

APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate school offers an opportunity to specialize in an academic discipline and may provide the education required for some professions. The decision to attend graduate school should come after careful consideration and research using accurate data. It is important to:

- Understand the job market for your field of interest
- Do some “reality testing” to gain experience in your field
- Examine your motivations; are your reasons for wanting to attend graduate school sound?

Right reasons for pursuing graduate school:

- You are **eager to study in the discipline**;
- You have a **specific career goal** that requires this graduate degree.

Wrong reasons:

- You're **undecided** about a career path and are thinking graduate school will allow you to “find yourself.” You may be better off (personally and financially) to first explore short term ‘gap year’ experiences and invest time in some self-reflection and career research to clarify long term goals.
- You are getting **pressure** from friends, family, or professors. What matters most is your own motivation, not what others expect. After all, you’re the one who has to pass the courses and repay the debt.
- You think you have no choice because **there are no jobs** for someone with your undergraduate major. This is a very common myth, but in the Fleishman Center we work with employers constantly who seek students from a variety of majors and with a variety of skills. Fleishman Center staff can help you identify opportunities.
- You're **waiting for the job market to improve**. There’s no guarantee that things will get better before you finish graduate school and by then you’ll have even more debt to repay.
- You **don’t feel ready for the working world**. This is a common fear, but will you be any more ready in two years? If you’ve gained experience through interning or similar activities, chances are you are ready.

What Should You Study?

As you focus your interests by reading and talking to professionals, mentors, and professors, you’ll likely find that more than one graduate program could be appropriate for the career you hope to pursue. Ask professionals about their educational background, where they studied, and what academic programs may provide appropriate preparation. Faculty and alumni found through LinkedIn can be an excellent resource for this.

Your undergraduate major does not dictate which graduate programs are open to you. Admissions representatives may expect you to have completed certain undergraduate courses, but not necessarily a specific undergraduate major. If your academic preparation lacks certain prerequisites, it is often possible to complete them prior to applying or as a condition for admission.

Should You Take Time Off First or Go Directly to Graduate School?

The answer to this question depends on many factors. If a graduate degree is mandatory in order to enter a particular profession, then continuing your education immediately may be advisable, as long as you are confident the career direction is right for you. However, many competitive programs prefer - or require - 3-5 years of work experience. Invest time in understanding expectations within your field of interest and what the benefits of obtaining an advanced degree might be. You may find that continuing your education is the right move, that it is best to wait, or that it is not necessary at all.

Identifying and Researching Programs

Once you have a clear idea of what you plan to study, identify where programs are offered. This is a research project, so plan to devote considerable time to this activity. Your research might include using the following:

- **Annual Graduate and Professional School Fair and Law Day Events:**
The Fleishman Center hosts a Graduate and Professional School Fair each fall, which brings in representatives from over 140 institutions. Spend some time at the fair speaking with representatives and learning about programs.
- **Online:**
Two recommended websites for identifying graduate and professional programs are www.gradschools.com and www.petersons.com. Search by geographic location, program, and many other factors. Professional associations are also an excellent resource for identifying programs. To find an association related to your field, try the ASAE Gateway to Associations Directory: www.asaecenter.org/Community/Directories/associationsearch.cfm.
- **Faculty, Alumni and Other Professionals in Your Field:**
Identify faculty members and professionals whose interests match yours and ask for recommendations of programs. LinkedIn is an excellent resource for identifying individuals, including Binghamton alumni, who may be able to provide you with insight that can aid in your decision making.
- **Pre-Law Advisor and Pre-Health Advisor:**
Any student planning to attend law school or pursue a medically-related degree should be connecting with these offices, located in Rockefeller Center Room 151, and visiting their websites <http://www2.binghamton.edu/pre-law/> and <http://www2.binghamton.edu/pre-health/>.

Comparing Programs: What to Investigate

Ratings and Selectivity: While there are published guides, faculty and professionals in your intended field may be the best resource in assessing which are considered the better programs -- ask several their opinion and see if there is consistency in responses. Use published rankings as guides rather than the definitive word.

Use information provided on individual graduate admissions offices and department websites to make a realistic assessment of your candidacy. Keep in mind that averages are just that – averages – with scores falling both above, and below. Schools are most interested in well-rounded candidates and it is unlikely that one component of your application is going to make or break you. Other things to consider:

- **Curriculum:** Does it have the depth and breadth you want? Does the primary emphasis suit your career goals? Do the courses look interesting? Are specializations offered that interest you? Are there cooperative programs with other educational, cultural, and research institutions available?
- **Internships or Practical/Clinical Experiences:** Does the program include any practical experience in its requirements? Is there help in securing it? Is there adequate supervision and guidance?
- **Faculty:** What is the student/faculty ratio? Are there faculty members with specialties that interest you? Do faculty research interests match yours? Is the faculty diverse?
- **Facilities:** How extensive are their resources? Ex. library, labs and computer facilities? Are there specialized research facilities?
- **Students:** What are the demographics of the student body (geographical representation, ethnic diversity, average entering age, male/female ratio)? How many are in the entering class? What is the attrition rate?
- **Location:** Is the geographic location of the school consistent with the lifestyle you want for the next few years? What will housing cost and is there housing on campus? Don't rule out an unfamiliar city or state prematurely; focus on where the programs are that best meet your needs.
- **Employment of Alumni:** What types of positions have recent graduates obtained? What types of services are available to assist graduate students with the job search?

