

4 tips for exploring graduate school options:

1. Exploring Options – Is graduate school right for me?
2. Researching Programs – What kind of programs are out there?
3. Crafting a Personal Statement – How can I get started?
4. Timeline and Next Steps – When do I need to get started?

Part I: EXPLORING OPTIONS *Is graduate school right for me?*

Graduate school is a significant investment in terms of time, energy and finances. It is important that you spend adequate time researching and considering all of your options before you make the decision to pursue graduate school. Exploring graduate school requires reflection, organization and careful planning. There is much to consider when deciding if graduate school is right for you, and whether to go now or in the future.

To get started, consider talking with a range of people in your life:

Talk with a faculty member. Faculty members and faculty advisors can be valuable resources to help you identify graduate school opportunities that are a match for your interests and goals. Talking with a faculty member who is in your career field of interest can help you better understand your options.

Talk with a career advisor. Career advisors are here to help you understand and prepare for the graduate school application process. We can help you:

- Understand your values, interests, skills, and personal strengths, and decide if graduate school fits into your academic and professional plans.
- Research various program options and career paths to develop confidence to make the decision to pursue graduate school – or not.
- Prepare a resume or cover letter.
- Develop your personal statement.
- Learn how to request letters of recommendation.
- Navigate the application process – from understanding the application requirements and preparing your materials to evaluating offers and accepting an offer of admission.

Talk with an academic advisor. Your academic advisor typically knows you well and understands the opportunities available for students in your major or program. They can help you reflect on the courses that interested you and consider opportunities you may not have considered. Seattle University also has specific advisors who work with students preparing for future careers in health, law, engineering, and more.

Other people in your life. In addition to faculty members or academic and career advisors, you can also talk with friends, family members, and others in your social network. Professionals working in the field you are choosing and mentors can also be helpful resources. In addition, you can talk with someone from the [Office of Fellowships](#), who might be able to help you identify fellowship opportunities that suit your interests and help you to prepare your required materials.

A Note About Test Preparation Programs

A variety of organizations offer test preparation classes and other resources that can help you stay focused and develop confidence for entrance exams that may be required. Some common resources include:

- Test preparation from Kaplan or the Princeton Review.
- Test prep books and CDs you can find at your local bookstore or library.
- Practice questions offered on the specific test websites, such as the GRE site.
- Individual or group counseling to help you develop strategies for managing test anxiety. At Seattle University, visit [Counseling & Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) to learn more.

Part II: RESEARCHING PROGRAMS *What kinds of programs are out there?*

You may have already started researching your options and have a clear plan, or you may be just beginning your exploration now. To get started, consider researching programs in one of four ways:

Exploring Options by Career Field or Discipline:

Begin by doing some research to determine if an advanced degree is required or preferred for your particular career field of interest. The **Occupational Outlook Handbook** (<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>) is a great resource for this kind of information. Use it to explore jobs and understand industries and needed qualifications for different occupations. Sometimes an advanced degree is not required and real world experience is just as valuable. In addition, **O*NET** (<http://www.onetonline.org/>) is another online resource that can help you explore by the characteristics of occupations and workers.

Many academic disciplines or professional industries also produce information that can be useful for prospective graduate students or professionals. To begin your discipline-specific search, start with the various websites for the **professional associations** in your career field to see if they include information about graduate programs or general tips for how to get into the field.

Using Your Network to Identify Graduate School Options:

One of the best ways to explore programs is to talk with someone who knows you well and understands the field you wish to enter, and your general professional goals. Consider speaking with professors and advisors, family and friends, supervisors, or mentors. See which programs they think you might enjoy.

Graduate School Online Resources:

There are several online resources you can use to explore options, including two mentioned above:

- The Occupational Outlook Handbook, at: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>
- O*NET, at: <http://www.onetonline.org/>

If your graduate school search will be limited to a specific state or geographic area, **Wikipedia** may be a helpful resource for finding listings of colleges and universities by state. Typically you can find a list by searching Wikipedia for “colleges and universities in [INSERT STATE NAME]” to get started.

Graduate School Guides:

There are many online guides to graduate schools you can also consider, including: Peterson’s Guide to Graduate Schools, U.S. News Graduate School Rankings, and GradSchools.com Graduate School Directory, among others. Although a multitude of graduate school rankings exist, it is important that you develop your own personal criteria for evaluating programs.

How will I decide? Career Services is here to help.

Trying to decide if grad school is right for you? Advisors in Career Services can help you explore your values and the ways they may shape your decisions. We have two handouts that may be helpful – one on **Values** and one on **Decision-Making and Goal-Setting**.

You can also try out our **Analytical Decision-Making Tool**, which may offer another perspective on the options and choices that lie before you. A career advisor can help you get started with these resources and support as you build confidence in your decisions.

