations
 - Special Program Requirements
- Explore the “Graduate Degrees at UT” handout in the Career Exploration Center (CEC). This handout lists graduate degrees offered at U.T.
- Explore the Peterson’s Guide – General Index at the CEC or at www.petersons.com or www.gradschools.com to see what degrees are offered by various colleges/universities.

2. *Research specific programs and develop a criteria sheet to evaluate how well it meets what the criteria important to you.*

- Explore other graduate programs through the CEC homepage and links to graduate school planning at www.utexas.edu/student/cec.
- There are differences between general catalogs and departmental catalogs.

- Departments will usually give you more information about faculty, coursework, etc. You usually have to request these yourself from the department you’re considering. Use the most current Educational Rankings Annual, to research graduate school rankings. This book is at the PCL in the Reserve Room (call number: LB2331.63 - E382).
- Talk to faculty members to help you learn about graduate school rankings and to answer other specific questions you may have.
- Use the Encyclopedia of Associations at galenet.gale.com/a/acp/db/grr/ to look up professional associations in your field. Many of these groups publish guides to graduate education targeted to one profession or career.

3. *Begin narrowing your options.*

- Talk to the graduate advisor in the department you are considering, or even set up a campus visit.
- Look over the information on UT faculty located in the Faculty Contacts Program in the CEC. You can find out where faculty attended graduate school. Talking to people who went to the school you are interested in will help you gather more insight into their programs.
- Ask the departments for names of current graduate students who can talk to you about their experiences. (What they know about their current program, as well as the other programs they researched while applying).

MAKING THE DECISION

Know your career objective. The reason for attending graduate and professional school is to prepare for a specific career. Clarity about this is essential for a strong application and a strong statement of purpose. Knowing your own values, skills and work characteristics is crucial to choosing which fields and programs to pursue. Come by the CEC at Jester A115A for counseling or to access our library resources.

The Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs is a guide to all such programs in the United States. The guide includes basic information about the university and faculty, and provides contact information. In addition, seek advice from professors, faculty, students, and alumni of the programs you are considering. Contact people who work in your field of interest, unaffiliated with the programs. Set up meetings to ask people questions to assist you in making an informed decision.

- Ask people who are in your field of interest what kind of training they recommend you receive and which programs they recommend.
- Find out if you are comfortable with the culture and locale of the programs you are considering.
- Know certificates, licenses, and degrees available in your field and understand the different career options associated with each. Find out if the school has accreditation.
- Consider the value placed on the prestige of graduate school programs in your field of interest.
- Know how you will be matched with an advisor, and if you will be working closely. Try to meet with an advisor before you make a final decision.
- Find out how departments support their students.
- Ask the percentage of students to graduate from the program and average length of time.
- Inquire about job placements of graduates from the program in the past several years.
- If possible, visit each campus; visit with faculty who specialize in your area of interest, meet with admissions staff, and sit in on classes.

BEFORE YOU START TO APPLY

Leave Plenty of Time

Many components of the application process take substantial time to effectively complete. Well-informed decision-making requires solid research, which requires a lot of time. Start the research process 12-16 months before you want to begin the program.

Know Application Deadlines

Most general deadlines fall between December and February, however, check exact dates once you have selected the programs to which you will apply. Schools will not make exceptions to deadlines.

Financial Aid Deadlines

The deadlines for financial aid are sometimes different from the application deadlines. In some cases, the financial aid deadline is earlier. Be sure to check these dates and allow time to complete the appropriate forms.

You may wish to track your progress:

- Request info from programs by _____
- Research completed by _____
- Begin work on essays by _____
- Practice test for GRE (or any test) _____
- Essays to professors for review _____
- Take a prep course/study during _____
- Info ready for letter writers by _____
- Approach letter writers by _____
- Deadline for letter writers by _____
- Select programs by _____
- Start filling out applications by _____
- Transcripts requested by _____
- Applications completed by _____

These deadlines should be well in advance of the actual deadline so you have time to follow-up and ensure all materials have arrived and that your application is complete.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Apply in tiers. Apply to programs where the average GRE score for the most recent entering class is lower than yours. Apply to programs where the average score is on par with yours. Apply to programs where the average score is above yours. Don't rule yourself out of a program you really want--you don't know how the admissions committee will weigh the different components of your application.

Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate/professional programs require three letters of recommendation. The following are commonly asked questions regarding letters of reference.

