

GRADUATE SCHOOL & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

Whether your interest stems from professional commitment or curiosity, the fact that you have opened this guide means you already have some idea of the importance of planning ahead for graduate or professional study. The choice to pursue further education involves much consideration, time, and paperwork. A good first step is the one you're taking now—reading this guide.

IS GRADUATE STUDY FOR YOU?

This is a question that appears in every guide of this type, and for good reason. Our country's graduate and professional schools have been experiencing a steady increase in applicants as more and more individuals seek specialization in one field or another. Unfortunately, some individuals enter graduate study with the idea that they can postpone the inevitable job-search and/or the career decision-making process for another year or two. If this is your motivation for entering graduate school, it could have serious implications for your career development.

Before applying for further study, you need to be fully aware of the working conditions, employment prospects, and physical and mental requirements of the field you plan to pursue. In addition, the more immediate demands of research, course work, and major papers that are all part of the graduate school experience must be considered. Although there are defined course requirements in most graduate and professional school curricula, by and large you are expected to build a program for yourself based on your interests and goals.

Before going any further, you may wish to carefully consider some important questions:

- What do I want to accomplish in my lifetime?
- What are my long- and short-range professional goals?
- Is graduate study necessary for me to achieve these goals?
- Do I have the interest and ability to be successful in a graduate program?
- By going to graduate school, am I simply delaying my career decision-making?
- Am I willing to invest the time and money to take on another academic program?

Two of the reasons most frequently given by students who have dropped out of graduate programs are a dislike of concentrated academic work and a realization that they have not defined their career goals clearly enough. By answering the previous questions honestly, you can hopefully avoid similar problems in the future.

Through research, you should be able to get a solid idea of whether or not you would benefit from graduate study. Further education is not absolutely required for entry into every career field. It is, of course, if you are planning to enter traditional professions such as law, medicine, dentistry, and college-level teaching. At this point, if you haven't already done so, it's a good idea to look over occupational literature and talk with faculty, friends, and alumni—people who have the kinds of jobs in which you are interested. The Career Services staff will also be able to assist you in determining your job prospects in various fields at all degree levels.

The message is simple: If you don't have a good idea of what you want to do career-wise, you'll have a tough time making sensible choices. If you don't know where graduate or professional school might lead you, your investment of time and money in additional education might have only limited benefits.

WHEN TO GO

There are no absolute guidelines about when to go to graduate school. However, once the decision has been made in favor of graduate study, you will want to consider when the best time would be for you to begin. It is highly advisable to speak with faculty advisers and with students currently pursuing programs of interest to you in order to hear their perspectives on immediate entry versus delay. But remember, what you hear from others is advice, not facts that necessarily apply to your personal circumstance. You must make your own decisions about the time frame for continuing your education.

There are pros and cons both with immediate entry and delay of graduate study. Some feel that going directly into graduate school after obtaining a bachelor's degree is easier because there are many sources of information on graduate programs available while an undergraduate. Also, faculty members will be more likely to remember your achievements for recommendation purposes. Likewise, study habits are generally well-developed and will help ease the transition into advanced course work. Another important consideration is that some professional schools, especially medical and dental, prefer to recruit students directly from undergraduate programs.

On the other hand, many graduate schools, and particularly those with well-known programs, are tending these days to be more selective in their admissions process. Often, preference will be given to individuals with a few years' life/work experience behind them. The argument given in favor of this selection process is that work experience tends to give students more knowledge on which to base their graduate school decisions.

Once again, the decision on when to enter a graduate or professional program is yours. If you do decide to delay graduate study, yet plan to begin a program within three-to-five years, you may want to take the appropriate standardized entrance examination(s) during your senior year of college, as scores on most of these tests are generally valid for this period of time.

WHERE TO GO

Although you can acquire further education by going to either graduate or professional school, there are some basic differences between the two. Graduate schools typically offer degrees in academic disciplines, while professional schools prepare individuals to practice a certain profession (e.g., law, medicine, ministry). In addition, business schools are sometimes considered graduate- and other times considered professional-schools.

A common concern of individuals considering graduate education deals with which institution has the "best" program of study. There is no single reliable ranking of graduate schools. National rankings do exist, though, and several are available. However, each is based on different criteria.

Professors, Advisors, and National Conferences

Your professors and advisors are a valuable resource when researching which graduate schools and programs are a good fit for you. They know you as a student and understand your aptitudes. Ask for their advice, both before and after, researching schools.

If you are conducting research with a member of the faculty and have the opportunity to present at or attend a conference, check to see if there are faculty members registered from graduate programs you would like to attend. Make it a point to talk with them during the conference and let them know of your interest in their research and graduate program. Again, talk with your professor/advisor about ways to approach someone during a conference.