The Application Process

Assembling and completing materials to support your application takes time and planning. Be sure to stay organized and pay close attention to deadlines! Make requests to appropriate offices for transcripts, reference letters and test scores several weeks in advance of deadlines to avoid last minute panic.

Application Timeline

There are many common parts of the application process for different graduate programs and universities. Here are some suggestions for managing the application process along with your other commitments:

- Research your field(s) of interest, programs, schools (Allow 1-2 months, or more).
- Create/update your resume (Allow 1-2 weeks to create, have critiqued, and revise. Use the Fleishman Center for help)
- Request letters of recommendation (Give recommender AT LEAST one month)
- Develop your Personal Statement (Allow THREE weeks to ONE month). Use the Writing Center and the Fleishman Center for assistance.
- Standardized Test Preparation:
 - Study at least TWO months in advance and become familiar with test material
 - Schedule your test for at least THREE weeks before you plan to submit your application
 - Be sure to schedule your exact test date about THREE weeks before so that you are not closed out
- Request transcripts (Processing by the Office of Student Records takes up to one week)

Writing the Essay/Personal Statement

An essay is typically part of the application process and should be considered an important component. It is both a writing sample and your chance to present yourself as a strong candidate for their program. Allow yourself plenty of time to consider your educational and career goals reflect on what experiences, skills and interests most support your candidacy, and write/revise your document. When preparing your final draft, proofread carefully, making sure there are no spelling or grammar errors. If you feel you need help structuring your essay, Binghamton's Writing Center is an excellent resource. The Fleishman Center's [Writing a Personal Statement](#) guide will also be helpful.

Reference Letters

Who and How to Ask

Faculty and/or supervisors of internships/jobs who are familiar with you and your talents are the best references. Graduate schools typically request 2-5 letters and it is recommended that at least two references be from faculty. The best references will be from those who know you best, not from the person with the most impressive title.

When asking someone to write a reference letter, make a point to meet in person or by phone. Discuss your plans; share a draft of your application, essay and/or resume, and a list of topics you would like addressed in the recommendation letter. Ask if she or he would be willing to write a letter in support of your application to graduate school. You may get a variety of responses including an enthusiastic "yes." If the person is cautious and expresses hesitation about providing a useful reference, don't push it. Identify an alternative person to approach.

Managing Your Reference Letters

The Fleishman Center recommends Interfolio, an affordable, convenient and efficient resource to manage references online 24/7. Students and alumni may create an account at any time with Interfolio www.Interfolio.com.

Tests

Test requirements and versions vary by institution and program, so check with your target schools about what you will need to take and any important deadlines. Both computer and paper-based options are available, and there are pros and cons to each. For more information about your options, please visit ETS.org.

Familiarizing yourself with how the test you will be taking is structured will help you prepare. Some students find it helpful to take a review course, but many find that using free and low-cost resources, such as materials found at ETS.org and prep books available for purchase are sufficient.

Financing Graduate School

While cost should be a consideration when deciding on schools, it is important to first identify which institutions offer the best program fit for you, rather than focusing solely on perceived affordability. Instead, apply and make your final decision about attending once you know what financial assistance you'll be offered.

Investigate all financial aid possibilities in and outside of the particular school or program, but **start early so as not to miss any opportunities!** Pay attention to deadlines. Financial aid deadlines are not always the same, and are usually earlier than application deadlines.

Types of Assistance Available

- **Graduate Assistantships:**
In exchange for working for your institution, you will receive some sort of compensation (a tuition waiver and/or a stipend). You may work as a teaching or research assistant, in a campus office, or even for another organization. Each school's application process will be different and the availability of graduate assistantships will vary by academic program. Be sure to explore all assistantship opportunities, both within and outside of your discipline. As long as you can make a case that you have appropriate skills to meet the needs of the sponsoring department, you have a chance!
- **Scholarships and Other Awards:**
Seek as many potential funding sources as possible and apply. Some resources include:
- **Office of External Scholarships, Fellowships & Awards:**
bulletin.binghamton.edu/scholarships/index.html
- **Faculty/Academic Departments:**
Departments often receive financial aid announcements so check with them about funding resources for your field.
- **Online:**
The Fleishman Center's website (<http://tinyurl.com/FinanceGradSchool>) links to many helpful sites.

How Admission Decisions Are Made

There is no standard formula that graduate admissions committees follow in making admissions decisions; and many hesitate to provide specific GPA and/or test score numbers because they want to evaluate you as a whole candidate. Personal conversations, application essay, test scores and academic record are all taken into account and are considered important.