California State University
Stanislaus

Planning for Graduate School

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Career Services
Advising Resource Center

(209) 667-3661
www.csustan.edu/career

Graduate School for You?

Should you go straight to graduate school after you graduate from CSU Stanislaus? There are no hard and fast rules. It is a good idea to consult with faculty, prospective employers, and students currently pursuing graduate programs of interest to you, in order to evaluate their perspectives on the advantages of immediate vs. delayed entry into graduate school.

You may want to consider these questions before making your decision:

- Are you reasonably sure of your career goals, or is there a strong possibility that you could change your mind after gaining practical experience in the "world of work?"
- Would related work experience help you clarify ambiguous career goals?
- How much will your job and salary prospects be enhanced by a graduate degree? The master's degree recipient almost always commands a higher annual rate of pay than a bachelor's degree recipient. A $3,000-$4,000 differential is common, while in some technical disciplines $6,000-$8,000 is not uncommon.
- Is an advanced degree a prerequisite to your chosen career? The doctorate is mandatory for practicing medicine or law, for example.
- What are the direct and indirect costs of graduate school? Include the cost of the program and books, living expenses and loss of income while you're in school.
- Is there a possibility that a future employer might pay for you to attend graduate school?
- Do you have a strong GPA? Would work experience enhance your application materials by offsetting mediocre grades or test scores? In the case of some professional schools, admissions committees are generally as interested in your work background as in your "numbers."
- Would you have difficulty readjusting to student life after a break?

Choosing a School

These criteria may help you to decide which graduate programs are best suited to your talents, your ambitions, and at a time of soaring college costs, your pocketbook:

Admission: What are admission requirements? How important are GPA and test scores? What criteria is used to evaluate and select students? Will it be easier to get accepted after gaining work experience?

Programs Offered: What specializations are available? Does the program focus on theory and original research, or does it stress the practical application of knowledge and skills? Does the program provide real work experience, such as practicum or internships? Is the curriculum structured or flexible? Are there opportunities to work on research projects?

Faculty: Who are they? What are their credentials? Do they hold degrees in fields of expertise from leading universities? What awards, grants and special recognition have they earned? What have they published? What research projects have they conducted? Is there diversity? What is the faculty/student ratio?

Program Structure: What is the average length of time spent in the program? Do opportunities exist for specialization in areas of your own interest?

Reputation: Is the university accredited? Is the program nationally ranked in terms of excellence? Is the program well established or relatively new? Who has graduated from the program and what are they doing now?

Library: Is there a comprehensive reference collection in your area of specialization? How many volumes? What special collections? Is the material accessible? Is a computerized system available?

Physical Facilities: Are there adequate study facilities? Sufficient classrooms and seminar rooms? Are there areas for student interaction? Are the surroundings attractive and pleasant enough to endure throughout the program?

Cost: What are the tuition and fees? What financial aid is available in the form of loans, scholarships, internships and grants? What about teaching, research and/or graduate assistantships? How much is non-resident tuition?

Geographic Location: Considering the weather, political and/or social climate, do I want to live here for several years? Would I be happier in a small town or a large urban area? Does the area offer cultural and recreational activities? Is this a place where I might want to stay?

Size and Student Population: Look at the size of the department and the university. A large institution will have more extensive facilities and libraries; a smaller school will offer more personal attention and sense of community. What is the makeup of the student body in terms of age, diversity, religion, etc.?

The Application Process: Putting Together the Pieces of the Puzzle

General Procedures:

Request Information. Email, call, or write for applications, catalogs, and financial aid information approximately one year before you intend to enter graduate school. Application requirements differ substantially among institutions and programs. Read each school's material to make sure you file a complete and timely application.