Part III: CRAFTING A PERSONAL STATEMENT *How can I get started?*

Most personal statement prompts ask three basic questions: Who are you? Why do you want a career in this particular field? Why is this program well-suited to your interests and goals?

This is your opportunity to:

- Describe who you are and why you are uniquely qualified for a particular career path beyond GPA and test scores.
- Advocate for yourself.
- Impress the reviewers for a chance to interview or be admitted to school!

Put yourself in their shoes...

How can you stand out to your admissions committee as interesting and unique?

The Personal Statement: Getting Started

- Begin with a free writing exercise to generate ideas of critical memories or moments that helped you clarify your desire to pursue this career or pursue this type of graduate program.
- For help writing a great personal statement, consider visiting with a Writing Consultant at the SU Writing Center on the 2nd Floor of the Library for tips to improve your writing.
- Schedule an appointment in Career Services. We can give you feedback on how well you marketed yourself to your graduate program.
- Finally, consider talking with a faculty member who can offer feedback based on their content expertise in your discipline or program.

Part IV: TIMELINE and NEXT STEPS *When do I need to get started?*

Use this timeline to help you stay organized with your graduate school exploration and application process.

24+ months to go

- Begin or continue exploring your academic and professional interests by getting involved on campus, in the community, or through internships and other work experiences.
- Think about how you want to incorporate your personal characteristics and interests into your career.
- Request catalogs or materials from the graduate programs that interest you.

15 months to go

- Continue exploring your interests and building experience (see above).
- Start researching graduate programs that appeal to you.
- Get organized.** Create a system to help you keep track of all your application materials including: a list of the programs you are applying to, the various application deadlines, and required application materials you will submit. Also consider making notes about the features of each program that most appeal to you.
 - **Career Services has an electronic template that can help you get started on our website.**
- Find out if entrance exams are required for the programs you are interested in. Typical exams include the GRE, MCAT, GMAT, LSAT or TOEFL.
- Create a study plan to prepare for your upcoming entrance exam (if required). Test preparation classes or practice tests can help you prepare for the exams. For more information visit our website.
- Register for your entrance exam/s by September of the year before you want to begin school.

12 months to go (typically the September before you plan to begin graduate school)

- Register for your entrance exam/s if you have not yet done so.
- Begin thinking about who you will ask to write your letters of recommendation. Professors are often the best people to ask as long as you confirm they are willing and able to write a positive letter by the application deadline. You will provide them with your recommendation forms and background information to help them

write a letter (resume, brief statement explaining why this program is a good fit for you, transcripts, or any other information that you feel will help them write their letter).

- Meet with faculty members to formally ask them if they would be willing to write a letter of recommendation on your behalf. Be sure to have all your materials and deadlines organized.

10-12 months to go (typically the fall before you plan to begin graduate school)

- You will likely take your entrance exam/s during early fall the year prior to starting graduate school.
- Order official transcripts from the Office of the Registrar.
- Write and edit your personal statement or other application essays that are required. It is a good idea to have a trusted friend or a professional in your field review your statement as well. Career Services and the Writing Center can help and so can faculty members in your area of interest.

8-10 months to go (typically the winter before you plan to begin graduate school)

- Many program application deadlines are in the month of December.
- Verify your recommendations were sent on time and thank the people who wrote letters for you.

4-6 months to go (typically the spring before you plan to begin graduate school)

- Consider visiting the various schools where you have applied or attending open house events.
- Submit a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) or other financial documents.
- During March and April many programs notify students of their admission decision.
- Decide which offer of admission you will accept (if you have multiple offers) and notify the school of your acceptance. Also notify any programs you will decline or defer.
- Celebrate your success!

Next Steps...

1. If you think graduate school is right for you, begin researching programs that may interest you.
2. Talk with important people in your life and professionals in your field to get feedback on whether you should go to graduate school now, after a few years of work, or not at all.
3. If you are having a hard time making your decision, try out the [Analytical Decision Making Tool](#) provided through Career Services to see if this helps clarify your options.
4. If this process is causing you a great deal of anxiety, consider talking with a counselor in Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) or another mental health provider to get the support you need during this stressful and important time.
5. If you decide to pursue graduate school, develop a system for tracking your application process right away before things get busy. Consider using the printed or online tracking form that Career Services offers, or create your own tool that works for you.
6. Review the graduate school timeline in this handout and start mapping out a plan for how you will complete all the steps in the time you have available.
7. Remember that Career Services is here to help you with all aspects of the process – do not be shy about stopping in for help along the way!

Visit us online and in person!

Career Advisors are available for 15 or 30 minute appointments Monday through Friday.

Call, email or request an appointment online.

For Express Advising times visit: www.seattleu.edu/careerservices

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