

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL DECISION

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

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Note to the Students:

Well over 50% of you will pursue graduate study. Some of you will decide to enroll in graduate courses immediately upon graduation from Carroll, while many more of you will choose to return to school in the next five to ten years. If and when you do find yourself contemplating the “graduate school decision”, I hope that this guide will be helpful.

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Some of the text and ideas for this guide were adapted from:

Thomson/Peterson's Graduate & Professional Programs Petersons, Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

America's Best Graduate Schools. US News & World Report

Medical School Admissions Advisor. Kaplan/Newsweek

The Ultimate Grad School Survival Guide. Mitchell, Lesli

Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way Into the Graduate School of Your Choice. Asher, Donald.

The Real Guide To Grad School: What You better Know Before You Choose. Clark, Robert E., Palattella, John, editors. Lingua Franca Books, New York.

For Graduate Study In Psychology: Not For Seniors Only! Bruce R. Fretz and David J. Stang, American Psychological Association.

Winning the Ph.D. Game: How To Get Into And Out Of Graduate School With A Ph.D. And A Job. Richard W. Moore, Ph.D., Dodd, Mead & Colk.

I. CLARIFICATION OF GRADUATE SCHOOL GOALS:

How can you determine that graduate school is the next best step for you? Many students decide on post-graduate studies because they are unclear of the future and their role within it. Two excellent reasons for attending graduate school include:

An advanced degree is a pre-requisite for entry into some careers, such as law, medicine, counseling and university teaching. Therefore, to pursue such a position requires graduate study.

If you long to immerse yourself into a particular academic discipline purely for the love of it, and now is the “hour”, you will likely find your graduate experience satisfying and valuable.

A decision to attend graduate school is an important one. In order to understand your reasons for pursuing a graduate education, you might want to ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) Am I interested in pursuing a specific field of knowledge for the love of it?
- 2) As preparation for my future career, do I need an advanced degree – now or later?
- 3) Am I interested in research projects, writing papers, and presenting academic material in front of a group?
- 4) So soon after graduation, will I possess the motivation necessary to complete independent projects and study effectively in a library?
- 5) Am I in the financial position, willing to live frugally for the next few years?

It is important to specify and clarify your goals regarding graduate school before applying. As you investigate your possible choices after graduation, be sure to consider all your options. Sometimes gaining relevant work experience can help you clarify your goals and enhance your application credentials.

SELECTING A FIELD OF STUDY

Inherent in the decision to attend graduate school is also the choice of a specific field of study. Some graduate degrees are academic and others are professional in orientation. Academic degrees focus on original research (i.e. Ph.D., M.A.) whereas professional degrees stress the practical application of knowledge and skills required for practicing in a profession (i.e. M.B.A., M.D., Ed.D.). Before you can begin to apply to graduate schools, you will need to make two important decisions:

- 1) In what specialization or area are you most interested?
- 2) What degree do you wish to earn? (Masters of Art, Ph.D., Specialist, etc.). Keep in mind that some programs allow students to pursue the Ph.D. directly from a bachelor’s program—i.e.: essentially, you bypass the Master’s degree. Depending upon your career goals and the general protocol in a given profession, this may be a wiser choice than earning a Master’s degree followed by a Ph.D.

As for making your decision to attend and in what specific field of study, your professors can be your most prized resources. Also consider talking to your friends who are currently enrolled in graduate school as their first hand experiences will offer valuable insight. Additionally, the following resources in the [Career Resource Library](#) can help you in your decision making process.