Online Resources

While actual rankings may be somewhat misleading, comparative information about various programs of study is available. Besides the websites listed below, look at the website of the national association within your field. For example, a Communication major may find useful information on the *National Communication Association* website (<https://www.natcom.org>, find the 'more resources' tab and go to 'doctoral program guide'). The national organization for someone interested in Chemistry is the *American Chemical Society* (<https://www.acs.org>, go to the 'students & educators tab' and find 'for students').

GradSchools.com (<https://www.gradschools.com>) is an online provider of information about graduate schools by subject, school, and distance learning. Search from over 60,000 masters degrees, doctorate/doctoral degrees, PhD's and graduate certificate programs. Helps you consider: why go to graduate school; how to apply to graduate school; and how to pay for graduate school.

Graduate School Rankings and More: Best Graduate Schools

(<https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools>) U.S.News and World Reports provides information on graduate school entrance tests, graduate school rankings, and career and graduate school related articles.

Petersons.com (<https://www.petersons.com/>) is a comprehensive guide for the education planning process and helps you search for information about colleges, graduate schools, test preparation, scholarships, and financial aid information.

Phds.org (<http://phds.org/>) allows students to enter criteria that are important to them when searching for a PhD program and the site will generate a list of schools that match that criteria.

The Princeton Review (<https://www.princetonreview.com/>) provides information on finding and applying to graduate and professional school, including detailed information on each test related to graduate and professional school.

ABA-Approved Law Schools

(https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/aba_approved_law_schools/) is a listing of the American Bar Association-approved law schools.

Career Services website

(<https://inside.nku.edu/careerservices/students/gradschool.html>) provides additional websites and helpful timelines as you pursue graduate/professional school.

After investigating various advanced degree programs through online resources, you may also wish to refer to the websites for the institutions you are considering. At this point you will want to give serious attention to your personal criteria for selecting an institution. Once you have determined that programs in your field of interest are available, you may want to take the following factors into consideration as you evaluate various specific programs:

Geographic Location. The weather, political/social climate, an urban versus rural setting, as well as accessibility of employment opportunities upon graduation may be important in your planning.

Size. How large is the institution and the department in which you're interested? The number of students, and particularly the student/faculty ratio, will affect the amount of individual attention you receive. The amount and availability of financial aid can also be affected.

State Regulations. In regard to admissions, many state universities are required by law to give preference to in-state residents. These regulations apply to your legal residence and may affect the cost of your tuition.

Philosophy of Education. What is the average length of time spent in the program? Do opportunities exist for specialization in areas of your specific interest? Some institutions may approach the subject matter theoretically, while others may be more pragmatic in their approach.

Available Work Experiences. Are opportunities available for career-related assistantships?

Residence Requirements. How much time must you spend taking courses at the particular institution in order to earn your advanced degree? Residence requirements also determine whether you pay in-state tuition (charged to legal residents of that state) or out-of-state tuition (charged if you are not a legal resident of that state). Out-of-state tuition may be twice that which a legal resident would pay.

Career Services. Will you receive assistance in your job search when you are ready to graduate? You will want to check with the institution's career services personnel, if possible, to find out what types of employers typically express an interest in graduates of the department of interest to you. Keep in mind, too, that departmental faculty often get actively involved in helping their graduate students with the employment process.

Other Considerations. Some doctoral programs require demonstrated competence in one or two foreign languages before the advanced degree is awarded. Universities may also require—or in some cases permit as a substitute for a foreign language—knowledge of a research tool (for example, computer programming). Similarly, you will want to investigate how much research effort you will be expected to make and whether or not a thesis is required at the master's degree level.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GRADES AND TEST SCORES

Although most graduate and professional programs require applicants to submit scores from standardized admission tests, one of the most critical factors in gaining admission to graduate or professional study is your grade-point-average. The main reason is that, as with applicants for full-time employment, performance in the past is usually a good predictor of future performance.

Almost all of the standardized tests produced by the Educational Testing Service and other organizations have faced criticism because of alleged cultural bias. It has also been questioned as to whether they measure anything more than your ability to take standardized tests. The upshot has been that, in general, their importance has been somewhat de-emphasized in the admissions process. However, they are still widely required and are usually regarded as the second most important criterion for admission. Admissions testing will be explained in greater detail later in this guide.