1. Who should write my letters?

You should have letters from people who can comment on your experience and abilities relevant to graduate study in your chosen field and relevant to later professional work. It's best to have some letters from professors in your academic major. Professional schools often look for letters from employers as well as from instructors. As Ph.D. programs focus a great deal on research and teaching, they put emphasis on letters from professors attesting to an applicant's scholarly potential. The strongest references grow out of established relationships. Start early! Visit your professors and take small classes or individual study.

2. What can I give my letter writers to help them write a well-informed recommendation?

The materials you give your letter writers should help them address the field and programs you have chosen. Include a copy of your statement of purpose (even if it's a rough draft), relevant class and employer evaluations, papers written for them (with comments), your resume, and any other relevant materials. Provide an outline of points you would like the letter to include. You can request letters to support a weaker part of your application. If you do poorly on the GRE verbal test, an instructor can praise your verbal abilities. Letter writers should be reminded of any special request.

3. Is it better to have a high-status instructor write a letter even if they don't know me well, or is it better to have a lower-ranked instructor write it if they know my abilities better?

These letters should be as personalized as possible. That is more important than prestige or rank of an instructor. It is better to have a strong letter from a junior faculty member or a graduate student Teaching Assistant who knows you well. A TA may ask the professor to co-sign the letter and this may be helpful. Or the TA may be asked for comments to be included in the professor's letter.

4. Is it better for me to waive my right to see letters of reference that are written about me?

Discuss your decision with your letter writers. Some graduate admissions committees prefer waived letters, feeling they have more credibility. Others give equal credibility to all letters. Some are offended by pressure put on students to waive a legal right. Even members of the same admissions committee may disagree. Members often change yearly so you may not know your admissions committee much less their opinions on this issue. Base your decision on your own values and concerns. How do you feel about waiving this legal right? What are the advantages either way?

Waiving your legal right to review your letters

- Some admission committee members may give more credibility to waived letters.
- Some letter writers prefer to send only letters that students will not see.

Not waiving your right to review letters

- You can acquire a pool of letters and can select different letters for different graduate programs.
- You know the contents of all your letters.
- You can hold on to your own copies for your own purposes.

5. If a letter mentions a weakness of mine, will the letter work against me?

Ask the letter writer if she/he can write you a positive letter. If a glowing letter mentions one or two areas for improvement, the letter may be taken even more seriously. The admissions committee is being assured your letter writer sees you realistically and is honest. But if the overall tone of the letter is not positive, this will likely count against you. If you are concerned it may not be positive, ask someone else to write the reference letter!

6. If I don't apply to graduate school my senior year but I am planning to attend later, when should I get my letters of reference?

There are advantages to getting the letters before you leave school, but different advantages to waiting. Many students worry that their instructors will not remember them, but writing reference letters may not require so personal a touch. The materials you gave the instructor should be enough to remind them of your merits. Consider the advantages of each approach:

Getting letters before you have left school

- You know where to find the instructor.
- The instructor remembers you.
- Get a letter now, ask writer to refine it later.

Getting letters at the time of the application

- You will have had time to clarify the specific field you wish to study.
- The information you give letter writers will differ from that given senior year.
- The letters will be more customized to the specific programs you have chosen.

Interviews

Only a minority of programs require interviews, although this varies by field. Doctoral programs in the sciences tend to interview prospective candidates. Prepare for interviews by researching the school and being clear about your goals.

Be prepared to ask well-informed questions whose answers could not be easily found elsewhere. The CEC offers mock interviews for graduate and professional school preparation.

Follow-Up

Even if schools say they will send postcards to let you know what pieces of your application are missing, it is still your responsibility to make sure all your materials have arrived. Take charge! Check early enough so that if something is missing, you have time to get it in by the deadline.

ADDITIONAL CAREER EXPLORATION CENTER RESOURCES

- **Graduate and Professional School Day** - Held usually in early October, representatives from more than 100 post graduate institutions share information about their programs.
- **Counselors** - Available to discuss your interests in graduate programs and the professional work thereafter.
- **Faculty Contacts Program** - Over 100 faculty members who have made themselves available for consulting with students in their various areas of expertise.
- **Texas Exes Career Network** - Listings of former UT students and their current field of study, available to consult with students. These contacts can be found at www.texasexes.org/careernet.
- **Graduate Application Assistance** - Counselors available to help with the application process, whether it be personal statements, gathering references, the application itself, or even resume or Curriculum Vitae review.
- **Career Tests** - Innovative options to help you generate career options, based on your interests and personality. Interpretation of your results is done by a professional counselor.
- **Library Resources** - Books, articles, and handouts assist you with your research of post-graduate options. Among these: admissions process, personal statements, and program directories.

