

Graduate School

Is Graduate School Right for You?

The decision to go to graduate school should not be made lightly. Graduate school requires a commitment of one to seven years of your life, and can be quite costly. Yet a graduate degree offers specialized training which is a requirement to practice in certain fields, such as law or psychology, and may place you at a significant advantage in other fields such as business.

Many employers seek out candidates with advanced degrees. Their graduate experience enables them to take on much more complicated and challenging assignments than someone with a Bachelor's degree. In line with their increased knowledge, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that individuals with higher degrees can usually expect to earn considerably more money and are less likely to be unemployed.

Of course, money should not be your only consideration in deciding on graduate school. Below is a short list of questions you may want to ask yourself, and/or seek assistance from the Career Center.

- 1) *Do I enjoy the field enough to commit to one to seven more years of school?*
If you are feeling confused on this point, the DU Career Center can offer you assistance that includes career counseling and career assessments.
- 2) *What do I expect to happen as a result of going to graduate school?*
Determine if your expectations are realistic by talking with faculty, friends and current or former graduate students who are or have been in your programs of interest.
- 3) *What are the recommendations of the professors and professionals in my field?*
Do they see graduate school as an important asset? Additionally talk with a *DU Volunteer Network*, (contact the DU Career Center for details), or others in your network of people you know.
- 4) *Am I ready for more school, or am I "burned out"?* If you're feeling burned out, it may be time for a break. A year or more of work experience may enhance your graduate school experience, or you may consider a program that allows you to attend part-time.
- 5) *Am I considering this for sound reasons, or am I trying to postpone entering the "real world" of work?* This is probably the weakest reason to go to graduate school. The concerns you are avoiding now may still be there when you finish your graduate degree.

Deciding Where to Apply

The first step in deciding where to apply is to research which schools offer the program that most interests you. There are several books which include comprehensive information on graduate programs available at Penrose Library or other libraries. You can also get good information on-line. Visit the Career Center web page at www.du.edu/career to link to many graduate school related sites and university web sites in the “*Career Links*” section, then *Graduate School Information*.

After researching your options, it is time to narrow the field. A good way to focus your efforts is to ask professors and professionals in the field their impressions of different programs. Be aware, however, that some people are apt to recommend their own alma mater.

Once you have identified several programs that interest you, visit those universities’ web sites and send for brochures and information. Also consider talking with students enrolled in those programs, as they usually have perspectives which are not published. As you conduct your research, here are a few topics to guide your thinking:

- 1) Faculty-student ratio
- 2) Research interests of faculty
- 3) Location & format
- 4) Reputation of program
- 5) Percent of students who complete the program
- 6) Percent of applicants who are accepted
- 7) Where have the graduates of the program found employment?
- 8) Opportunities for scholarships, grants, fellowships, etc.
- 9) Specialization areas within the program
- 10) Outline of available courses
- 11) Demographic make-up of the students
- 12) Financial cost of the program
- 13) Admission requirements

Some of these issues might be more important to you than others, and you may have other concerns to add to the list. This general guide can help you organize your thinking about these decisions.

The Application Process

Once you have made the decision to go to graduate school, and have narrowed your options to a manageable number, it is time to begin the application process. Most schools require that applicants take a standardized test relevant to the subject area, such as the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, or MCAT, as well as submitting college transcripts, and complete an application form with a fee. They may also require a statement of purpose,

letters of recommendation (three is standard), and an interview. Deadlines for submitting application materials are generally in January, February or earlier.

The statement of purpose or essay will have bearing on admission after your test scores and grades have qualified you to be considered for this next step. Your statement needs to demonstrate your knowledge of the area or profession and how your past experiences relate. The information should be presented in a sincere and non-superficial way. Be sure to include a brief history of your interest in the area, your academic preparation and any special areas you want to study. Discuss your ability to perform graduate level work through past grades, special projects/research, and testimonials from former professors. Additionally, cover why you want to study at the particular institution you are applying. In the latter section, personalize the essay by incorporating some of your activities and interests. Finally, conclude the essay with a mission or vision. There are several good books and web resources that help with writing these statements (see *Career Links* at www.du.edu/career and then *Graduate School Information*).

The importance of the interview cannot be overstated. This is a time to highlight your strengths, and demonstrate why you would be an asset to their program. Equally important, it is a time to find out more about them and to determine if they are going to meet your needs. If a program to which you are applying does not require an interview, try to schedule a time to visit the campus and meet with professors and current students. Not only will you learn more about the school than the brochures reveal, but faculty will remember your initiative and the positive impression you made when they select new students. If you are nervous about your interviewing skills, make an appointment for a practice interview at the DU Career Center. Career Counselors can help you develop the skills to make your interview a success.

Timetable

Below is a schedule to guide you in planning the application process:

Eighteen Months Prior

- Begin researching available programs by reviewing graduate school guides and talking with professors. Review web sites and request brochures from programs that seem promising, and begin to consider which school you would like to attend.
- Explore opportunities for fellowships, scholarships and other financial aid.
- Sign up for required standardized tests. Note that computer-based testing is available; take practice tests. Consider signing up for an organized preparation course such as those offered through the Special Programs office at DU, Kaplan, or Princeton Review. Also, study guides and computer programs are available to assist you.

Eleven to Twelve Months Prior

- Take standardized tests.
- Write a first draft of your statement of purpose and have it reviewed.

- Request letters of recommendation from faculty members. Give them a copy of your statement of purpose to help them tailor their letters.
- Investigate assistantships, fellowships, scholarships and other financial aid opportunities.
- Web sites for financial aid can be located at the Career Center web page www.du.edu/career, to *Career Links*, then to *Financing Your Education*.

Nine to Ten Months Prior

- Order official transcripts from the Registrar's Office.
- Write a final draft of your statement of purpose.
- Complete and mail applications. It is best to get your application in early.
- Apply for fellowships, scholarships, and assistantships.

Six to Eight Months Prior

- Visit prospective campuses and interview with representatives of the programs.
- Talk with current students and alumni in the program to learn about their experiences.
- Fill out financial aid applications.
- Write thank-you notes to those who met with you.

Four to Five Months Prior

- Once the school of your choice has accepted you, contact other schools to withdraw your name from the applicant pool. Let references know about your acceptance into the graduate program and thank them for their assistance.
- Mail the required deposit to your new school.

Other Considerations

Should you attend part-time versus full-time? Going part-time allows the flexibility of working at the same time, and allows you to spread tuition over a longer time period. Full-time advantages are the obvious quicker route to the end goal.

Should you go straight to graduate school right after earning your bachelor's degree or postpone school for a few years? Going right after your bachelor's does keep you in the "school mode", with sharper study skills and less obligations. Going to graduate school a few years later gives you more time to make a decision on direction; you may have more maturity and a broader world view, and some employers will pay for a portion of certain graduate programs.