- 1) *Bound for Graduate School? Getting Into Competitive Graduate Programs*, a video by the nation’s foremost expert on the graduate school admission process, Don Asher.
- 2) *Peterson’s Annual Guides to Graduate and Professional Programs*

- 3) Institute for Career Research – Career Monographs. The Career Resource Library has several hundred individual monographs profiling various occupations and careers.
- 4) Institute for Career Research – Career Monographs, Internet version. The Career Resource Library subscribes to this terrific resource that allows users to learn about various occupations and careers online.
- 5) College Source Online—a wonderful online subscription that allows users to sort programs and schools on the basis of several criteria such as cost, location, type and level of degree, etc. The program provides access to college and university catalogs and links to program and school websites.
- 6) NACE Link’s web page contains very useful information, including tips on the application process, test preparation, and deciding which programs will meet your needs. There is also an excellent link to a site devoted to writing the all-important personal statement. NACE Link is hot linked to Career Services’ front web page.
- 7) The Educational Testing Service administers more than 9 million tests annually including the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Their web site has the excellent, up-to-date information on graduate school testing; it also contains a comprehensive set of links to college and university web pages on the net. www.gre.org
- 8) WorldWide Careers also has links to business, law and medical schools conveniently sorted by geographic location.
- 9) *Graduate Admissions Essays -- What Works, What Doesn't and Why*, by Don Asher
- 10) Reference and career books within your specific area of interest (i.e. science and technology, Health and Medicine, etc.)

II. HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR CANDIDACY FOR ADMISSION

You can enhance your chances of acceptance into the graduate school of your choice by engaging in any of the following:

- 1) Review your undergraduate course selection, and with the help of your faculty advisor, identify classes which could potentially strengthen your background academically (e.g. writing, computer science, accounting, chemistry, etc.).
- 2) Training and research experience can complement a solid academic performance. By taking advantage of independent research projects or engaging in your own thesis construction, you can demonstrate a willingness to undertake in-depth research in a field of your choice and grow to know members of your department quite well.
- 3) Serving as an undergraduate laboratory assistant will not only help confirm your own career goals, but also indicate a level of commitment to your academic field. For example, Carroll has opportunities to become tutors, lab assistants, and/or graders.
- 4) Getting to know your professors can increase your comprehension of the classes and subject matter, as well as provide a means through which your letters of recommendation can be strengthened. Professors who know their students outside of class generally can write stronger, more detailed letters of recommendation than they can for students who have never made the effort to know their professors.
- 5) Many disciplines have professional organizations in which you can become a student affiliate. In some of these organizations, you can receive journals with recent developments in the field and information on preparation programs. In addition, you will learn of upcoming conferences, conventions and possible job openings. Many Carroll students present professional papers at regional as well as national professional conferences aligned with their academic major/future career area.

- 6) Depending on the choice of field, experiential opportunities will help in your preparation for graduate work. For example, if you are interested in counseling or psychology you might want to gain some training and experience in the helping services. Volunteer opportunities, internships, and summer jobs are ways in which to gain practical knowledge while at the same time put personal learning into action. Many graduate programs require a minimum number of volunteer hours in order to be considered for admission into their programs.
- 7) Also worthy of consideration are extracurricular activities where you can demonstrate a high level of energy and leadership potential.

IV. CHOOSING AMONG SCHOOLS

Once you have decided that it is time to seek admission to graduate school, you are confronted with the challenge of choosing the right school(s) for you. Conducting research on the schools you are considering takes time and effort. By selecting schools from the rated top ten, you are allowing someone else to decide what is best for you. A school may be rated highly because of its outstanding faculty – but what if those faculty are not accessible to you? What about geography, or a social being, and a person in need of _____, establish your own basis of criteria considering the following:

- 1) Faculty: What is their academic training, research activity, and productivity? How is their teaching effectiveness viewed by present students in the program? How active are they within the specific program (i.e. concern for student development, advising, group morale, etc.)? Do they represent a broad cross section of approaches? Are they accessible to students for advice and research assistance?
- 2) Students: What is the caliber of students presently in the program (i.e. entrance GPA and test scores, achievement, background, etc.)? Are women and minorities represented? What is the competency level of students upon completion of their degree? What are they doing after graduation? Are they securing jobs in their field? How satisfied have they been with the quality and other aspects of the program? Are the graduate students a cohesive group often working in collaboration with each other?
- 3) Resources: How much financial support does the program have? Do they have the quality and quantity of laboratory equipment and facilities necessary? Will you have access to computers? What are the library facilities like? What are the available supportive community resources? Will you have quality practicum and assistantship sites from which to choose?
- 4) Program Curriculum and Operations: Be sure to look closely at the general functions of the program.
 - Goal statement and purpose of program and institution
 - History of program and duration of program's existence
 - Course and program offering
 - Flexibility of electives and further specialization
 - Evaluation of student progress
 - Program leadership/decision making opportunities
 - Student/faculty ratio
 - Internships, assistantships, and other opportunities
 - Degree requirements
 - Accreditation for future licensing requirements
 - Job placement for graduates
 - Respectability among other programs
- 5) Personal Needs: Consider your own personal needs.
 - Campus environment – ethnic diversity, resources available, aesthetics, personalness
 - Community environment – climate, recreational opportunities, proximity to family and friends, employment opportunities for partner
 - Financial assistance – grants, fellowships, and teaching and research assistantships available