Apply early. Application deadlines can range from August 1 (before your senior year) to July 1 (after your senior year for colleges with rolling admissions). Admission and financial aid decisions are often made well in advance of stated deadlines. Departments in heavy demand may close applications early**. If admissions are handled on a "rolling" basis (i.e., qualified applicants are accepted as they apply) it is to your advantage to apply at the earliest possible date to receive maximum consideration. Since approximately one-half of graduate school candidates apply during the last month before deadlines, an early application can set you apart from the competition.**

The Application Package

- Application form, including personal essay or "statement of purpose"
- Non-refundable fee
- Separate financial aid application
- Transcripts
- Letters of recommendation
- Standardized test scores
- Personal interview

How to Apply

A General Rule of Thumb: apply to at least two or three schools with programs that match your interests. Select at least one prestigious/competitive school, and one major university with fairly large graduate programs where you feel you have a reasonable chance of being accepted. As insurance, apply to an institution where you feel certain you will be accepted. If you are accepted at more than one, so much the better.

The Application Form should be completed clearly, accurately, and be free of typographical and grammatical errors. Be consistent in spelling out your full, legal name on all forms.

The Personal Essay

Every graduate school application contains an essay portion or a "statement of purpose." Your essay should specifically address questions posed in the application and express your enthusiasm for the field

of study as well as your motivation, creativity, maturity, and personal uniqueness. The essay is a key measure of your ability to communicate, so it pays to be meticulous about spelling, grammar, and writing style.

Application Fees vary, ranging from $35-$100 in most cases. Most schools have an application fee waiver for students with financial need - call the admissions office and ask how to get a waiver.

Financial Aid: an application for financial aid will generally come either as part of your application packet or in a separate mailing from a campus financial office. You may have to apply separately for fellowships, assistantships and/or loans. Since financial support varies widely from institution to institution, the best advice is to read all financial materials carefully and to file documents on time. Keep in mind that assistantships can help defray your costs and allow you to gain valuable experience at the same time.

Transcripts and Grades

Have the registrar's office at each college/university you attended send a transcript of your undergraduate work directly to the admissions office of the schools to which you are applying. Grades are extremely important, but a GPA that does not quite meet the minimum standards can be offset with good letters of recommendation, high test scores, and a well-written statement of purpose.

Letters of Recommendation

Most institutions will request three to five letters of recommendation. It is best to obtain recommendations from faculty members and employers who are qualified to evaluate your academic and/or work potential and performance, based on personal observation. Approach your recommenders early in the fall of your senior year to give them time to write before their other academic responsibilities take priority.

Test Scores

Most colleges require that you take one or more standardized admissions exams before they decide upon your application. The GRE (Graduate Record Examination), MAT (Miller Analogy Test), GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test), MCAT (Medical College Admission Test), and LSAT (Law School Admission Test) are among the more common standardized tests. The college's catalog will specify which test you need and will often give some indication of the score needed to be competitive for the program.

Personal Interviews

Some graduate and professional schools will require an interview as part of the application process. The interview provides an excellent opportunity to "sell yourself." Take this opportunity to discuss your qualifications, personal goals, and why you think you're a perfect match for the program.

Admissions Testing

Think the SAT was your final encounter with that sophisticated form of torture known as standardized testing? Not so fast! Now that your career plans include law, medicine, business, education, or other pursuits requiring a graduate degree, odds are you'll be asked to run the test gauntlet again. For many grad school applicants, test scores play a pivotal role in determining which institution they attend.

The Tests

The following are the four major graduate school admissions tests:

Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The GRE is required by many university graduate programs. Because competition for admission to such programs tends to be less than that for professional schools, the GRE is usually less of a make-it or break-it proposition than its professional test counterparts. This instrument measures certain developed verbal, quantitative, and analytical abilities important for academic achievement.

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). GMAT scores are used by nearly 1,300 graduate management programs throughout the world, and about 850 schools require GMAT scores from applicants. At most business schools, GMAT scores count heavily in the admissions process, although their importance is somewhat reduced by the fact that many B-school applicants are older and already have a record of career accomplishment that may counterbalance mediocre test scores.