Most universities have established minimum grade point-averages and/or test scores that you must attain in order to be eligible for admission. Graduate bulletins sometimes furnish this kind of information. If this information is not printed but set standards of admission are alluded to, you should contact the admissions officer at the institutions where you are applying. Admissions officers can help you evaluate your record in advance, even if they are unable to give you an immediate and definitive answer regarding admission. The point to remember is not to "self-select" yourself out of the application process before you have thoroughly investigated the situation from various perspectives.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Formal applications vary from one institution to the next, but usually consist of the following:

- an application form
- separate financial aid application
- transcripts
- letters of recommendation
- required test scores

As you research each institution, you may wish to keep a record or file noting admission requirements and application deadlines. Some graduate programs require a personal interview; most require a non-refundable application fee (which may cause you to limit the number of schools to which you actually apply). Following are some suggestions for completing the application process:

Application Forms. Most applications are completed online. Many institutions will ask that you submit a personal statement in addition to basic personal data requested on the application form. Personal statements provide you with the opportunity to supplement standard application materials with your own goals and objectives with respect to the program; therefore, they should not be taken lightly. Typically, when a personal statement is requested or required (as is the case with most applications for professional schools), the institutions will offer suggestions on items to consider including, such as your reasons for applying in relation to personal goals and professional expectations. Good grammar and writing styles are extremely important. Don't hesitate to seek help from faculty members if you need advice and guidance in preparing your personal statement or other application materials.

Be aware of application deadlines. If admissions are handled on a so called "rolling" basis (i.e., qualified applicants are accepted as they apply), it is to your distinct advantage to apply at the earliest possible date in order to receive maximum consideration. This is also advantageous if you are applying for financial assistance.

Testing. As mentioned previously, most graduate and professional schools require that you take one or more standardized examinations before they decide upon your application for admission. Online registration is available for most of the exams. Listed below are some of the more commonly required examinations:

- Graduate Record Examination (GRE) for study in the academic disciplines
- Law School Admission Test (LSAT)
- Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)
- Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) for MBA programs
- Miller's Analogies Test (MAT) for, among others, education programs
- Dental Admission Test (DAT)

Due to increased competition for admission and financial assistance, it will work to your advantage to take the appropriate standardized test(s) early in your application process. For example, those wishing to enter a graduate program in the fall of a given academic year will want to consider testing up to a year in advance of this desired entry date.

After reviewing the appropriate information online for the test you are considering, you may wish to purchase a preparation manual for that test. These preparation manuals have been published for most of the major examination programs, and are available for sale at bookstores. These manuals typically contain several practice tests based on different units of each examination, as well as “refresher” sections designed to assist in updating your skills in recall, judgment and mathematics. In addition, private “short courses” exist to help applicants prepare for examinations such as the MCAT and LSAT. Before investing a considerable amount of money in one of these services, it is advisable to check them out thoroughly with faculty members or with persons currently or formerly enrolled in them.

Transcripts. All transcripts must be official; that is, transcripts must be sent to admissions offices directly from the Office of the Registrar. If you receive your transcript first and then send it on, there is no proof that it is “official” and therefore it may be considered invalid. For additional information on transcripts, visit the Office of the Registrar’s website.

References. Most institutions will request between three and five letters of recommendation on your behalf. As with application forms and test dates, it is important to pay close attention to application deadlines; you can then contact people whom you wish to write letters well in advance of the deadline date(s).

Letters of recommendation are useful to graduate admissions committees only if the letters tell them something about you that is not particularly evident in the rest of your application packet. It is best to obtain recommendations from people qualified to evaluate your academic and/or work potential and performance, based on personal observation—namely, faculty members and former employers. At least one, and preferably two or more, letters 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.

It is absolutely essential that the reference person know you well enough that he or she can make a good assessment of your academic or work abilities. Do not hesitate to ask references if they feel they know you well enough to write a good recommendation. You might find it beneficial to “touch base” with your reference persons and discuss the qualities you feel you have demonstrated for them and which they could highlight effectively in their letters. In addition, you will want to share with them your reasons for applying to graduate or professional school as it relates to your overall goals and objectives. Administratively, reference persons will expect you to supply them with updated personal and professional data as needed, recommendation forms (if required by the institution), and a list of deadlines.

INTERVIEWS

Some graduate and professional schools will require an interview as part of the application process. The interview gives the graduate admissions committee an opportunity to determine if there is a match between what you are seeking in graduate study and what their institution has to offer. At the same time, the interview gives you the opportunity to find out more about the graduate program as well as visit the campus to talk to faculty members and currently enrolled students.

The following listings are designed to give you an idea of the types of questions you may expect in a typical interview situation and provide some useful examples of questions you may wish to ask the interviewer.