Prepare a “Graduate School Comparison Chart” to help rank the schools under consideration, according to the criteria you have established for yourself. You will first need to rank order your criteria by assigning weight values to each one to be assessed. The single most important criterion should carry the most weight, and your second most valued criterion, the second highest weight. For example, if you have identified eight criteria by which to evaluate a school, and student to faculty ratio is your most valued criterion, assign that characteristic with the weight value of eight. If geography is second most important, assign it a weight value of seven. For each criterion that a school meets to your satisfaction, enter an “x” in the appropriate column. Compute a “numerical score” for each school by totaling the “weight values” assigned for each criterion met. The “ranking” of each school can then be determined according to the “numerical scores” – the school with the most points being ranked #1 (a.k.a. your first choice). See Appendix for your “Graduate School Comparison Chart.”

III. APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS:

- 1) Preparing the application forms should be treated with great care:
 - Read and follow instructions carefully
 - Pay particular attention to varying deadlines – usually falling between January and March for fall matriculation
 - Type all information unless otherwise required
 - Keep a copy for your own records
 - Be prepared for the expense of non-refundable application fees ranging from \$20.00 to \$40.00 each
 - Answer optional questions about ethnicity and religion only if you think it will help you
 - Have someone proofread carefully for spelling, grammar, and typographical errors.
- 2) Most applications require an autobiographical section or statement of career/graduate study goals. Keep these points in mind:
 - Compose the essay carefully, asking professors and friends to critique your writing
 - Be brief, concise, and stick to the information requested – two double-spaced pages should be enough
 - Avoid use of slang and words too elaborate for the purpose at hand
 - Communicate why you wish to attend graduate school, what you hope to gain from the experience and what your future plans are. Tailor each essay to each school’s philosophy and requirements; describe what parts of the program especially appeal to you and why you have chosen to apply to this school above all others.
- 3) Almost all graduate schools require that you take an entrance exam. In Career Services, you will find information and applications for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), and Law School Admission Test (LSAT). In addition, the Academic Resource Center has guides for the chemistry portion of the MCAT, LSAT, and GRE (both general and some specific subjects tests). In metropolitan areas, training courses are offered in preparation for these exams. Unfortunately, there are none available locally.
- 4) Admissions committees always require official transcripts (as opposed to a student copy) from each college or university attended. Typically the cost for these is \$5.00 each, and they must be mailed directly from the Registrar to the institution considering your application.
- 5) Letters of recommendation are essential and an important component of your application. Make sure to ask professors and previous employers early to write these letters. Do not send in more letters to any one institution than requested.
- 6) In applying for financial aid, you will probably need to complete some type of standardized Form, which is often the Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service (GAPFAS) application. For an excellent listing of financial aid definitions and a bibliography of financial aid directories, refer to: *Peterson’s Annual guide to Graduate and Professional Programs: An Overview*, available in the Career Resource Library.
- 7) Some schools require the enclosure of a curriculum vita (C.V.) or qualifications statement. Workshops, appointments, and handouts and books on resume writing are all available in Career Services to help with this process.
- 8) Many schools require a selection interview. Your effectiveness in such an interview is

dependent on your level of confidence. Your confidence is dependent on the amount of preparation.