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). A good performance on the MCAT, like a strong grade point average, remains a high focus for medical school admission. The skills and concepts tested by the MCAT are those identified by physicians and medical educators as prerequisite for the practice of medicine.

Law School Admission Test (LSAT). In order to be accredited by the American Bar Association, law schools must require that applicants submit LSAT scores. In the highly competitive arena of law school admissions, a less than average score is enough to send an otherwise qualified candidate down in flames.

Other Tests. Some schools may require other graduate school admissions tests, including the Miller Analogies Test, and the more specialized Dental Admission Test, Optometry Admissions Test, Pharmacy College Admission Test, Veterinary Aptitude Test, and Test of English as a Foreign Language.

Test Preparation

You need to evaluate your time, financial resources, and goals in determining which of these options you will choose for test preparation.

Review study questions in the Test Registration Bulletin.

Each Test Registration Bulletin provides sample questions for you to review. The Bulletins are available at no cost from the Test Maker.

Purchase a Test Preparation Book from the Test Registration Bulletin or your local bookstore.

These books are widely available in bookstores from a number of publishers. They range in cost from $17.00 to $50.00. They usually include some general information about the test's philosophy, test-taking strategies, and sample tests.

Purchase Interactive Study Software through the testing company or at your local bookstore or software store.

This option has become more and more popular as standardized tests move towards computerized administration. You will be able to answer sample test questions interactively, and the program will give you test-taking hints. Costs are usually around $50.00.

Use the GRE or GMAT Test Prep Software - available for download to IBM or PC compatible computers.

The Power Prep software is a computer program designed to help you get ready to take the GRE or the GMAT. Some of its features include: timed-test mode so you can practice for the paper and pencil or computer based versions of the test, hundreds of practice questions, and clear explanations of correct and incorrect answers.

Register for a study course through your local college, university, or adult education center.

Information about course offerings may be obtained by calling or emailing local colleges, universities, or education centers.

Register for a private study course (i.e. Stanley Kaplan or Princeton Review)

This is the most expensive test preparation option, although most test review courses guarantee results. Costs can range from $700.00 to $2,000.00. Just like the study courses mentioned above, this option may be useful to students who need a regularly scheduled class period to keep them motivated.

Recommendations: Points of Reference

Graduate school recommendations really become important when an admissions committee is trying to decide between you and one or more other candidates. Most departments will request three to five letters of recommendation.

Who should you ask for letters of recommendation? At least one letter, and preferably two or more, should come from faculty members in your major field. You may also wish to obtain a recommendation from a professor in an unrelated discipline (perhaps your minor field) in order to show the breadth of your academic interests.

These tips will give you the "competitive edge:"

- Choose professors or employers with whom you have a good relationship. It's important that they know several facets about you: your character, course work, initiative, and communication skills. Keep them up to date on your achievements, either verbally or in writing.

- Determine who will be your best advocates. If you hear complaints about not having enough time to write the recommendation or not knowing you well enough or long enough—be ready to ask someone else to write a letter on your behalf.

- Inform your recommenders of any points you would particularly like to get across. Ask them to use as many specific examples as possible.

- Provide your recommenders with a copy of your resume.

- List your references' telephone numbers on applications. More than ever, admissions officers are inclined to place a telephone call to a recommender for more details.

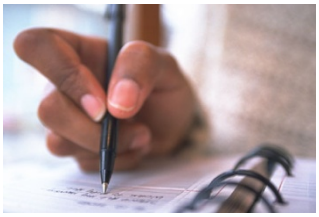
- Don't solicit references from friends or relatives, or from people who do not know you well.

- Give your recommenders all of the necessary forms, including addressed, stamped envelopes.

- Give your recommenders at least a month in which to write the reference letter and ask them to meet a deadline.

Let the reference know when you will submit your applications so he or she can send the letters of recommendation at the same time.

