

# Graduate School 101

## Before you start



### *To go or not to go, that is the question*

When considering graduate school, the first thing to do is to consider why you want to go in the first place. Students often come to their senior year and aren't sure what they can do with their major or lack confidence in their ability to secure a job and see graduate school as an "easy" choice for after college. However, when it comes to applying to graduate school, it is important to understand what your reasons are for going to graduate school. This essential question will be asked of you over and over again as you research schools, ask for letters of recommendation, write personal statements, and interview with your top choices. By taking time now to begin to articulate your reasons for going, you will have a head start on the application.

### Questions to consider

*Will it help me reach my long term goals (do I even know my long term goals?) Will it help me advance in my career?*

*Do I have the money? The time? Fewer family obligations?*

*Am I disciplined enough and committed to work hard for as long as it takes?*

*Do I have access to a program near my place of work/home?*

*Do I need to go right away after college or can I wait & gain some work experience?*

*Is there a subject/topic/idea/issue I am passionate about?*

### **Masters vs. PhD: Does it really matter?**

Well, yes, to some extent. Although this depends on the program and area of expertise you are interested in, most people recommend aiming for a doctoral program when applying. By applying for a PhD program over a Masters degree program, you are more likely to receive financial aid and other support since doctorates take so much time to complete. Other reasons for choosing to go for the PhD include higher occupational achievement (varies by discipline), an opportunity to research & study independently, and a willingness to be flexible about your dream job (i.e. are you open to having a PhD but not being a college professor?).

At the same time, Masters degree programs help you achieve credentials in a shorter amount of time, especially those in the professions (ex. Lawyer, counselor, etc). Masters also help you to upgrade your skills and allow you to change career direction rather easily. On the other hand, financial aid is often less available. In the end, it is your choice. It might help to know you can start off saying yes to a doctoral program and then ultimately choose just to go through with the Masters program. Remember to keep your options open.

# The Fundamentals of Applying for Graduate School

## Entrance Exams

- Basically, the GRE, MAT, MCAT, GMAT, & LSAT are the “SAT’s” for graduate school. They range in cost from about \$100-\$250, depending on which exam you take. These exams are often a required portion of the application process.
- We highly recommend that you invest time into studying for your entrance exams. You can also buy books & other materials or even attend preparation classes. However, you can get help from free resources by checking out resources in the library and online.
- Entrance exams are often given on a computer and the location of the exams varies. See the exam booklet for your specific exam for details on schedules, cost, testing locations, etc.



## Applications

- Research potential programs. Be aware of different emphases in programs and where you would like to attend. Some programs are geared toward working professionals and others are more for full-time students. Know the schools you apply to inside & out.
- Consider all types of schools not just the top research schools, but consider lesser known, smaller institutions; get suggestions from faculty as well.
- Request applications as soon as possible, at least one year in advance of when you’d like to start classes.
- Pay attention to application deadlines, they can vary from department to department.
- Leave nothing blank. If a question does not apply, put N/A (not applicable).
- *Print* clearly with no errors in grammar and spelling—make it look neat and organized.
- If a letter of intent or statement of purpose is to be included in the application form, be sure to understand what the department is looking for in students. Is the school noted for its research? Then talk about research. If it is practical application, then talk about practices and implementations.
- Include your application fee—sounds simple yet many potential students forget this final detail.
- Proofread everything, have others review your writing.
- Follow a school’s checklist (if provided). It will help reduce human error.

## Transcripts

- Cost at Bethel is: \$2. You will need to fill out a transcript request which can be obtained from the Registrar’s office. They need your signature, so you can’t just phone in your request.
- Start early requesting them—become good friends with the folks in the Registrar’s office.
- Ask for a copy for your own records—just in case you need to send an unofficial copy someplace.

## Grades and GPA

- Your GPA is important but not as important as you may think when it comes to applying for graduate school. Don’t disqualify yourself if your GPA is below the cutoff line.
- If your transcripts show progressive improvement during the course of your college years, it can help in the final admissions process. Therefore, if you started with C’s and end your final years with A’s, consideration may be given even if your overall GPA is lower than the cutoff.
- Highlight improvement over time, get involved in research projects, & recognize that GPA is just one piece of the admissions puzzle.