VII. ACCEPTING AND DECLINING OFFERS:

You may be notified by phone or in writing that you have been accepted for admission into a given program or that you are an alternate on a waiting list. Consider the following:

- 1) As soon as you have a satisfactory offer from your most preferred school, accept it and advise the other schools of your decision. They will appreciate your thoughtfulness in opening the way for another student.
- 2) Repeat this comparison and decision process as you receive each new offer.

After you have accepted an appointment, do not take your commitment lightly. Attempts to be released from your appointment may spoil your reputation with all institutions involved as well as with your references.

TIMETABLE FOR CHOOSING AND APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Use this timetable for an overview of the choices and actions that should occur as you consider graduate school decisions. Plan to recheck this timetable as each semester ends in order to make sure that you are progressing effectively in preparing for and applying to graduate schools.

JUNIOR YEAR

- ___ 1. With the help of your faculty advisor, select courses beyond the general college requirements that will enhance your graduate school preparations.
- ___ 2. Try to talk to and meet graduate students (could be friends or relatives). Ask them what graduate student life is like, what kind of study load you can expect in their various specialties, which professors can provide detailed information about graduate school, and which professors you should work with on research projects.
- ___ 3. Begin preparation and register for the appropriate graduate school entrance test. By taking these tests in the Spring of your Junior year, you will have the opportunity to retake the test if you are disappointed with your scores. However, keep in mind that some exam companies—such as GRE—use cumulative score reporting, so retaking the exam does not “erase” your first score; both scores will be reported along with the date each score was achieved.

BEGINNING OF SENIOR YEAR

- ___ 1. Check with the Registrar and your department advisor to confirm your eligibility for graduation.
- ___ 2. Arrange for conference (s) with faculty who know about graduate schools in your preferred specialty area. Begin the process of deciding on the basis of qualifications and goals, schools with interest you. Take your professors a copy of your transcript and C.V. so that they can recommend schools for which you may qualify.
- ___ 3. Request bulletins, brochures, assistantship information, financial aid forms, and department application forms from schools to which you might eventually apply. You may also wish to request information on housing availability.
- ___ 4. Begin to apply for scholarships, fellowships, etc. They can have unusual deadlines, depending upon which organization sponsors them, so stay on top of this step!

- ___5. Register for, and take (October or December at the latest), the entrance exams needed, if you have not done so previously or if you need to improve your scores. Remember, scores are not immediately available after you have taken the test. Plan ahead!
- ___6. With the help of Career Services, prepare a C.V. or qualifications statement to supplement your application for acceptance and assistantships.
- ___7. Request a student copy of your transcript from each undergraduate institution that you have attended. Check for errors since any changes may take many weeks; if you wait until the application deadline to do this, you may either miss the deadline or be forced to submit an incomplete or erroneous transcript. Merely obtaining a transcript may take weeks because colleges are sometimes swamped with transcript requests just when you need yours! Again, plan ahead.
- ___8. Make sure that you will have enough money in December to pay for all necessary application fees and transcripts. Depending on the number of schools you apply to, this amount could easily exceed a few hundred dollars.

NOVEMBER OF SENIOR YEAR

- ___1. Narrow down your list of possible schools. Check the application deadline for each school. Post these deadlines on your "Application Record Sheet" where you will see them frequently.
- ___2. Graduate schools generally require from three to five letters of recommendation. Remember to ask professors and work supervisors early for these letters.
- ___3. Begin working on your personal statements and other essay questions.
- ___4. Request that your entrance test score results be sent to all schools to which you have applied, if you have not done so previously.

DECEMBER OF SENIOR YEAR

- ___1. Prepare final copies of application materials. Include a photocopy of your entrance test results if you have them. Everything should be mailed at least one week before the deadline. Be sure to include the necessary fees with your applications.
- ___2. Request from the Registrar's Office that your undergraduate transcript (s) be sent to all the institutions to which you have applied.

JANUARY-APRIL OF SENIOR YEAR

- ___1. Prior to the deadline, call to verify that your application material, references, transcripts, etc., were received.
- ___2. If you receive copies of any test results after your applications have been submitted, send a copy to each school.
- ___3. Consider the options available and make your decision.