Application Essays



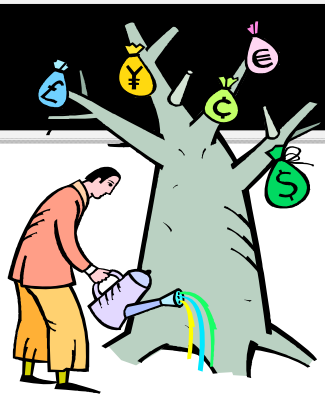
Writing an essay or personal statement is often the most difficult part of the application process. Requirements vary widely in this regard. Some programs request only one or two paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study, while others require five or six separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about your motivation for graduate study, strengths and weaknesses, greatest achievements, and solutions to hypothetical problems. Business schools are notorious for requiring several time-consuming essays. Some important points to keep in mind when writing your admission essay are listed below:

- Your goal should be to provide a clear, succinct statement that shows you have a definite sense of what you want to do and enthusiasm for the field of study you have chosen.
- Your essay should reflect your writing abilities; more important, it should reveal the clarity, focus, and depth of your thinking.
- Before writing anything, stop and consider what your reader might be looking for. The general directions or other parts of the application may give you an indication of this.
- Admissions committees may be trying to evaluate a number of things from your statement, including the following things about you:

    1. Expectations with regard to the program and career opportunities
    2. Writing ability
    3. Major areas of interest
    4. Educational background
    5. Immediate and long-term goals
    6. Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution
    7. Maturity
    8. Personal uniqueness—what you would add to the diversity of the entering class

- Preparing an outline will probably lead to a well-organized essay, whereas writing spontaneously may yield a more inspired piece of writing. Use the approach you feel most comfortable with.
- Whichever approach you use, you will want someone to review and critique your essay.
- Keep your essay positive.
- In every case, essays should be typed. It is usually appropriate to attach pages to your application if the space provided is insufficient.
- Neatness, spelling, and grammar are important.

Financial Aid



- Fellowships: granted by individual universities based on merit, not need, usually cover tuition and expenses.
- Assistantships: stipend and tuition waivers, exchange for services, teaching, and/or research.
- Grants are a sum of money awarded to a university or individual in exchange for work, research, and/or scholarly publications.
- Loans
    - Direct Stafford Subsidized loans
    - Direct Stafford Unsubsidized loans
    - Perkins loans
    - State loans

Additional Resources

- **http://www.finaid.com** - Links to Financial Aid Sites
- **http://www.ed.gov/news/newsletters/index.html** - U. S. Department of Education Information
- **http://www.fdncenter.org** - Clearinghouse on Grants & Foundations
- **http://www.fastweb.com** - Searchable Index of Private Scholarships, Grants and Loans
- Federal Student Aid Information Center - (800) 433-3243

Researching Graduate Schools Using the WWW

The Internet has become an unparalleled information resource. Graduate Schools, like many other businesses, can be found in abundance on the World Wide Web. The Career Services Center web site provides up-to-date links to many of these sites which contain helpful information and search features. Please visit these Graduate School links directly at the addresses listed below:

Directories

http://staff.wm.edu/career/02/Student/Grad/GradSchIndex.cfm
Tips plus information on several books available on the subject of graduate schools from Career Services at the College of William and Mary.

http://www.jobweb.com/Career_Development/gguides.htm
Job and graduate school information from JobWeb.

http://www.gradschools.com
Comprehensive information for schools and programs around the U.S. and the world.

http://www.ets.org
Information about many assessment tests from the Educational Testing Service.

Tips and Information

http://www.cgsnet.org/ResourcesForStudents/choosing.htm
Information on a conglomerate of graduate schools from around the United States from the Council of Graduate Schools.

http://www.northwestern.edu/careers/STUDENTS/graduateschool.htm
Tips and information for choosing and applying to grad school from Northwestern University's University Career Services.

http://www.gradview.com/index.html
Information on deciding to go to, getting into, surviving through, and living after grad school from Gradview.com.

http://www.essayedge.com/graduate/essayadvice/course "Graduate School Statements 101" a six section course on admissions essay writing and editing from EssayEdge.com.