## Letters of Recommendation

### **WHAT A LETTER SHOULD HIGHLIGHT:**

*The letter should state or imply that the letter writer is confident that you will be successful in the program. The educational institution is looking to see if you have skills in the following:*

« Reasoning and intellectual capabilities «  
 Critical thinking « Thoughtful contributions in class discussions « Your interpersonal skills  
 « Demonstration of leadership skills « Logical and analytical skills « Generalized information gathering (big picture thinking) « Research skills « Working independently « Involvement in extracurricular activities «

- Considered one of the more important parts of the application. A substantive letter from an informed recommender can often be very persuasive to graduate admissions committees, especially in “borderline” admissions decisions.
  - Enlist candidates who you are confident will write a good recommendation. It is okay to ask them for a good recommendation.
  - Pick faculty that know you well. Meet with them to discuss your goals & be sure that they have a copy of your resume so they see what you have done outside the classroom as well.
- Different programs and different departments require different people for recommendations. In some academic settings, letters of recommendation can come from both a supervisor in your current occupation and from a professor while others only want academic sources.
  - Give the person you selected plenty of time to write a good letter. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope so they can mail the letter as soon as possible.
  - Call the admissions department occasionally to see if the letters have arrived. Make sure the person writing the letter doesn’t forget. You could also give the phone number and the address of the person writing your letter to the admissions office, this way they can call them directly if the deadline is near.
  - Be sure to write a thank you letter to those who wrote letters for you.

## **Statement of Purpose/Application Statement**

- Another key element of the application is the statement of purpose. The statement of purpose is basically your opportunity to discuss your goals, hopes, and how you can contribute to the department.
- Personalize your letter. Avoid writing a generic type letter (something that looks like it was copied out of a “Statement of Purpose 101” book). Be specific. Don’t cut and paste!
- Proofread
- Understand the nature of the college or university. What type of applicants are they looking for?
- Research what is important to the department and the department Chairperson, and then tailor your letter accordingly. Speak their language. Illustrate how you fit into the department’s goals and mission.
- Have your letter(s) proofread by other professors, faculty mentors, professionals in the field, and career/academic advisors. When proofing, concentrate not only on grammar, but content as well.
- Read literature and research material written by professors in the department you are applying to.
- Use your letter to explain any “hic-ups”—glitches in your performance record such as an “F” on your transcript, a complete change in your focus, a poor score on your GRE, etc.
- And, did we mention, proofread?

### **Things Considered in the Application Statement**

*Departments vary somewhat in what they look for in a good application statement. Here are some things application screeners may look for:*

- ⇒ Can the applicant produce professional-looking written work that is free from punctuation, grammatical and spelling errors?
- ⇒ Does he or she have the appropriate academic background to handle graduate level courses (determination may be based on your transcripts unless you can prove otherwise)?
- ⇒ Does the applicant have clearly articulated interests and could he or she propose a focused area of study? Explain how their program can help you meet those objectives. Most individuals do not have precise clarity at this time in their lives. Do the best you can.
- ⇒ What kind of research skills and experience does the applicant have? Describe your research experiences.
- ⇒ Does the applicant appear to know something about the program and whether or not it would be a good match for his or her interests?

### **Interviewing**

- Get to know the interviewers personally before the interview if possible.
- Be clear on what your long-term goals are.
- Clearly express why and how you would be successful in this program.
- Ask good questions about the program itself.
- Try to set up interviews with the least desired schools first so that you are more relaxed and prepared for the most desired.
- Practice, practice, practice!

### **Final Thoughts**

- Cultivate friendships with faculty members. They can offer valuable advice not just about getting in but surviving graduate study as well.
- Early is always better than late. Starting early offers you the best chance to get where you want to go.
- Be direct, specific, focused in both your long and short terms goals--be able to answer how you plan to succeed in a program.
- If at first you don't succeed, try and try again: Many colleges and universities encourage students to try again for the next year if at first they didn't get in. Try not to take it personally or as a personal rejection. Sometimes it's just a numbers game.
- If you were not accepted into the program, it is okay to ask why. Use this information when you try again to reapply later. Or ask if you can apply to the Master's program instead of the PhD program.