Sample interview questions:

1. Why are you interested in this graduate program at this particular school?
2. What are your plans after you complete your graduate work?
3. Are you interested in an assistantship? If so, which one(s)?
4. How did you decide to pursue this field of study?
5. What are your research interests?
6. What courses or experiences at your undergraduate institution caused you to think about graduate study in this field?
7. What other graduate schools are you considering?
8. What are your plans if you should not be accepted into a graduate program?

Questions for the interviewer:

1. What are the academic backgrounds and research interests of your faculty?
2. Do students select, or are they assigned to, an academic adviser?
3. What is the size of a typical graduate class in your department?
4. What is the relationship between academic course work and practica (or internships)?
5. What are the typical duties of a graduate assistant?
6. Is a comprehensive examination or thesis required?
7. What are the career outcomes for graduates of this program?
8. What is the availability of housing?

FINANCIAL AID

Monetary support to attend graduate/professional school is available from several sources—universities themselves, government sources, banks, and private foundations. One major problem lies in discovering just what is available at any given time. New sources are continually being developed, and in the case of government aid, the amount available is subject to current executive and legislative policy. Financial aid information can be found in graduate/professional school descriptive information published online by universities, governmental units, and foundations. Individual faculty and staff members, both at NKU and at the school where admission is being sought, can be particularly helpful.

Typically, deadlines are quite early for financial aid applications. If you will require financial assistance, be sure to seek the financial aid application early. These forms are used by financial aid administrators to determine your financial need, so it is important to fill them out carefully. Types of financial aid available for graduate study are somewhat different from aid you may have been familiar with as an undergraduate. General types of aid include the following:

Fellowships. On the graduate level, the equivalent of a scholarship is a fellowship. It is usually a straight monetary award given on the basis of scholastic achievement. Fellowships are often tax-free unless they involve teaching or research; in these cases the recipient will more than likely be required to report them for income tax purposes. Specific institutions have their own fellowships, which you may identify by contacting the school's financial aid office and the department to which you are applying. The federal government also supports some fellowships, for which applications may be made through the institution to which you are applying.

Assistantships. Teaching or research assistantships are often available through the academic department or program of study. Assistantships usually involve working 10-20 hours per week in exchange for some stipend and/ or fee remission. Although fee remissions are common, be aware that in accepting a graduate assistantship, you still may be responsible for partial payment of your tuition and/or fees. Requests for information on graduate assistantships and applications should be made directly to the department or program of interest to you.

Resident Assistantships. Some institutions have programs in which graduate students earn a stipend, room and board, or both by working as assistants in undergraduate residence halls. If you do not receive information on such a program, along with your application materials, you might contact the school's director of residence halls to inquire about such possibilities.

Long-term Educational Loans. Most institutions have loan programs for which graduate students may be eligible. Such programs include private, state, and federally-sponsored Guaranteed Student Loan Programs. The institution's financial aid office will be able to explain these loan programs to you.

Other Employment. Several "college towns" provide good opportunities for part-time work. In some cases, schools may have cooperative agreements with neighboring businesses and industries and governmental agencies whereby graduate students might be employed for research and/or consultation. Check with the institution's financial aid office, or the chairperson of the department to which you are applying, regarding possible part-time employment opportunities in the local community.

A general word of caution: Financial support of graduate education may vary widely from institution to institution. Therefore, it is essential for prospective applicants to thoroughly investigate the availability of financial aid in all its various forms as they go about the admissions process. Both the sources and amounts of financial aid are important considerations. This is another of the reasons why students considering further education should begin the process early.

SOME CLOSING SUGGESTIONS

The information found in graduate and professional school online listings may be of only limited value because, by design, they are directed toward a general audience. In other words, they may not answer specific questions you may have about the particular program you wish to pursue. Admissions officials and faculty members at the institution you would like to attend can help you with this information. Do not hesitate to contact them by phone, e-mail, letter, or even a personal visit. In some cases a telephone call can save a \$50+ application fee, or even more important, prevent you from making an unfortunate choice of academic program.

If further education at this point in time looms as an alternative to a job search, you may wish to re-examine your career objectives to see if they "fit" with the opportunities that the chosen program offers. As practical work experience is an education in itself, a combination of work and study may be a possible solution. Graduate/professional study can be a worthwhile and rewarding career additive; it should not be a disappointing employment alternative.

The Career Services staff encourages you to take advantage of the many campus resources that can help to make your choice more meaningful and enjoyable. Of course, you are particularly encouraged to attend our workshop on "Planning for Graduate/Professional School," to use our resource materials on various graduate and professional programs, and to meet individually with our career advising staff as you consider pursuing advanced education.

CAREER SERVICES WEBSITE

For additional information about Career Services and links to graduate school websites, please refer to our website at <https://nku.edu/careerservices>.